THE JUDAEO-ARABIC COMMENTARY ON JONAH
BY THE KARATE JAPHETH BEN ELI:
INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a translation and analysis of Japheth ben 5Eli the Karaite's tenth-century Judaeo-Arabic commentary on the book of Jonah. As with most Jewish exegetes in the medieval Islamic world, Japheth's approach to the Bible reflects his engagement with Karaite, Rabbinic and Mu'tazilite hermeneutics and theology.

In order to understand the background of Japheth's work, this thesis examines his commentary in the context of other medieval Jewish interpretations of Jonah. The commentaries of Daniel al-Qumisi, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi) and Eliezer of Beaugency, as well as the Jonah narrative from Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, bring the notable features of Japheth's commentary into sharper relief.

Japheth's commentary is remarkable on several counts. It is the earliest systematic commentary on Jonah, and it offers a textually and theologically consistent reading of the prophet's adventures. Japheth's familiarity with Arabic theological discourse leads him to interpret the story of Jonah in light of Mu'tazilite doctrines such as 'isma (prophetic infallibility). The principle of 'isma conflicts with the conventional reading of Jonah's experiences as punishment for the prophet's disobedience. Therefore, Japheth reframes the entire narrative to illustrate the benefits of prophecy and the purposes of prophetic literature in the Bible.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO JAPHETH BEN ELI'S COMMENTARY ON JONAH

1.1 The Book of Jonah and its Exegesis

The book of Jonah narrates the tale of a prophet whose journeys take him across dry land and upon a storm-tossed ship, inside the belly of a fish and among the sinners of a foreign city, and finally to the east, where he struggles under the harshness of the elements and an unexplained grief.¹ In all his travels, Jonah and God communicate. God commands and converses with his prophet, and Jonah responds through actions and two prayers. One prayer is a psalm of thanksgiving in praise of the God who has rescued him; the other is a plea for the same God to take his life. God provides Jonah with a fish to swallow him and a gourd to shelter him, a worm to consume the gourd and a stifling wind to torment him. The meaning of these provisions is as enigmatic as the prophet's mission to proclaim against Nineveh and his response to this mission.

This brief and curious text is situated among the Minor Prophets, between the books of Obadiah and Micah. Although its composition is difficult to date, a variety of

¹ For recent critical commentaries on the book of Jonah, see Sasson, Jonah or Simon, Jonah.
late Hebrew linguistic features point to a post-exilic origin. Its four intertwined chapters are episodic, like acts in a drama. In the first chapter, God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh and proclaim against it, and Jonah responds by boarding a ship that is headed for Tarshish. God casts a tempest upon the sea which the sailors quell by throwing Jonah into the water at his insistence. This incident causes the sailors to fear God and offer sacrifices and vows. In the second chapter, Jonah prays to God from the belly of the fish that God has provided to swallow him. The third chapter reprises God’s command that Jonah proclaim against Nineveh. Upon hearing the threats against them, the people of Nineveh believe God, and the king decrees that everyone repent of his or her evil behavior. God sees this response and renounces his punishment. The fourth chapter opens with a deeply grieved Jonah praying to God and hoping for death. The prophet explains that he went toward Tarshish because he knew that God was compassionate and merciful. By now Jonah is dwelling east of Nineveh, and God has provided a plant to shade him. When God sends a worm to destroy the plant, Jonah again begs for death and God compares Jonah’s concern for the plant to his own concern for Nineveh and its inhabitants.

The Jonah narrative touches on theological problems without fully addressing them. The characters, events, and dialogue raise questions about the nature of prophecy and the role of miracles as well as the tensions between Israelite particularism and the universality of God; divine justice and mercy; and rebellion and repentance. Why does the God of Israel send his prophet to a foreign nation, and why does Jonah head toward Tarshish when God has directed him to Nineveh? Is the immediate repentance of Nineveh sufficient to merit God’s compassion, or should they be punished for their

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2 For a concise listing of these features, see Sasson, Jonah, 22-3; Simon, Jonah, xxxix-xlili.


history of rebellion, evil and injustice? What is the purpose behind the storm that endangers Jonah, the fish that swallows him, the gourd that shades him, and the worm, wind, and sun that scald him? Does God intend to teach a lesson—and if so, what is the lesson and for whom is it intended? What kind of prophet is Jonah and what is the cause of his anger and depression at the conclusion of the narrative?

The biblical text neglects to answer these questions or issue normative statements about the theological meaning or homiletical import of Jonah’s adventures. Exegetes have approached the book of Jonah in the effort to understand the narrative and draw theological significance from the story. The primary narrative questions revolve around Jonah’s motivation for going toward Tarshish (Jonah 1) and the reason for his anguish in the wake of Nineveh’s repentance and salvation (Jonah 4). Exegetes interpret these two episodes in order to establish an image of Jonah that sheds light on God’s relationship to his prophet and to the city of Nineveh.

The present work examines the book of Jonah and from the perspective of several medieval Jewish commentaries, with particular attention to the work of Japheth ben ‘Eli, a late tenth-century Jerusalem Karaite. We have consulted Jonah interpretations of both Rabbanite and Karaite provenance that date from the eighth through twelfth centuries. Two texts predate Japheth’s commentary: the eighth-century aggadic work, Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, which retells Jonah 1-2 as part of the fifth day of creation, and Daniel al-Qumisi’s Karaite commentary on the Minor Prophets. We also consider two Jonah commentaries that postdate Japheth’s text. Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi) and Eliezer of Beaugency are representatives of the northern French school of biblical exegesis in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These five commentaries approach the book of Jonah
from a variety of interpretive angles. Often the exegetes who are most alienated from one another in terms of time period and exegetical background produce compatible interpretations of the text. For example, Japheth’s core assertions about Jonah’s character oppose those of his Karaite contemporary al-Qumisi but resonate with those of Eliezer of Beaugency. The conclusions of Eliezer of Beaugency, in turn, diverge from those of his compatriot and intellectual predecessor, Rashi.

In Rashi’s interpretation, Jonah attempted to flee God’s presence and reject the divine charge because he misunderstood God’s omnipresence. Foolishly, Jonah imagined that it was possible to escape God’s control. He ran away from his mission in order to avoid personal responsibility for Israel’s demise. Jonah feared that Nineveh’s repentance would expose his own country’s heedlessness to the prophets, and the Israelites would hold him accountable for their ensuing misfortune. Rashi suggests that Jonah feared an alternative scenario as well, to which the biblical text refers in Jonah’s complaint, *O LORD! Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country?* (4:2). This passage alludes to Jonah’s worry that if God forgave the people of Nineveh, they would punish him as a false prophet whose threats went unrealized.³ In Rashi’s estimation, Jonah is a rash and selfish man whose inappropriate fears prevent him from understanding God or obeying his commands.

Eliezer of Beaugency, a student of Rashi’s eminent grandson Rashbam, paints a more sympathetic portrait of Jonah, which he supports with a contextual approach to the biblical text.⁴ Eliezer interprets Jonah’s flight as a respectful way of requesting that God

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³ In this interpretation and others, Rashi follows the narrative presented in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, X.
⁴ On Eliezer’s commentary, see Harris, “Contextual Reading.”
send another prophet in his stead and not as an aggressive act of rebellion against God.\textsuperscript{5} Jonah had good reason to be wary of a journey to Nineveh. Not only were the people of Nineveh unlikely to repent and God unlikely to carry out his threats of urban destruction, but Jonah was a frail man and the voyage to Nineveh would endanger his health.\textsuperscript{6} Eliezer’s interpretation of Jonah’s distress (Jonah 4) is particularly charitable. Jonah was grieved because he left Nineveh prior to the peoples’ repentance, and the joyous news of their salvation had not yet reached him. Although Eliezer—like all exegetes of the northern French school—was influenced by Rashi, his interpretation of Jonah is wildly different. Rashi’s Jonah fled because he fundamentally misunderstood God’s omnipresence; Eliezer’s Jonah excused himself because he rightly ascertained God’s compassionate and merciful nature.

The comparison of Rashi and Eliezer of Beaugency on the topic of Jonah demonstrates that the exegetes’ understanding of Jonah’s nature is central to their analysis of the broader theological implications of the book. Jonah’s character is revealed through his actions and his words to God, the sailors, and the people of Nineveh. Neither Jonah nor the narrator, however, describes Jonah’s motivations and assumptions, the causes for his feelings or the intentions behind his words and deeds. These gaps provide opportunities for the exegetes’ meaningful expansion and clarification. Theology, as always, sits on both sides of the equation. Theological premises shape the exegetes’

\textsuperscript{5} The way that Eliezer imagines Jonah excusing himself from this overwhelming obligation imitates Moses’ request that God send another in his place in Exodus 4:13 (Harris, “Contextual Reading,” 89).

\textsuperscript{6} Harris remarks that Eliezer’s depiction of Jonah as old or frail has no “midrashic or exegetical parallel” and it “does not appear to be based on information provided by the biblical text” (“Contextual Reading,” 88). Japheth finds indication of Jonah’s infirmity, obesity, or general weakness in the statement they picked Jonah up (1:15), which suggests that he was physically incapable of heaving himself overboard (see Japheth’s comments to 1:15 and 2:4). It is possible that Eliezer’s sense of Jonah’s frailty also emerges from this biblical verse, or that both exegetes drew upon a lost midrashic source.
interpretation of Jonah’s behavior and comments, and the text of Jonah, once expanded through exegesis, occasions the discussion of central religious themes. Through the book of Jonah, exegetes consider the relationship between God and his prophets, the role of Israel among the nations, and the nature of divine mercy and justice.

1.2 Japheth ben ‘Eli’s Reading of Jonah

The core Karaite literary corpus was established in Jerusalem between the late ninth and eleventh centuries, and Japheth’s exegetical activity (ca. 960-1005) was central to its development. Bible study was a primary religious obligation within the Jerusalem Karaite community, and Japheth’s translation and commentary are prominent representatives of this exegetical movement. In Japheth’s translation and commentary, we find a witness to broader trends in Karaite exegesis.

By Japheth’s own admission, his Jonah commentary records existing interpretive traditions, which he has shaped with his own insights. In the final words of the commentary, he explains: “We interpret according to what we have heard, and though we may, perhaps, have added some explanation, it was our intention to [offer] only what the language [of the text] could most plausibly bear.” Japheth introduces these pre-existing interpretations with formulae such as “one exegete claims” (1:6) and “according to one of the scholars” (4:5). Japheth does not name any of his sources for the Jonah commentary, and his reliance on normative explanations surely exceeds his rare admission that an interpretation was transmitted to him. There are several reasons for Japheth to minimize

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1 For a description of the Jerusalem Karaite community, see Ben-Shammay, “The Karaites,” Gil, A History of Palestine, chap. 9. On early Karaite exegesis, see Frank, Search Scripture Well, esp. chap. 1; Polliack, “Major Trends in Karaite Biblical Exegesis” and The Karaite Tradition, esp. part 1.

8 This explanation appears at the conclusion of Japheth’s Jonah commentary.
the extent to which contemporary exegesis has influenced his reading of Jonah. One advantage to this practice is that it enables Japheth to separate the content of an interpretive angle from the identity of its author. In this way, Japheth’s commentary filters out the authority or negative associations of particular sources and merges the most effective interpretations into a coherent narrative.

1.2.1 Exegetical Techniques

The format of Japheth’s Jonah commentary follows the Karaite standards for exegetical literature and pedagogy. Japheth’s commentaries typically include three components: portions of the original Hebrew verse, followed by a full Arabic translation and a comment in Arabic. The format of side-by-side translation and commentary enables the interpreter to practice “exegesis on two levels.” Japheth frequently structures this third component—the Arabic comment—as an expanded paraphrase of his more precise verse translation. In this way Japheth provides an exact translation of the Hebrew verse as well as an expanded, more nuanced reading of it. We see this two-pronged approach in Japheth’s presentation of Jonah’s response to the probing sailors (1:9).

In this passage, the frantic sailors bombard Jonah with questions, demanding to know how their passenger could be responsible for the terrifying storm. The biblical Jonah replies, “I am a Hebrew,” he told them. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who created the sea and the dry land.” Japheth’s Arabic translation imitates the Hebrew

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9 Polfiack describes the “three-fold codex” form of ninth and tenth century exegetical texts in The Karaite Tradition, 14-17. The extant manuscripts of Japheth’s commentaries sometimes omit this first component to include only the Arabic translation and commentary.

10 This phrase comes from Ben-Shammai. “Jerusalem in Early Medieval Bible Exegesis,” 448.
original, with only minor variation, but his Arabic comment takes greater liberties. There, Jonah articulates his mission with conviction and prophetic discernment:

I fear the God of heaven and the creator of the sea and the dry land, which are under His control, which He can change as He wishes. He is the one who troubled the sea on my account, although not because of any sin that I committed, in my behavior, which it was your intention to discover through your question: what is your business. I am obedient to God, so the sea’s turmoil is not due to any rebelliousness on my part. Rather, the one who is mighty and sublime did this as a way of making a miracle through me.

Japheth paraphrases the translation, interspersing the biblical material with his interpretive expansions. His translation remains faithful to the biblical words, and his comment aims to be faithful to the biblical text. According to Japheth’s theory of elision, which we will address below, the content of this expanded paraphrase is inherent within the structure of the biblical verse.

Occasionally Japheth’s paraphrases do not noticeably augment the simple meaning of the verse. These cases may reflect a pedagogical criterion of explicating every phrase, even when it does not differ from the obvious sense of the biblical text. For the biblical passage, God provided a worm that attacked the gourd so that it withered (4:7), Japheth offers, “The Lord caused a destructive worm to appear. It continued working away at the plant until it had nullified its benefit.” The structure of Japheth’s systematic verse-by-verse commentary calls for a statement at every juncture of the biblical text. Beyond this mandate, however, Japheth’s comments have a practical purpose even when they appear superfluous. These literal paraphrases forestall more extravagant interpretations, rejecting them without invoking them.
Japheth’s proclivity for expanded paraphrase and his three-fold structure of verse, translation and commentary reflect the Karaite standards of his day. Japheth’s concept of biblical redaction and his application of this concept to prophetic literature is another hallmark of his exegetical theory. This concept is one of Japheth’s innovations, even though it accords with Karaite hermeneutic principles. Japheth proposes a three-step process by which a prophetic book is recorded and included in Scripture. First, the prophet receives a message from God; later, the prophet establishes a record of these messages and the activities connected with them; and finally, an editor (mudawwin)—either a later redactor or perhaps the prophet himself—compiles (dawwana) this material. The content of the prophet’s speech comes from God, but the final form of the prophet’s collection (dīwīn) is the product of the mudawwin. He selects which prophecies will be included, arranges them appropriately, and inserts relevant contextual information into the book.11

Japheth may have modeled his concept of the prophetic texts’ mudawwin on similar literary and compositional features in other genres.12 The anthology was a popular medieval genre, and Japheth’s mudawwin resembles the compiler-editor of such literary compilations. The historical books of the Bible likewise acknowledge a human redactor. The connection between biblical historiography and prophecy is well-established—the prophet Jonah, for example, also figures in Kings—so Japheth is on solid footing in importing this process of redaction to the genre of prophetic literature. Another source for Japheth’s view of prophetic redaction may be the grammatical theory of elision (ıktisār)...

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12 The following analogues are presented in with significant analysis in Polliack and Schlossberg, “Yefet’s Introduction,” 31-3.
as articulated by the Karaite grammarian Yaʿqūb Yūsuf ibn Nūḥ. According to the theory of elision, letters or words that are missing from the written Hebrew text of the Bible are implicit in the structure of the text.\textsuperscript{13} Japheth extends this grammatical theory to encompass the narrative technique of postponing or omitting details from a biblical story. Japheth attributes such editorial activity to the mudawwīn.

The concept of ᵐ>iƙtišār₃₃ permeates Japheth’s exegesis of Jonah, even though he only uses the verb ᵐ>iƙtašara once. Japheth identifies the eponymous character of the book of Jonah with the prophet of the same name in 2 Kings. Why, then, is the prophet’s mission to Nineveh recorded at length while his mission to Israel is mentioned by a single verse? Japheth explains that “Scripture mentions [Jonah’s] prophetic mission to Israel in cursory fashion (‘iƙτašara) because his prophecy did not relate to Israel in the future.” A biblical redactor decided that Jonah’s mission to Israel did not merit comprehensive treatment. However, this brief reference to Jonah’s earlier mission alludes to certain facts that are discernable to the skilled exegete. The biblical redactor must convey the most pertinent information about Jonah and the fullest account of his activities in a reasonable amount of text. Through elision (‘iƙτišār), the redactor succinctly incorporates the divine message and the narrative context, and indicates the true meaning behind the biblical passage.

This logic justifies Japheth’s expansion of the episode in which Jonah reveals to the sailors that he is God’s prophet, as we discussed above. The redactor has abbreviated

Jonah’s remarks, taking care to phrase them in such a way that their full content remains intrinsic to the text and perceptible to the exegete. Japheth often relies on his concept of ‘iktisār in order to make sense of difficult or incomplete passages. One such passage involves the king of Nineveh, who proclaims, “Whoever knows ... God may relent so that He changes His mind” (3:9). Japheth expansively glosses this phrase as, “Everyone who knows that [there] is a forbidden deed or an unjust thing in his hand will turn to God so that He will immediately be merciful to him and not seek retribution for his actions.” Japheth has supplied the phrase “that [there] is a forbidden deed or an unjust thing in his hand” because the fragmentary biblical expression whoever knows indicates to him that a clause has been elided.

1.2.2 Sustained Reading

Japheth’s commentary on Jonah is remarkable for its commitment to a sustained reading of the book. The Karaite exegete Daniel al-Qumisi composed remarks on the Minor Prophet which predate those of Japheth, but the latter exegete surpasses the former in terms of the systematic nature of his commentary as well as his sustained reading. Al-Qumisi’s notes include proof texts and Arabic glosses of unfamiliar biblical vocabulary, while Japheth molds the biblical account through Arabic translation, expansion, and explanation, ultimately constructing a coherent narrative. Japheth twice refers to his unified vision of Jonah as an interpretive “path” (madhab) that he follows throughout his commentary (3:3, 4:11). The road is an apt image for describing Japheth’s technique of sustained reading. Early in his commentary, Japheth veers away from the plain sense of a
verse and proposes a reading that alters the logic of the remaining narrative. For theological reasons that we shall discuss below, Japheth rejects the notion that Jonah fled to Tarshish in order to escape his prophetic mission to Nineveh. Instead, he asserts that the obedient prophet accepted his charge and hastened to Tarshish, which was the most expedient route to his destination. Once his exegetical course is set, Japheth continues along the path he has chosen, explaining the ensuing verses in accordance with this initial interpretation.

For example, Japheth could not rightly assert that God hurls a tempest at Jonah’s ship as punishment, since Japheth’s Jonah has not disobeyed God. For Japheth, then, the storm is a miraculous event that God designed to demonstrate his omnipotence and inspire the sailors to convert to Judaism. By following a consistent interpretive path, Japheth ensures that his vision of Jonah as an eager prophet does not disrupt the narrative. Rather, this vision of Jonah becomes central to the story line. When the sailors witness the miracle of the storm, they recognize Jonah as a legitimate prophet and report this miracle to the people of Nineveh. By the time Jonah himself arrives in Nineveh, the inhabitants are predisposed to believe his words and heed his call to repentance. While Japheth’s interpretation initially creates difficulties in the logical development of the plot, it also responds to longstanding textual curiosities. Here, Japheth’s interpretation explains why the people of Nineveh were so quick to follow the prophet’s instruction to repent.

Every aspect of Japheth’s commentary flows from the premise that Jonah is an obedient prophet and all his tribulations are divinely ordained. Jonah’s prayer in the belly of the fish is not the desperate appeal of a guilty man, but a psalm of praise in which a righteous prophet expresses his gratitude to God, prophesies his own deliverance, and
models the proper way to pray in the age of Exile. Similarly, God does not punish Jonah by allowing him to suffer in the desert east of Nineveh, bereft of the gourd that had shaded his head. Rather, God devises this episode to make an impression on those who hear the story of Jonah, and God compensates Jonah for any suffering endured in the line of his prophetic duty. Japheth interprets each episode in accordance with the theological premise that Jonah, like all prophets, obeys God. From this standpoint, Japheth produces a lucid, sustained reading of the biblical text. We shall see why he does so in a moment.

1.2.3 Japheth’s Theory of Prophecy

In addition to his interest in narrative consistency, Japheth is concerned with the purpose of biblical prophecy. The commentary on Jonah provides him with ample opportunity to explore the benefits of prophecy and the reasons for recording it in Scripture. Japheth addresses this topic in at least two texts: his Introduction to the Minor Prophets—in which he presents key themes that arise within the records of the twelve Minor Prophets—and his opening remarks on Jonah. In the former text, Japheth enumerates eight benefits of prophetic activity, and in the latter text he proposes five reasons that Jonah’s prophetic adventures are included in the Bible. Japheth’s overarching statements about the purpose of prophecy in his Introduction to the Minor Prophets provide a framework for his more specific observations about Jonah’s prophetic mission and the benefits of studying the book of Jonah.

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14 See Japheth’s excursus to 2:10.
15 See Japheth’s excursus to 4:11.
In both discussions, Japheth promotes Israel as the primary beneficiary of prophetic activity. This concept of prophecy rings true for the prophets whose messages were directed toward Israel, but Jonah’s mission to distant Nineveh seems to preclude any consequences in his native land. However, Japheth shows that Jonah’s prophetic message is aimed at Israel in spite of his assignment to a foreign city. In this assessment, the significance of Jonah’s actual mission to Nineveh dwindles in comparison to the significance of the biblical account.

Japheth considers the reasons for including Jonah’s prophecies in Scripture and ascertains five messages contained within the book of Jonah. Of the five messages, four are lessons for Israel. According to Japheth, Jonah’s prophecy to Nineveh (1) informs the Israelites of God’s miraculous signs; (2) instructs Israel that God holds the nations accountable for their deeds; and (3) reminds Israel that the prophets who call for their repentance are dispatched from God, in order for them to merit God’s compassion. The fourth message stands out from the previous ones, in that it seems to be directed toward the nations rather than Israel. Japheth suggests that Jonah’s mission to Nineveh (4) demonstrates the superiority of Israel to the nations. The nations will be impressed by the fact that all prophets come from Israel, and they will abandon their own religions in order to accept the Israelite rite. Still, even this fourth message is ultimately directed toward Israel. For (5) once the Israelites learn that the nations, who have not enjoyed the benefits of God’s chosen people, have responded to God more appropriately than they have, they will understand that the fundamental purpose of Jonah’s mission to Nineveh was to censure Israel.
This fifth reason for recording Jonah’s prophetic activity in Scripture subsumes the previous reasons. The people of Nineveh unreservedly believe a foreign prophet and merit God’s compassion through sincere repentance, while the Israelites, who have benefited from a constant stream of prophets, have rejected every opportunity to behave as befits their elevated status.\textsuperscript{17} In Japheth’s view, the principle reason for Jonah’s mission is to encourage Israel’s repentance by juxtaposing their hostile rejection of the prophets with Nineveh’s immediate response to Jonah’s call.

The notion that Israel is the intended audience of Jonah’s original prophecies as well as the biblical record of them leads Japheth to reframe Jonah’s complaints following the salvation of Nineveh. Exegetes often interpret Jonah’s misery (4:1-2) as a sour reaction to the repentance of Nineveh. For Japheth, however, the primary beneficiaries of all biblical prophecy can only be Israel. Therefore, Japheth’s Jonah does not lament the recent happenings in Nineveh, but the reprehensible state of his own people, Israel:

We should not believe that the repentance of the people of Nineveh or the Lord’s willingness to forgive them displeased Jonah. The prophet desires that all people turn to God, especially as he already knew that the Lord dispatched him to them in order that they repent and he forgive them. Insofar as something was \textit{difficult for Jonah} it is only that he was grieved for the sake of Israel, since they had not repented although they had been reprimanded. They were not moved by God’s threats, which his prophets delivered. \textit{He was distressed} means that he became distressed because he knew that it was inevitable that God would carry out his threats against Israel if they did not repent.

\textsuperscript{17} In addition to Rashi, other later exegetes such as David Kimhi and Abraham ibn Ezra suggest that Jonah linked Nineveh’s repentance with condemnation of Israel. Their interpretation may be rooted in a midrashic tradition from \textit{Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael} (Simon, \textit{Jonah}, viii-ix). While Japheth may have been aware of this midrash, his argument is rooted in his theory of prophecy.
Not only does Jonah grieve for Israel, but God does likewise. In Japheth’s expanded paraphrase of 4:4, God commiserates with his faithful prophet over Israel’s deplorable conduct and refusal to heed the warnings of the prophets:

“Jonah, you have just witnessed the repentance of the people of Nineveh. What upsets you concerning Israel? Indeed, at this time it is difficult for you. Likewise, their deeds are reprehensible to me, for I have sent prophets to them continually yet they have not repented.”

The Israelites of Jonah’s day did not take advantage of his prophetic instruction. In Japheth’s view, however, the benefits of prophecy extend beyond the lifetime of prophets themselves, since biblical records ensure the lasting value of prophetic messages. In the list of eight benefits of prophecy that Japheth proposes in his Introduction to the Minor Prophets, he addresses the value of prophetic literature in the time of Exile. Study of the biblical prophets allows people in Exile to maintain their faith, even though they have no prophets of their own. In the miserable conditions of Exile, the enduring words of God’s prophets bring comfort and instruction.

This theory of prophetic literature informs Japheth’s discussion of Jonah’s prayer in the belly of the fish (Jonah 2). According to Japheth, Jonah’s descriptions of his travails in the sea and in the belly of the fish prophetically allude to the two Exiles. Jonah’s psalm instructs the people of these future Exiles in how to pray when they are overcome by difficult circumstances and barred from cultic ritual practice.

1.3 The Rabbinic Background of Japheth’s Commentary

Although independent interpretation was a fundamental principle of Karaite exegesis, Karaite commentaries are replete with references to rabbinc traditions and
hermeneutical principles. One reason for the citation of Rabbanite material was that it enabled Karaites to demonstrate their mastery over their rivals’ scholarship. Karaite interpreters could present the adversary’s incorrect reading, refute it, and supplant it with a more appropriate explanation. Just as frequently, however, Karaite scholars embraced rabbinic hermeneutic principles and embedded rabbinic explanations within their own commentaries. The rabbinic material in Japheth’s Jonah commentary falls largely into the latter category.

Japheth invokes the rabbinic maxim of ‘rin múqdum ù-mé’ulhár batórã in his analysis of the sailors’ religious awakening (1:16). According to this principle of rabbinic hermeneutics, the order of verses in Scripture does not always adhere to the actual chronology of events. Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Meir are credited with this exegetical rule within the rabbinic tradition, and there is Karaite precedence for it as well. In the first half of the tenth century, the Karaite Ya’qūb al-Qirqisani issued a statement akin to ‘rin múqdum ù-mé’ulhár batórã in his own catalogue of exegetical principles. Al-Qirqisani maintains that God endows religious thinkers with the skills to explicate Scripture by “joining or separating or arranging and placing [passages] in proper sequence.”

Throughout his commentary on Jonah, Japheth repositions words within a single verse

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8 See Tirosch-Becker, “The Use of Rabbinic Sources in Karaite Writings,” for examples of the former tendency and Ben-Shamai, “Jerusalmi in Early Medieval Bible Exegesis” or Frank, “The Limits of Karaite Scripturalism” for comments on the latter tendency.

9 Literally, “there is no ‘early’ or ‘later’ in Scripture.” For a description of this principle, see Kasher, “Scripture in Rabbinic Literature,” 590-91.


11 Nemoy, Karaite Anthology, 58: Hirschfeld discusses al-Qirqisani’s use of this exegetical principle in Qirqisani Studies, 28-9.
and proposes alternative arrangements for longer passages. These maneuvers enable Japheth to craft a Jonah narrative that meets his standards of logical and theological acceptability. Yet Japheth does not justify his interpretations with reference to al-Qirqisani or his own Arabic explanation; he validates them by the rabbinic Hebrew phrase 'ēn mūqdam ē-mēʾuḥār batōrā.

Aside from his fluency with rabbinic technical terminology, Japheth’s discussion of the sailors’ activities in Jonah 1 suggest that he was familiar with the midrashic traditions found in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer. This eighth-century aggadah from the Land of Israel narrates the biblical tale of Jonah with great midrashic flourish. In the biblical account, panic-stricken sailors cry out to their gods for relief from the tempest: The mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god (1:5). In Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, these ‘gods’ are envisioned as hand-held idols to whom the sailors direct their pleas for salvation. As the storm rages about them, the sailors conduct an impromptu theological contest in which the deity that rescues the ship will be declared the true god. When the sailors eventually consent to throw Jonah overboard, Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer suggests that they interpret Jonah’s instruction, lift me and throw me (1:12) in an unusual way: they lower his body into the sea bit by bit. First the sailors lower Jonah into the sea as far as his knees and the sea becomes calm; when they pull Jonah back into the boat with them,

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22 For a description of this rabbinic work, see the entry in Strack and Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, 328-30. Because Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer preserves ancient sources, it is possible that Japheth learned these midrashim elsewhere. Japheth neither acknowledges indebtedness to Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (unlike Rashi, who admits this source) nor quotes the material verbatim. However, the parallels between Japheth’s remarks on Jonah 1-2 and the Jonah narrative from the tenth chapter of Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer suggest direct influence.
the storm resumes. The sequence repeats when they lower Jonah into the sea as far as his navel and then as far as his throat; finally they deposit his whole body into the sea and the storm ceases altogether.

These midrashic traditions reverberate in Japheth’s interpretation of the sailors’ actions. The parallels are not transparent, though, as Japheth reports these midrashic traditions selectively and with caution. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* reports the tradition as follows:

Rabbi Hananya used to say, “There were people [speaking] seventy languages on the ship, and every single one had an abomination [an idol] in his hand, as it says, *the mariners were afraid and each man cried out to his god* (1:5). They bowed low and said, “Each of us will call out the name of his god, and whichever god responds and rescues us from this distress is the [true] god.”

Japheth’s version of this tradition is stripped of the expansive details that flag the midrashic elements of rabbinic interpretation. Japheth writes,

One exegete claims that the people of the ship were of different faiths and each person had his own deity whom he worshipped. He would pray to that deity for deliverance and if he was delivered, the group would be delivered along with him.

The introductory formula “one exegete claims” often signals that Japheth will discredit the tradition and supplant it with a more likely explanation. In this instance, however, Japheth neither denounces nor advocates the tradition explicitly. By indicating that he is not the author of this tradition, Japheth allows it to stand as an acceptable explanation but does not throw the weight of his authority behind it.\(^{23}\)

Japheth modifies the second midrash so that it is less fanciful, then advances it as one possible interpretation of Jonah’s plea, *lift me* (1:12). In place of *Pirke de Rabbi*

\(^{23}\) On personal authority within the Karaite exegetical tradition, see Lasker, “Islamic Influences.”
Eliezer's suspenseful tale, in which the sailors lower Jonah into the water three times, each time hoping to placate the god without surrendering the prophet, Japheth records the event with little fanfare:

They lowered part of his body into the sea and then they lifted him upwards and the sea raged on account of it. Then they lowered all of him and the sea became calm. They witnessed a great sign and they learned that God did this to demonstrate His power and they learned from this that God, may He be blessed and exalted, made this miracle with his prophet so that the sailors would believe in the signs of God and in the message of His prophet.

The raw material for this account appears in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, yet Japheth has crafted it to resonate within his commentary and to conform to his scripturalist ideals. In Japheth's perspective, everything that befalls Jonah conforms to God's plan for his prophet, the people of Nineveh, and those who will read Jonah's collected prophecies. God has designed Jonah's ordeals at sea in order to create the strongest impression on the sailors and the people of Nineveh. This midrashic tradition is useful because it leaves the sailors in no doubt as to God's omnipotence, and strengthens Japheth's contention that the sailors convert to Judaism in response to an irrefutable demonstration of divine power. Even a casual reference to this midrash sets the stage for a central component of Japheth's narrative. When the sailors reach Nineveh, they convey their amazement to the local people, who become convinced of Jonah's prophetic authenticity before he arrives in their city. The sailors' testimony moves the people of Nineveh to heed Jonah's call to repentance when Jonah proclaims the threat against them.²⁴

Once Japheth has excised the most discernable aggadic flourishes from the midrash, it no longer violates his commitment to scripturalist methodology. Japheth

²⁴ Japheth introduces this interpretive line in his comments to 1:15 and recapitulates it with ever greater force in his comments to 2:10 and 3:5.
substantiates his modified version of the midrash with biblical proof texts, in which the tempest ends as soon as the sailors lift Jonah into the sea. This miraculous sequence is hardly implausible in Japheth’s theological framework, and this plausibility supports his recourse to the rabbinic narrative.  

1.4 **Japheth’s Commentary within the Karaite Tradition**

To a great extent, the common Judeo-Arabic tradition of Bible translation and exegesis supersedes divisions between Rabbanites and Karaites. Karaites accepted certain rabbinic hermeneutic techniques and explanations of biblical material, as described above, and the Arabic cultural environment shaped the theological and literary sensibilities of both communities. Additionally, sectarian friction is considerably less visible in the interpretation of narrative material, such as the book of Jonah, which affords few triggers for legal dispute.

While outright Karaite/Rabbanite polemic does not appear in Japheth’s Jonah commentary, certain passages are sectarian insofar as they represent distinctively Karaite values. For example, Japheth’s discussion of Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the fish reflects core Karaite attitudes toward prayer. The Karaite liturgy emerged from biblical literature, and the book of Psalms was a particularly rich resource for the composition of prayers. In his excursus on 2:10, Japheth compares Jonah’s prophetic prayer to the psalms. In so doing, he articulates doctrinal statements about the purpose and content of

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25 Frank shows that Japheth is willing to entertain midrashic explanations when he can substantiate them through Scripture and they are not implausible (“The Limits of Karaite Scripturalism,” 62).

prayer. He identifies key phrases from the psalms, which resurface in Jonah’s prayer, and shows how Jonah’s prayer resembles those of David. Jonah, like David, adhered to the principle that worshippers must pray to God in times of severe distress, even when they are assured of divine aid. Prayers of praise and thanksgiving calm the worshipper and remind him of God’s promise of salvation.

The description of prayer that Japheth articulates in his Psalms commentary applies to Jonah’s prayer in the belly of the fish as well. In his Psalms commentary, Japheth designates twelve categories of prayer and identifies verses within the Psalter that represent these themes. Themes such as God’s beneficence; the recollection of miracles that he has performed; the request for redemption; and the conversion of the nations all appear in Jonah’s prayer.

Because Jonah is a prophet, his prayers do not merely convey his individual circumstances at a given historical moment. The enduring relevance of this prophetic prayer lies in the instruction that it provides for future congregations. Just as David expressed the details of his suffering so that later generations would know how to pray in analogous circumstances, so Jonah’s depiction of sinking in the depths of the sea alludes to the two Exiles. For Japheth, Jonah’s prayer illustrates “how to complain (yaškūna) to the Lord about conditions that will obtain during the Exile, when it is likely that [the exiles] will face difficult conditions.” In Japheth’s liturgical theory, complaint is one of

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27 Japheth cites Pss 42:8; 66:13-14; and 69:2-3. I have noted additional parallels between Jonah 2 and various psalms within the translation.
28 According to Japheth’s interpretation of Jonah, 2:2-3 recall God’s beneficence in responding to Jonah’s plight; 2:9 relates the conversion of the nations and expresses gratitude for the “great miracle” that God performed through his prophet; and 2:10 articulates Jonah’s request for deliverance. Frank discusses Japheth’s twelve rubrics in Search Scripture Well, 168-69.
29 Simon, Four Approaches, 96.
the main functions of prayer.30 Jonah’s prayer, like the psalms, models the proper way to complain to God in times of suffering. Because Japheth’s concept of affliction correlates with his own experience, he imbibes Jonah’s prayer with a foreword-looking sensibility. More than a theoretical model for prayer in generic situations of distress, Jonah’s prayer foretells the exiles’ suffering and supplies them with a form of prayer that will be meaningful and efficacious in their unique circumstances. Japheth identifies two levels of prophecy within Jonah’s prayer: Jonah predicts his imminent rescue from the sea and the belly of the fish (2:3, 7-8) and composes a prayer of lasting liturgical significance. This prophetic element, in which Jonah’s psalm prophesies a future situation and provides a prayer for future congregations, is a hallmark of the Karaite position on prophetic prayer.

On the other hand, the most striking assertion of Japheth’s commentary—that Jonah never sought release from his prophetic mission—does not represent a particularly Karaite stance toward Jonah. As we will discuss below, the attribution of prophetic infallibility to Jonah comes from the Islamic background of the commentary, and appears in Karaite and Rabbanite circles. Japheth’s Rabbanite opponent, Saadia Gaon, shares Japheth’s perspective and insists that there is no biblical evidence that Jonah did not fulfill his mission straightaway.31 By contrast, Japheth’s Karaite precursor, Daniel al-Qumisi, devotes the bulk of his Jonah commentary to attacking this exegetical approach on several counts.

Al-Qumisi’s analysis of Jonah’s culpability demonstrates that Japheth’s reading of Jonah was neither uniformly Karaite nor unfamiliar among exegetes. Al-Qumisi cites

30 In his comment to Ps 3:1, Japheth defines prayer as “a complaint (šākwa) at (one’s) situation, and an entreaty to God for salvation and the fulfillment of the (divine) promise” (qtd. in Frank, “The Shoshanim of Tenth-Century Jerusalem,” 235 n. 162).
31 Saadia Gaon, The Book of Beliefs and Opinions, 153-54.
five biblical verses in which the verb *librōah* (1:3) unequivocally denotes flight. He insists that Jonah admits his own wrong-doing within the biblical dialogue: “When the sailors ask him, ‘where are you from?’ he says to them, *I fear the LORD, the God of heaven* (1:9). If he were not fleeing, and if he had not defied God’s word, why would he fear?" In al-Qumisi’s view, to mistake Jonah’s reticence for obedience is to render the rest of the narrative unintelligible. If Jonah were not desperate to shirk his divine charge, God would not have cast a storm upon the sea, Jonah would have risen and prayed to God rather than falling asleep in the ship’s hold, and he would have prayed immediately for rescue from the fish’s belly rather than stalling for three days and nights. Japheth addresses each of al-Qumisi’s objections in the course of his Jonah commentary, through the explication of relevant verses and in excurses dedicated to the refutation of arguments presented by an anonymous interlocutor. Japheth’s sustained reading of Jonah—in which he never attempts to escape his assignment to Nineveh and constantly obeys God—reflects his engagement with Islamic theology, as we shall now discuss.

1.5  The Islamic Background of Japheth’s Commentary: The Problem of Prophetic Infallibility

Medieval Jewish thought developed within the Islamic cultural milieu, and Japheth’s commentary is indicative of the widespread Jewish engagement with Islamic literature and theology. Through the medium of the Arabic language, communities under Islamic rule encountered and absorbed and participated in Islamic discussions. The

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32 Al-Qumisi, *Commentarius*, 41.
prevalence of Arabic encouraged a broad cultural shift, in which literary styles, religious doctrines, business practices, and hierarchies for spiritual and political leadership followed the models of Islamic culture. Like his Rabbanite and Karaite contemporaries, Japheth composed his commentaries in Arabic and participated in the broad theological discourse of his day. As a product of tenth century Basra and Jerusalem, Japheth’s theological framework was heavily influenced by the ideals of Mu'tazilite Kalām and articulated in Arabic.

Japheth’s entire exegetical corpus was composed in Arabic, and his vocabulary reflects the spoken language of his environment. Most of Japheth’s Arabic terms have standard Hebrew analogues and his word selection carries no particular ideological baggage. Japheth’s translation of the divine name, for example, is mostly systematic and conventional. He uses the qur’anic expression rabb al-ʿālamīn (“Lord of the worlds”) to stand in for the Hebrew tetragrammaton, and the Arabic word ʿallāh renders the generic Hebrew term for deity, ʾelōhîm. Japheth departs from this pattern in certain verses (3:5, 8-9; 4:2, 9).

Other Arabic expressions summon complicated theological issues. One such term is mukallafīn, which Japheth employs in his explanation of why the people of Nineveh would dress their animals in sackcloth (3:8):

Someone may ask about the significance of dressing the animals in sackcloth and denying them nourishment. There is no doubt that animals are not obligated (mukallafīn) to perform the divine commandments, so how could they commit disobedient actions? The answer to this is that they sought to inspire divine mercy for themselves by means of this [action], as if to say, “Oh Lord, we have sinned and it is likely that our
deeds require the overthrow of the city upon our community and upon all who are in it. Have compassion upon the children and animals, who have not sinned before You.”

The foundation of Japheth’s comment is the doctrine of taklīf. In the Islamic context that medieval Jews considered effective for articulating Jewish doctrines, taklīf denotes God’s imposition of obligations on his creations. According to Muslim and Jewish Mu’tazilites, God imposes obligations on human beings for their own benefit, and reveals these commandments to them through the prophets. Animals, children, and insane adults are categorically not mukallafin, which is to say, they are not obligated to perform the revealed commandments. Since they are not subject to taklīf, animals and children could not be charged with disobedience, and therefore not required to repent.

In a related discussion, Japheth invokes the Mu’tazilite doctrine of ‘iwād, the principle by which the innocent are compensated for the suffering that they have endured. Because children and animals are not mukallafin—not obligated—a perfectly just God would neither punish them for disobedience nor reward them for obedience. Therefore, it would be incomprehensible for God to destroy the animals and children of Nineveh, because these innocents have done nothing to incur God’s punishment. Yet it would be equally unjust for God to destroy only the parents—who are mukallafin—and allow the children and animals to remain alive with no one to care for them. For this reason, Japheth suggests that God could have destroyed the entire population of Nineveh, including the children and animals. In this case, the death of the children and animals

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would not be a punishment. Rather, it would allow God to compensate them after their death. The children and animals are not entitled to divine reward, because they are not *mukalla'afin*, but a perfectly just God would not fail to compensate them for their suffering.

These assertions about children and animals are hardly isolated from Japheth’s sustained reading of the Jonah narrative. After explaining that God would compensate the innocent children for their suffering and that this suffering would not be for the sake of punishment, Japheth applies the same theological principle to Jonah’s situation. The prophet endures a series of memorable trials from the beginning of the book to the end. He is threatened by a tempest, harangued by sailors and tossed into the sea; swallowed and spewed by a great fish; tantalized by and then deprived of a gourd plant, which leaves him so exposed to the sun and wind that he craves death. The tale of Jonah can be reduced to the litany of perversions that the prophet has endured, and exegetes are quick to read these events as punishments for the prophet’s wrong-doing. In his excursus to 4:11, Japheth proposes an alternative interpretation:

[God] speaks to [the prophets] in parables in order to augment the influence on the people. If trouble befalls a prophet, it is not the result of any sin that he committed. Rather, God does this to increase the strength of the impression. It is without a doubt that [God] compensated him (ya‘idadhi) positively and many times over for the suffering that has befallen him.

Other hallmarks of Japheth’s engagement in Islamic discourse are not determined by Arabic vocabulary. Japheth’s theory of prophecy and his criteria for the verification of prophetic signs emerge from the Islamic background of his theological system.\(^{36}\) The central feature of Japheth’s Jonah commentary—the absolute guiltlessness of Jonah—is

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\(^{36}\) See Stroumsa, “The Signs of Prophecy.”
occasioned by an Islamic doctrine that found acceptance within the Jewish world. Although Japheth does not invoke the doctrine of ‘isma by name, his portrayal of Jonah and sustained reading of the book demonstrate his commitment to this principle.\textsuperscript{37} ‘isma, the doctrine of prophetic impeccability, was a standard Mu’tazilite dogma by Japheth’s time. The Mu’tazilites modified the orthodox Islamic view that prophets are inherently sinless or that God protects them from major sins. Rather, Mu’tazilite theologians argued that an omniscient God would not select prophets who were disobedient or unfaithful.

This version of ‘isma surely guides Saadia Gaon’s interpretation of Jonah. Saadia asserts that Jonah must have fulfilled his mission without sin because “the All-Wise would not choose anyone to execute an errand of His who would not carry it out.”\textsuperscript{38} For Saadia, the notion that Jonah was unresponsive to God’s command flies in the face of divine omniscience. Japheth’s application of ‘isma emphasizes Jonah’s impeccability as well as God’s omniscience, and he reaches similar conclusions to Saadia. The doctrine of prophetic infallibility is incompatible with the suggestion that Jonah fled a divine directive. This theological constraint leads Japheth to propose an unusual translation of the verb \textit{librāhā} (1:3) and to insist that Jonah “went quickly” to fulfill God’s command rather than attempting to escape. Japheth’s sustained reading of Jonah, in which the prophet’s obedience and devotion lead him to accomplish God’s task, emerges from Japheth’s attention to the Mu’tazilite doctrine of prophetic infallibility.

\textsuperscript{37} On ‘isma, see Madelung, “‘Isma,” 182-84; Zucker, “Is it possible for a prophet to sin?”

\textsuperscript{38} Saadia Gaon, \textit{The Book of Beliefs and Opinions}, 154.
1.6 The Present Translation

The present translation of Japheth’s commentary on Jonah follows Lawrence Marwick’s eclectic edition, which he compiled from seven Arabic manuscripts. Another witness to Japheth’s text exists in a medieval Hebrew translation from the Byzantine Karaite community. I have consulted the Byzantine Hebrew translation in order to clarify difficult passages from Marwick’s edition. It is surprisingly faithful to the Arabic manuscripts that were available to Marwick, and its rare departures are often illuminating. Such departures and additions are indicated in my notes to the English translation of the commentary.

In rendering Japheth’s Arabic translation of the biblical Hebrew passages into English, I have followed the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV). Where Japheth’s Arabic translation departs from the Hebrew text, I have adapted the NRSV citations to reflect Japheth’s translation. Most of Japheth’s departures are intentional and he discusses their exegetical significance in his comments. Occasionally, Japheth’s translation diverges without explanation or obvious reason from the Masoretic text that appears in the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia; I have noted these divergences. In several cases, Japheth’s modifications to the biblical text also appear in BL Ms. Hunt. 206.

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39 This Judeo-Arabic edition was printed under the title Retribution and Redemption: Yefet Ben Eli on the Minor Prophets. A Lost Work of Lawrence Marwick. In a personal communication, Dr. Frank has described to me the unusual circumstances by which Marwick’s edition was first printed decades after his partial correction of the page proofs. Dr. Frank postulates that the seven manuscripts to which Marwick had recourse in assembling his edition correspond to those cited in Birnbaum’s edition of Japheth’s Hosea Commentary. The two most recognizable manuscripts are Oxford, Bodleian Ms. 4to, 168 (Cat. 2483) and London, BL Or. 2400 (Cat. 287).
40 On exegesis in the Byzantine Karaite community, see Frank, “Karaite Exegetical and Halakhical Literature;” Lasker, “Byzantine Karaite Thought.”
medieval Judeo-Arabic translation of Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets. These shared features may exist because both texts preserve an older oral tradition of Arabic Bible translation.⁴¹

All biblical citations are italicized, whether Japheth has rendered them in Hebrew or Arabic. Where Japheth cites a biblical proof text in truncated form, I have expanded his citation to include the relevant portion of the text.

⁴¹ Pollitack discusses the possibility that Arabic Bible translations among different religious groups preserve oral traditions in The Karaite Tradition, 3-9.
CHAPTER 2

TRANSLATION

1:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying,

This prophet—peace be upon him—was either from a prophetic lineage or his father was a great chieftain, which is why he\(^{42}\) mentions Amittai, his father. [Jonah] prophesied concerning Israel in the time of Jeroboam son of Joash, bringing them good news about the recovery of the border from Edom. Edom had seized many territories from the land of Israel in the time of Hazael king of Aram when he was victorious over Jehu and Jehoahaz his son. Jehoash son of Jehoahaz had already recovered some of it, as it says: *Three times Joash defeated [Ben-Hadad] and recovered the towns of Israel* (2 Kgs 13:25). Then the Lord informed Jonah son of Amittai that He would restore the border of Israel to them through Jeroboam son of Joash, as it says: *He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-Hamath as far as the Sea of Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher* (2 Kgs 14:25).

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\(^{42}\) The narrator (*muqaddimah*). The role of the *muqaddimah* is explained in the Introduction, 1.2.1.
We learn three things from this verse. First, the restoration of the Israelite border to them [occurred] in the time of Jeroboam son of Jehoash. Second, God brought this good news to him through Jonah son of Amittai; because of this we know that [Jonah] was a prophet. Third, this prophet was from the tribe of Zebulun, for it says in the [passage concerning] inheritances: *from there it passes along on the east towards the sunrise to Gath-hepher* (Josh 19:13). Thus we learn (1) that this prophet was an esteemed person and the son of an esteemed person, (2) that he was from the tribe of Zebulun, and (3) that he prophesied concerning Israel and the nations. His prophecy concerning Israel is attested by the verse: *according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai* (2 Kgs 14:25). His prophecy concerning the nations is recorded in this text: that God dispatched him to Nineveh.

Scripture mentions [Jonah’s] prophetic mission to Israel in cursory fashion because his prophecy did not relate to Israel in the future, but rather, it related to the people of his own age. He was like one of those prophets who would rebuke Israel and bring them good news about things that would happen in their own time. [God] did not bring about signs and miracles through [Jonah] concerning Israel like the ones that he brought about through Elijah and Elisha. Therefore, no collection of his prophesies to

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43 Since Jonah is from Gath-hepher (2 Kgs 14:25) and Gath-hepher is part of the territory inherited by the tribe of Zebulun (Josh 19:13), Japheth deduces that Jonah must be from the tribe of Zebulun.

44 Arabic: *ṯásara*. One of the techniques that Japheth attributes to the *muḍawwīn* is *ṯišišr*, the omission, elision, or postponement of information within the narrative. The Karaite exegete al-Qirqisani likewise notes the biblical propensity for withholding details in narrative and legal contexts (Hirschfeld, *Qirqisani Studies*, 27). For discussion of Japheth’s concept of *ṯišišr*, see Introduction, 1.2.1.

45 Hebrew: *yisraēl le’atid*

46 Hebrew: *ṯišišr u-mōfēṭim*. For an explanation of Japheth’s Hebrew and Arabic terminology for miraculous events, see 37 n. 71-73.

47 Elijah and Elisha merit special mention in Japheth’s discussion of the eight purposes of prophecy, which appears in his Preface to the Minor Prophets. In that context, Elijah, Elisha, and Joshua represent the category of prophet who performs miracles in times of trouble (Pollack and Schlossberg, “Yefet’s
Israel was established, but instead, they were noted by the statement: *according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, <138> which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet* (2 Kgs 14:25).

He recorded⁴⁹ his prophecy concerning Nineveh for several reasons. The first reason was to report the stupendous sign⁵⁰ that God made through him. The second was to instruct us that God, the Mighty and Sublime, would examine the nations and their deeds when they had exceeded all bounds in their rebellious acts. The third was that God dispatched his prophets to the nations in order to call upon them to repent of their rebellious deeds, so that disaster would not befall them and God’s compassion⁵¹ would be upon them.

The fourth is to make known the nobility of [God’s] people among the nations, since He dispatched his prophet from them to the nations, and many of the people of the other nations abandoned their religion and accepted the religion of Israel. The fifth is to instruct us that the prophet went to Nineveh and said to them *forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown* (Jonah 3:4) and then they believed the prophet’s statement even though he was not one of their people but, on the contrary, he was an Israelite. They

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⁴⁹ Arabic: *dwan*
⁵⁰ Arabic: *dawwana*
repented to God and He was gracious to them. But as for the congregation of Israel, who were chosen out of all the nations, a band of prophets was dispatched to them on a daily basis, but when these prophets tried to persuade them by speaking with the most enticing language, [the Israelites] were unreceptive, and sometimes they even killed the prophet. Therefore, the prophet’s journey to Nineveh was a reproach against Israel. For these reasons that I have mentioned, then, Jonah’s prophetic mission to Nineveh has been recorded for us.

At the beginning of this prophecy it states: now the word of the LORD came (1:1).

Similar to this is are the other statements: the word of the LORD came (Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1) and the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel (Ezek 1:3). He informs us in the beginning of his prophecy that God addressed him in this way. Then, he informs us of [the words] with which God addressed him, saying,

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52 Arabic: rahíma. This term is consistent with Japheth’s comments to 4:2, in which he distinguishes between God’s grace (rahím), by which He forgives those who repent, and God’s mercy (hanání), by which He has compassion even on those who do not repent.

53 Arabic: yataalláf. This root recurs in Japheth’s translation of 1:6, in which the ship’s captain hopes that God will “deal benevolently” with those on board the vessel during the tempest.

54 The motif of Israelites killing their own prophets appears throughout medieval Jewish and Islamic literature, even though there are few biblical examples of this phenomenon. For a discussion of propheticide legends in rabbinic writing, see Amar, “The Killing of the Prophets: Unraveling a Midrash.” For examples of this motif in Karate literature, see Ben-Shamai, “The Attitude of Some Early Karaites Toward Islam,” 14, and Frank, Search Scripture Well, 193. For an analysis of Muslim polemical texts that invoke this charge against Jews, see Lazarus-Yafeh, Intertwined Worlds, 67-8.

55 Arabic: taqát lē-yisrā’el. Surely this phrase renders the Hebrew expression ʿerppā lē-yisrāʾēl, which Japheth invokes in his remarks on 3:3.

56 Arabic: dawwana

57 Japheth understands all these phrases to mean that God spoke (Poliack and Schlossberg, “Yefet’s Introduction” 14).
1:2 “Get up, go quickly\textsuperscript{58} to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim to it; for their calamity\textsuperscript{59} has risen before me.”

By His words, “Go at once to Nineveh,” God commanded him to go from the land of Israel and journey to the city of Nineveh, which was a long distance from him.\textsuperscript{60} He said the large city because it was an extensive city, spanning a three-day walk, as it states below: Now Nineveh was God’s large city, a three days’ walk across (3:3).

It begins with these words to inform us that God felt compassion\textsuperscript{61} for this city because it was a large city in which there were many human beings, including children, as it says, And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons? (Jonah 4:11).\textsuperscript{62} It is also possible that there was no city larger than Nineveh in the world, and that is why he said the great city.

Next, He commanded him to cry out against it by saying: Proclaim to it. He does not record\textsuperscript{63} here that God said to him, “Say such-and-such to them.” That is why <139> He said to him, proclaim to it the message that I tell you (3:2) in the second command. It informs us that [God] would not tell him what to proclaim, but he would know that He

\textsuperscript{58} Hebrew, ū∅. Arabic: ‘sādī. This translation points ahead to Japheth’s portrayal of Jonah as completely obedient (see notes to 3:2).

\textsuperscript{59} Hebrew: rā‘ātām. Arabic: bāliyyāhum

\textsuperscript{60} Literally, “between them was a far distance.” (wa-baynāhum masāja barīda).

\textsuperscript{61} Arabic: ṣofaqa

\textsuperscript{62} Modern Bible scholars identify these verses as part of a “growing phrase” that links the great city (1:2; 3:2), God’s large city (3:3) and the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons (4:11). (Simon, Jonah, xxxi). Eliezer of Beaufeggity shares Japheth’s conviction that the great city is a clue of God’s impending compassion. For Eliezer, this phrase stirs Jonah to refuse his mission. Jonah supposes God will spare the city even though total repentance is impossible among such a large population. Since the great city is unlikely to repent and God’s compassion will deter him from carrying out his threats, the journey to Nineveh is hardly worth the trouble.

\textsuperscript{63} Arabic: yādawwina

35
wanted him to proclaim some sort of threat\textsuperscript{64} against them, as it says, \textit{O LORD, is this not what I said while I was still in my own country?} (4:4). We will explain [this passage] when we reach it, with the help of God.

\textit{For their calamity has risen before me.} By this he means that their reprehensible actions had become so stupendously overwhelming that there was no one to declare the reprehensible things to be evil.\textsuperscript{65} Rather, everyone who cried out to the Lord on account of injustice\textsuperscript{66} done to him would cry out [to the Lord] since there was not one person there who would administer justice. Similarly, the statement \textit{the outcry that has come to me} (Gen 18:21) means that there was not a single person in Sodom who could judge honestly, so those who had suffered injustice turned to [God].\textsuperscript{67} In the statement \textit{for their wickedness has come up, injustice\textsuperscript{68} is included along with these business dealings and other things, as we shall explain in connection with the statement, They turned aside from their evil ways} (3:10).

\textsuperscript{64} Arabic: \textit{‘al-wa‘ād}

\textsuperscript{65} Arabic: \textit{yankiru ‘al-munkar}, “to declare a reprehensible thing to be so.” Japheth alludes to a commandment familiar from the Islamic milieu: the moral obligation to command what is proper and forbid what is reprehensible (\textit{al-smr bi-l-marrāf wa-l-nahr ‘an al-munkar}). This command appears in the Qur‘ān and in medieval Islamic theological discussions, in which Muslims are required to admonish those who participate in immoral behavior. See Cook, \textit{Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought}. Lazarus-Yaleh, “Self-Criticism in Jewish and Islamic Tradition,” 308-10.

\textsuperscript{66} Arabic: \textit{zuhm}

\textsuperscript{67} This reference is the first of Japheth’s two comparisons between Nineveh and Sodom. In his comment to Jonah 3:8, Japheth specifies that sexual impropriety and corrupt business practices were prevalent in both cities.

\textsuperscript{68} Arabic: \textit{zuhm}

36
1:3 Jonah set out to go quickly to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, from before the presence of the LORD.

I have translated *lubrōah* as to *go quickly*⁶⁹ as in *Make haste, my beloved* (Cant 8:14) or *Now be off with you! Go home!* (Num 24:11). This expression could be used to connote going in haste, like a fugitive on his way. In this way Jonah—peace be upon him—sought out the quickest route. He decided to travel by sea in order to shorten the journey.⁷⁰ He would depart for Nineveh from Tarshish.

Or he knew that God would work a miracle⁷¹ through him at sea so that it would be a sign⁷² for him and a proof⁷³ to confirm his words to the people of Nineveh when he would call out, *forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown* (3:4). For this reason it stated, to *‘go quickly’ to Tarshish*. The phrase from *before the LORD* means from the

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⁶⁹ Japheth follows a Judeo-Arabic tradition of rendering Hebrew *lubrōah* (‘to flee’) as Arabic *lil-madīf* (‘to go quickly’). For a discussion of this approach in Rabbanite, Karaite and Islamic sources, see the Introduction.

⁷⁰ Even those interpreters who uphold the conventional reading of *lubrōah* as ‘to flee’ find ways to justify Jonah’s desire to escape. For Eliezer of Beaufort’s apology, see Introduction, ‘1. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*’ hardly defends Jonah’s actions, but it does present a sympathetic reading of Jonah’s plight through the techniques of creative historiography. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* suggests that after Jonah’s successful first prophecy, in which Israel’s border was restored (2 Kgs 14:25), Jonah was directed to foretell the destruction of Jerusalem. The Israelites repented and God spared the city; thus, Jonah was labeled a false prophet. Jonah’s third call—to proclaim against Nineveh—fills him with dread that the people of Nineveh will also repent and execute him as punishment for false prophecy. The fearful prophet attempts to forestall this outcome by fleeing to the sea, where he believes that God’s glory does not exist (29-30).

⁷¹ Arabic: *marjīz*. By the medieval period, *marjīz* was a technical term for a specific class of miraculous activity. For an event to qualify as a *marjīz*, it needed to meet several conditions. For example, it must be contrary to the natural order, be impossible to contradict, occur through a prophet and conform to the prophet’s announcement of it (Wensinck, “*Marjīz*,” 295).

⁷² Arabic: *āya*. Unlike *marjīz*, the word *āya* has a more flexible usage. *Āyar* include natural wonders, which attest to God’s presence and power, as well as portents that occur through the prophets in order to testify to their legitimacy and urge people to take their warnings seriously (Jeffrey, “*Āya*” 773-74).

⁷³ Arabic: *burhān*. *Marjīz* and *āya* are synonyms in medieval Arabic, both meaning ‘miracle.’ Japheth uses *āya* as a cognate of the Hebrew ‘ārah, ‘sign’ (Polliack and Schlossberg, “Yefet’s Introduction,” 10). The Byzantine Hebrew translation of this passage renders both *marjīz* (miracle) and *burhān* (proof) as Hebrew ‘ārah (sign), and Arabic *āya* (miracle) as Hebrew *mofet* (marvel), (981. 60).
place of address. He informs us that his only delay was the time that passed en route while he swiftly proceeded to Tarshish.

In Hebrew, Tarshish is a proper name: the descendents of Javan: Elisha, Tarshish (Gen 10:4). It is the name of a kind of gemstone: a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper (Exod 39:13). It is the name of a sea: once every three years the ships of Tarshish used to come (2 Chr 9:21), and likewise: beaten silver is brought from Tarshish (Jer 10:9). Also, it is the name of the country of Tarshish, as it says here: to flee to Tarshish, and likewise: Tarshish did business with you (Ezek 27:12).

He went down to Joppa. It is possible that he went down to Joppa because it was a port where ships would gather from all over. He may have gone there for that reason, or because it was close to him and there was a port there, so he went to it. He found a ship informs us that a ship going to Tarshish—his intended destination—was provided for him. He paid the fare informs us that he paid the fare prior to going down into the ship so that [the sailors] would guarantee his transport to Tarshish and that they would not renge on him. Or perhaps it was the custom in ancient times for passengers to pay the fare before setting sail, and he acted according to the custom. To go with them to Tarshish means that he boarded the ship on the condition that they would conduct him to Tarshish.

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74 Hebrew: târšîš
75 Arabic: ṣ̣ịṇạḥạ. Japheth translates the Hebrew root m-n-h with the Arabic root w-f-q in 2:1 and 4:6-8. in which God “provides” or “appoints” a large fish, followed by a gourd, a worm, and a sultry east wind. By drawing on this root in the present verse, Japheth extends God’s engagement into the very beginning of the tale. Perke de Rabbi Eliezer (chapter ten) also emphasizes the divine providence behind the arrival of Jonah’s ship. There, the ship to Tarshish is still two days away when Jonah reaches Joppa and God provides a wind that blows the ship to him immediately. Jonah interprets the ship’s sudden appearance as a favorable portent.
76 The unusual detail of paying the fare before the journey’s end does not pass without note in Rashi’s commentary or in the tenth chapter of Perke de Rabbi Eliezer. The latter text implies that Jonah pre-paid out of jubilation at the ship’s arrival and the conviction that he would reach his destination unharmed (30).
Had it not stated to go with them to Tarshish, it would have been possible that both his intended destination and theirs was Tarshish, without his having reached an agreement with them concerning Tarshish. But since it stated to go with them to Tarshish, we know that he arranged with them that they would conduct him to Tarshish. It states from before the LORD twice in this verse. The first time is to inform us that he promptly undertook the journey without delay, and the second is to inform us that passage to Tarshish was provided for him immediately.

1:4 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.

He informs us that hardly had he boarded the ship when the LORD agitated the sea. The turmoil began, however, [only] when the ship had reached the deep part of the sea. Had the ship been in the harbor or close to shore, they would have been able to return to dry land. But the Lord let them alone until they had reached the middle of the sea; then he cast a wind upon the sea so that they could not return to shore.

It seems that this wind came down from the heavens, for it states he hurled a wind rather than “he raised a wind,” as in the verse, he raised the stormy wind (Ps 107:25). Nor does it state, he drove back, as elsewhere it stated, the LORD drove the sea back (Exod 14:21). The sailors did not perceive this wind [beforehand]; rather, God brought it about suddenly.

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77 Arabic: ġayr ‘ammahu lam yuwaftiqhu mlā īrsīḥā. This translation renders the verb Yuwaftiq in accord with its meaning in form VIII, which typically takes the preposition ila rather than ilā.
78 Arabic: ‘ntafqa; see 38 n. 75.
79 Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer extends this description: not only was the wind imperceptible on land, but the other ships on the sea were unaffected by it as well. These vessels were diverted so that the storm affected Jonah’s ship alone (chapter ten).
From the phrase *a mighty storm* we learn that the sea became greatly tempestuous. It was a tempest to end all tempests, by which ships are overtaken and destroyed, just as he says *the ship threatened to break up*. It is probable that this wind was a maritime wind and there was no trace of it on dry land.

<141> 1:5 *Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god.* §80 *They threw the cargo* §81 that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep.

After the sailors saw this great abyss and that the ship [would be] annihilated, they feared that they would perish. Every one cried out to his god, in whom he believed, because they believed that this wind would only calm down by [the will of] the one who had cast it upon the sea. Therefore the crew threw whatever was in the boat, including tools and baggage, into the sea in order to lighten the ship so that they could continue on. Then it informs us that Jonah did nothing while the sea was troubled, for it says *he had lain down, and was fast asleep*. It may be that God threw him into slumber so that he would not cry out when the others cried out, and that they would need to awaken him from his sleep and they would compel him to cry out to the Lord, as it says in the next verse. §82

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§80 Hebrew: * Elohai could refer to many deities or a single, national god (Sasson, *Jonah*, 98). The medieval commentators prefer the former interpretation. Japheth’s Arabic translation, *ma’bdulihi*, refers to any object of worship, whether a deity or an idol.

§81 Hebrew: * haškelim*, Arabic: *tāl-hār*. This generic Hebrew term refers to “material objects, finished products, utensils, or tools.” It could include idols, implying that the sailors dumped their idols overboard since they were useless in ending the storm (Sasson, *Jonah*, 98). Japheth’s translation, which refers to instruments or tools, is similar to the Arabic word for deities, so that the Arabic version could also resonate with the midrash from *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* in which the sailors cry out to, and eventually discard, their idols.

§82 While Japheth ascribes divine authority to Jonah’s slumber, other exegesists suggest psychological reasons. Eliezer of Beaugency posits that Jonah’s great sorrow, confusion, and sluggishness lead him to fall asleep. Likewise in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Jonah falls asleep because of his profound sorrow (chapter ten). These interpretations distinguish Jonah’s slumber from the incubatory sleep of other biblical prophets. The
1:6 The captain said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, pray to your god! Perhaps the LORD will consider us benevolently so that we do not perish."

He informs us that the ship’s director came to him and told him “This is the time in which people are sleeping and they are deeply asleep. Whatever kind of god you have, call upon him! Get up from your sleep and pray to your god like we have prayed, and perhaps the Lord will answer your prayer and will deal benevolently with our difficulty by calming the wind so that we will not perish.

One exegete claims that the people of the ship were of different faiths and each person had his own deity whom he worshipped. He would pray to that deity for deliverance and if he was delivered, the group would be delivered along with him. Every single person prayed to his deity, but the sea did not become calm. Then he told Jonah, “Pray to your deity. Perhaps he will respond to you and we will be saved and we will not perish.”

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Hebrew word that describes Jonah’s sleep, nirdâm, also describes Daniel’s trance prior to receiving a message from God (Dan 10:9), (Sasson, Jonah. 102).

83 Hebrew: mā-lēḵā nirdām, Arabic: mā-lakā mansabīt. The participle nirdām can be understood as an accusative of state, i.e., “what’s wrong with you, being in a trance?” or as a vocative, i.e., “What’s with you, entranced man?” (Sasson, Jonah. 103). The Arabic participle functions identically.

84 Hebrew: yīrāšēt, Arabic: yalūf

85 Arabic: ṣalā ṣallā al-illāhka

86 Arabic: ‘illāh

87 Arabic: wa-yalūf. The Byzantine translation transfers this Arabic root into Hebrew: yalīf (99 l. 101).

88 The Byzantine translation excludes the formula za‘ām bāṣūd al-mufasāsirīn, ‘one exegete claims’ (99 l. 101), which suggests that Japheth endorses the following interpretation. It is clear from the Arabic version, however, that Japheth distances himself from the interpretation without taking full responsibility for it. Rabbi Hananya, who is credited with a similar interpretation in the tenth chapter of Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, may be the ‘one exegete’ that Japheth has in mind.

89 Arabic: muqātalīta al-maṣāḥib. The word maṣāḥib (sg., maṣḥab) refers to the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence and, by extension, to different religious faiths. Japheth also uses to term to refer to interpretive paths (3:2; 4:4).

90 In Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Hananya expands the biblical verse, in which sailors pray to their deities, to suggest that they clutched religious icons to whom they directed their prayers. This description accords with the scholarly understanding of maritime ritual in the ancient Near East. Seafarers kept figurines of patron deities on board, to which they would offer sacrifices or make vows in times of distress (Brody, Each Man Cried to His God, 68-77).
Captain\textsuperscript{92} derives from [the same root as] pilots of the sea\textsuperscript{93} (Ezek 27:29) and he will consider\textsuperscript{94} derives from [the same root as] the king considered\textsuperscript{95} (Dan 6:4), which some have rendered as “the king directed.”

\textit{1:7 The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity\textsuperscript{96} has come upon us.” So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.}

It may be that Jonah did not pray to the Lord because he knew that the Lord wanted to throw him into the sea. For this reason he did not pray but rather he refrained from prayer. When the sailors noticed that their prayers went unanswered and that the sea did not become calm but, on the contrary, that the storms increased, they discerned that there was a cause on account of which this disaster had overtaken them.

Then they said, “It is necessary for us to cast lots in order to find out on whose account the turmoil of the sea was gathered against us. Then we will throw him into the sea and we will be saved.’\textsuperscript{97} They did this, and because of the Lord, the lot fell on Jonah; this occurred by the will of the Lord, Mighty and Sublime.

\textsuperscript{91} According to the tenth chapter of \textit{Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer}, it is only after the captain learns that Jonah is a Hebrew that he directs him to call upon his god. The captain exclaims, “Haven’t we heard that the god of the Hebrews is indeed great? Get up, pray to your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought and make a miracle for us just as he made for you at the Red Sea!”\textsuperscript{(51)}.

\textsuperscript{92} Hebrew: \textit{rab habhōbel}

\textsuperscript{93} Hebrew: \textit{ḥōbēl hayyām}

\textsuperscript{94} Hebrew: \textit{yir’uḥṣēt}

\textsuperscript{95} Hebrew: \textit{ā-nakkkāt ḥāliṯ}. Rashi likewise cites Dan 6:4, as well as Ps 146:4, in order to make sense of this verb. Eliczer of Beaugency glosses \textit{yir’uḥṣēt} as \textit{ṣimmālēḵ}, “to take counsel.”

\textsuperscript{96} Hebrew: \textit{hārādā}. Arabic: \textit{balaṣa}

\textsuperscript{97} Arabic: \textit{nastarīḥ}. The word “wind,” (Hebrew \textit{rāḥ}) and Arabic (\textit{riḥ}) derives from the same root. Japheth semantically links the cause of the sailors’ distress—\textit{the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea} (1:4)—to their desired outcome, i.e., salvation.
1:8 Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what religious community are you.”

1:9 “I am a Hebrew,” he told them. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who created the sea and the dry land.”

After the lot fell on Jonah, it was necessary for them to inquire into his explanation. So together they told him, “The lot has fallen on you, so you must be the cause, the person who brought this misfortune upon us. Respond to [the questions] that we ask you. There are four items. First: what profession and business do you practice? Second: from which city did you set out to us? Third: from which city are you? Fourth: from which religious community do you come?” He answered every one of the questions, and he took them one by one, starting with the last.

He said, “As for your question about my city and my religion: I am a Hebrew.” He informed them of his religion and his city because “the land of Israel” is “the land of the Hebrews,” as it says, for in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews (Gen 40:15). Then he said, and I worship the LORD, God of Heaven. The statement I worship the LORD, God of Heaven, has two meanings. First, it answers their question what is your business? Second, [it provides background for] the later statement, the men knew that he was going quickly from the presence of the LORD (Jonah 1:10).

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98 Hebrew: hārāʾē, Arabic: hālīṣa
99 Hebrew: qāʿām, “people,” Arabic: qābil, “tribe” (in the translation proper); mīlā, “religious community; faith, creed” (in the comments). The sailors’ questions may satisfy a Near Eastern storytelling convention in which a foreigner must fully introduce himself. The fact that Jonah’s answers are not elaborated provides evidence that his responses do not fulfill any plot purpose (Sasson, Jonah, 126).
100 Hebrew: ʿibār (Arabic: ʿibrāniyy) alerts the audience to “the extraordinary nature of a Hebrew’s character.” Similar proclamations appear in Esther 3:4, in which Mordecai tells the king’s servants that he is a Jew, and Genesis 40:15, in which Joseph reports that he is a Hebrew (Sasson, Jonah, 127). Japheth himself cites the latter parallel.
102 Eliezer of Beaugency likewise identifies Jonah’s assertion as his response to the sailors as well as his disclosure of the reason behind the tempest (158).
In this verse he mentions heavens, land, and seas. He says, “I fear the god of the heavens and the creator of the sea and the dry land, which are under His control, which He can change as He wishes. He is the one who troubled the sea on my account, although not because of any sin that I have committed in my behavior, which it was your intention to discover through your question: what is your business. I am obedient to God, so the sea’s turmoil is not due to any rebelliousness on my part. Rather, the one who is mighty and sublime did this as a way of making a miracle through me.” When they heard this speech they were terrified that this occurrence would come to pass through him, as it says in the next verse.

<143> 1:10 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 departing from before the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

When they found out that he was a dispatched prophet, they said to him, “What have you done with us?” By this they meant that he should take charge of their situation until the sea became calm, either through prayer to God or through other means.

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103 Arabic: rajul tar 'allah
104 Arabic: mu'fiz
105 Although Japheth does not include the term ṣīṣār here, this exegetical principle is the basis for the expanded dialogue (on ṣīṣār, see Introduction 1.2.1). According to the principle of ṣīṣār, Jonah would have verbalized the full content of the speech that Japheth proposes, and the madanwin would have excised the superfluous material. The complete text is discernable within the structure of the abbreviated passage, and Japheth spells out the full conversation in his commentary.
1:11 Then they said to him, “What shall we do, on your command, so that the sea will quiet down for us? For you are the one who sees.” The sea was growing more and more tempestuous.\textsuperscript{106}

After they asked him, “What is this that you have done?” they told him, “Tell us what we should do with you so that the sea will calm down around us. Indeed, we do not know what we should do with you because it is you who is the prophet, and you know how we must participate in your situation so that the sea becomes calm.\textsuperscript{107} You are the one who sees everything that has happened.” The sea was becoming ever more turbulent.

1:12 He said to them, “Lift me out of the ship\textsuperscript{108} and throw me into the sea; so that the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”

He informed them that the sea would become calm for them once they threw him into the sea. He could have said this only by virtue of the knowledge that God had imparted to him; because of this [knowledge], he permitted them to throw him into the sea. He only permitted them [to do] this because he knew that God would rescue him and it would not be sinful for them to throw him.\textsuperscript{109} By the words it is because of me he means “My presence with you in the ship is the reason for the storm’s increase, so the sea will become calm when you heave me overboard.”

\textsuperscript{106} Japheth intersperses two clauses into his translation of 1:11: fi 'amrka hadâ, “on your command,” and fi'amrka iswâdâ tarâ, “for you are the one who sees.” The impetus behind these additions is clear: an exact Arabic translation would be incompatible with Japheth's sustained reading, in which Jonah is an obedient prophet whose legitimacy the sailors recognize. Japheth's expansion could be justified by a liberal use of 'iktisâr. In order to make sense, however, the six word insertion requires further expansion, which Japheth provides in his comments.

\textsuperscript{107} At this point, the Byzantine translation includes an additional clause, in which the sailors tell Jonah, “You are neither wicked nor a sinner, for by slaying you we will be rescued” (100 l. 136). The first clause appears to gloss the Arabic rajul tâ'î 'allah (“I am obedient to God;” see comments to 1:9), which appears in the Byzantine translation as 'unî 'ôbêd l-shâh (100 l. 129). The second clause points ahead in the narrative.

\textsuperscript{108} Japheth adds: min 'al-sofina, “from the ship.” The addition appears in Ms. Hunt 206, 110.

\textsuperscript{109} The sailors discern that Jonah’s instruction comes from God and not “from his own heart” in Eliezer of Beaugency’s commentary.
1:13 Nevertheless, the men strove to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.

When he informed them that the sea was agitated because he was with them, and that it would become calm if they threw him into the sea, they did not dare to throw him unless they had no other choice but to do so. They strive means that they took measures to return to dry land but this was not possible on account of the tumultuous sea.

1:14 They prayed to the LORD in this way: “O LORD, 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.”

After they saw that they had given a concerted effort to every stratagem, they reconsidered Jonah’s instruction. The sea had not calmed down, and they were certain that they would inevitably perish if they did not throw him into the sea. So they prayed to the Lord and they asked him two things. First, do not let us perish, which means, “don’t let us perish after we throw him over; keep the sea from turmoil” because

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110 Japheth adds: ‘al-safina, “the ship.” This addition also appears in Ms. Hunt 206, 110.

111 Approaching the shore in stormy conditions is anti-theoretical to nautical wisdom. Sasson, therefore, advances a religious reason for the sailors’ puzzling strategy. He suggests that the mariners sought to gain God’s mercy by demonstrating that they would risk their own lives in an effort to rid themselves of God’s errant prophet. By preventing the sailors from reaching dry land, God taught that “the events on board the ship were by no means a drama about wayward individuals and divine vengeance; nor were they about testing human compassion under impossible circumstances. Rather, they were about learning a lesson wherever and whenever a prophet of God appeared—willingly or otherwise” (Jonah, 142). This reading emphasizes the main points of Japheth’s interpretation: that Jonah and the miracles that occur through him are God’s tools for making an impression on those who witness this prophetic activity (see esp. Japheth’s comparison of Jonah and Jeremiah in his comments on 4:11).

112 Hebrew: wayyaha’erû, Arabic: ḥ̱āl, “to work or strive.” The meaning of the Hebrew word is unclear in this context. The remaining eight biblical attestations of the root h-ḥ-r concern digging (BDB, 369); for example, Amos proclaims the futility of digging (h-ḥ-r) down day ṣē’ol to escape the hand of God (9:2). Sasson links Amos’s imagery to this verse in Jonah. In Amos, people “desperately and feverishly drive an instrument into the earth in order to escape their own world. In Jonah, a parallel atmosphere is evoked. Here, the mariners try to break through the waves, to master and overcome them” (Jonah, 130). Rashi also characterizes the sailors’ activity in the water as a sort of digging: yiqqû wē-ʿasqû kēḥōtēr bēmahierei, “they toiled and occupied themselves like a digger in his digging (52).” Eliezer of Beaugency curiously glosses the biblical phrase without a verb to correspond to wayyaha’erû; “this way and that, in order to find a way to return to dry land” (158). Japheth’s translation—they strove—is similarly vague about the sailors’ activity. The Byzantine translation offers ʿasû tahbûlōt, “they employed stratagems” (100 l. 146).
they were not certain that this tempest would calm when they threw him into the sea. On the contrary, they heard this statement from him without proof.\textsuperscript{113} so it could be that his statement was untrue. It was difficult for them to accept Jonah’s instruction, so they beseeched the Lord not to let them perish after they threw him overboard.

The second [request] is: \textit{do not make us guilty of innocent blood}. By this they meant that God should not call on them for restitution of his blood, either after they departed the sea or in the next world. \textit{For you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you} means “you, O Lord, did as you wanted when you troubled the sea.”\textsuperscript{114}

1:15 \textit{So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging, which is to say, from its tempest.}\textsuperscript{115}

It could be that Jonah’s body was heavy, for he was unable to throw himself into the sea and they needed to carry him and throw him. It is possible that they practiced and [then] threw him. They lowered part of his body into the sea and then they lifted him upwards and the sea raged on account of it. Then they lowered all of him and the sea became calm.\textsuperscript{116} They witnessed a great sign\textsuperscript{117} and they learned that God did this to demonstrate His power and they learned from this that God, may He be blessed and

\textsuperscript{113} Arabic: bi-gayr burihān; in the Byzantine translation: bēlō yā yā bēlō mōfēi, “with neither a sign nor a marvel” (101 l. 151).
\textsuperscript{114} Likewise, for Eliezer of Beagency the sailors only consider Jonah’s instruction as a last resort. Their desperate prayers reveal a lack of confidence in their decision; “When they saw no other means [of rectifying Jonah’s error] other than to throw him into the sea, as he had said, then they cried out to the Lord (158).”
\textsuperscript{115} Hebrew: mizzchāppō; Arabic: mīn zağmihī yatānī mīn hayajānihī. Japheth offers a dual translation of the single Hebrew term. The first word is a cognate to the Hebrew term; the second word seems to gloss the first with a more familiar Arabic word.
\textsuperscript{116} Japheth’s depiction of the sailors lowering Jonah into the sea bit by bit in a final attempt to verify that their actions accord with God’s will resembles a more elaborate midrash recorded in \textit{Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer} (see Introduction, 1.3).
\textsuperscript{117} Arabic: sāhādā āyat aẓīma (Cf. Japheth’s comments to 4:4 and notes there.)
exalted, made this miracle with His prophet so that [the sailors] would inform the people of Nineveh of it and [the people of Nineveh] would believe in the signs of God and in the message of His prophet.

1:16 The men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

[Jonah] knew that they would fear God greatly when they witnessed this miracle. This means that they converted to the religion of Israel, for surely God would not have accepted their offerings if this were not the case. This offering that they presented to Him after their departure from the sea, when they came to Jerusalem, was an offering of thanksgiving, due to God [in return] for His rescue. They made vows [after] their departure from the sea, for chronology is elastic in Scripture. It may be that they [first] vowed to present these and other offerings, but they offered a sacrifice to the LORD precedes they made vows [in the text] because thanksgiving is loftier. This verse is arranged on the basis of what is most lofty. For this reason he initially mentions fear.

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118 Arabic: marjiz
119 Arabic: bê-ayat-allah wa bê-risâlat-nâsîhi |'alîf missing from text|. Japheth revisits this interpretive line in his comments to 2:10 and 3:5.
120 Hebrew: wayyiyiqâl, Arabic: wa-faza'â. Japheth understands this verse to mean that the sailors worshipped God, and that his worship includes their vows and sacrifices—even their conversion. While the Hebrew root y-r-â refers to fear and worship, Japheth selects an Arabic root that denotes terror without a religious connotation. Japheth’s theologically neutral translation preserves fear as basis of worship but not the entirety of it.
121 Arabic: sâhadâ (See Japheth’s comments to 4:4 and notes there.)
122 Arabic: marjiz
123 Literally, “they entered the religion of Israel.” (dalââ fi din yiqrâ’ûl).
124 Hebrew: maqdam u-mâ’âkûr (see Introduction, 1.3).
125 Arabic: sanzara
which is the root cause, and it is loftier than thanksgiving [offerings]. Next he mentions thanksgiving [offerings], because they are loftier than the vow.\footnote{Pirke de Rabbi Eizerer explains how non-Israelites were able to offer sacrifices to the Israelite deity. The ‘sacrifice’ in question is that of circumcision; this ‘covenant of blood’ is akin the blood of sacrifice (chapter ten).}

\begin{pagebreak}{<145>}
\begin{verse}
But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.
\end{verse}

[Chronologically], this verse immediately follows 1:15, but it is inserted after the men worshipped the LORD (v. 16) in order to mention the faith of the people and their conversion at the time that the sign was performed. Then he begins to relate the story\footnote{Arabic: \textit{qiṣṣa}. This word, which means story or narrative, may also connote fabulous or legendary tales. It is unlikely, however, that Japheth uses this word to establish Jonah as ‘story’ in contrast to ‘history.’ Throughout the commentary, he refers to \textit{qiṣṣat-yamî}, “the story of Jonah,” and \textit{qiṣṣat-ninîwê}, “the story of Nineveh.” (the terms appear side by side in Japheth’s comment to 4:5).} of Jonah. By inserting this verse (1:16) between them (1:15 and 2:1), he arranges the verses appropriately.\footnote{Arabic: \textit{kassana}. Japheth uses this verb to describe the mudawwin’s process of arranging verses in their proper order (Pollack and Schlossberg, “Yefet’s Introduction.” 13 n. 38).}

The phrase the LORD provided informs us that at that moment the Lord accommodated Jonah with a large fish to swallow him\footnote{Some exegetes take pains to determine how a fish could swallow and accommodate a human being. Pirke de Rabbi Eizerer records Rabbi Meir’s description of a pearl suspended from the fish’s belly to provide light for Jonah, and Rabbi Tarfon’s image of Jonah entering the fish’s mouth as one enters the great meeting house (chapter ten). In contrast to these midrashic presentations, Eizerer of Beaugency identifies the large fish as “a whale or something like it” (158). Japheth, however, accepts the entire sequence as a miraculous event and does not speculate about its mechanics.} so that he would not sink. Furthermore, it swallowed him whole and did not chew him up or digest him. That is the reason that he survived and remained three days and three nights in the interior of the fish and did not die.\footnote{For Eizerer of Beaugency, the duration of Jonah’s captivity within the fish convinces the prophet that God does not intend to injure or kill him. During this period, God subjugates Jonah’s heart so that he will take up his mission (158).} \begin{verse}
Blessed is he who is held in awe, who makes wonders.
\end{verse}
2:2 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,\textsuperscript{131} 
2:3 saying, “I prayed to the LORD in my distress,\textsuperscript{112} and he answered me; from the belly 
of Šē‘ōl\textsuperscript{133} I cried, and you heard my voice.

He informs us that after he landed in the belly of the fish, he prayed to the Lord. 
This [action] indicates the soundness of his intellect and prophethood. When he said \textit{I shall look again} (2:5) we learn that he was undoubtedly prophesying. The phrase \textit{I prayed to the LORD in my distress} means that when he was thrown into the sea he prayed to the Lord to rescue him and to save his life, and God answered him by providing a fish to swallow him. \textit{From the belly of Šē‘ōl} refers to his presence in the interior of the fish.\textsuperscript{134}

He raised him from the place of ruin, where he was. Had the LORD not preserved him he would have been annihilated already. For this reason, his existence in the belly of the fish is compared to a person’s existence in the grave. He informs us that he appealed to the Lord when he arrived in the belly of the fish, [pleading] that the belly of the fish not crush him and that he not perish. God responded to him, as he says, \textit{you heard my voice}.\textsuperscript{135}

\textsuperscript{131} Hebrew: dāqā, Arabic: ḥāt.
\textsuperscript{112} Hebrew: miṣṣārā ʾāl; Arabic: mīn al-šādā ʾāl. This part of the verse is nearly identical to Ps. 120:1 and similar to Ps 18:7 (Smart, “Jonah,” 886).
\textsuperscript{133} Hebrew: Šē‘ōl, systematically translated to Arabic: ḥarā. Šē‘ōl is often mentioned in Psalms as an indication of spiritual distress, i.e., Ps 18:5; 30:3; 116:3 (Smart, “Jonah,” 887).
\textsuperscript{134} Rashi concurs that Šē‘ōl refers to the belly of the fish (53).
\textsuperscript{135} Karaite exegesis characteristically recognize biblical parallelism as stylistic repetition. Here Japheth departs from this principle by ascribing distinct meanings to the chiastic parallel, much in the style of rabbinic exegesis. (On the rabbinic insensitivity to parallelism, see Kugel, The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History, esp. chap. 3.) In Japheth’s interpretation, \textit{I prayed to the LORD in my distress} refers to Jonah’s prayer from the sea, which God answered by sending the great fish. \textit{From the belly of Šē‘ōl} refers to Jonah’s confinement in the fish’s belly, when he entreats God to protect him from being crushed and again, God hears.
2:4 You cast me into the deep, and into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.\textsuperscript{136}

He starts to describe the distress\textsuperscript{137} that overwhelmed him as he prayed to the Lord and He answered him. He informs us that when he was thrown into the sea he landed in an abyss—as \textless 146\textgreater he said, \textit{you cast me into the deep}—and that he was in the depth of the sea and not close to the shore—as he said, \textit{into the heart of the seas}. The currents that poured into the sea circled around him. He informs us that the waves and billows passed over him, over his head. It is impossible for a person to survive when a situation like this befalls him, especially if he is thrown overboard when he is physically ill, as we have remarked in [our explanation of] \textit{they threw him into the sea} (1:15).

2:5 Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall look again upon your holy temple.’

He informs us that when he landed in this situation, he said to himself, “You see, O Lord, that I am driven away from your presence,”\textsuperscript{138} which means [banished] from this world and the next. By the phrase \textit{yet I shall look again}, he means, “I now know that I will survive and reconnect with your holy temple, since you brought about this fish to swallow me. I will not be destroyed, for I know that I will return to my former state and I will gaze upon your holy temple.”\textsuperscript{139}

\textsuperscript{136} Hebrew: kōl-mišbārēkā wégallēkā ʿalay ʿabarō. The same phrase appears in Ps 42:8b (Smart, “Jonah,” 886).

\textsuperscript{137} Arabic: ʿal-ṣiddā, as in Japheth’s translation of 2:3. For Japheth, ʿal-ṣidda designates Jonah’s despair in the sea prior to his captivity in the belly of the fish.

\textsuperscript{138} Hebrew: min bēn yōdekā, literally, “from between your hands.”

\textsuperscript{139} The time sequence between the first and second clauses of this verse is the subject of discussion. For Japheth and Eliezer of Beaugency (1:58), the verse indicates three points in time. The trauma of finding himself in the sea leads Jonah to perceive a separation between himself and God (‘I am driven away from your sight’); when he becomes reassured that God will rescue him, he prophesies his rescue and return to the temple (‘yet I shall look again’).
2:6 The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; the Red Sea \^{140} covered my head.
2:7 at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars \^{141} closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God.

These two verses could refer to the time that he spent in the belly of the fish, for he informs us that he was nearly annihilated. Alternatively, they could indicate the time when he said *I am driven away from your sight* (v. 5), as though he said “I said, ‘Behold, I am driven away from your sight’ when the waters closed in over me entirely and when I saw the Red Sea covering my head. The Red Sea probably flows into this sea, for when I landed in this situation, I said ‘I am driven away from your sight.’ Likewise, I also said ‘I am driven away from your sight’ when I saw that I had landed at the base of the marine mountain and I saw that the ocean floor had locked its gate over me, which means that I would never emerge from it.” *You brought my life up from the Pit* means “you brought my spirit from this grave that is the belly of the fish.” This is prophetic speech\^{142} in which he makes it known that the Lord will rescue him from the belly of the fish and that he will return to the land of Israel and he will gaze upon the temple of the LORD.

2:8 As my soul withered,\^{143} I mentioned the LORD; and my prayer came to You, <147> into your holy temple.

\^{140} Hebrew: *saf*. Japheth interprets the Hebrew word *saf*, “reeds,” as an elliptical reference to *ram saf*, the “sea of reeds” or Red Sea, and translates this word as *bahr al-qilzum*, the Arabic term for the Red Sea. Japheth’s interpretation is hardly unique. Ms. Hunt 206 offers the same translation (110) and Rashi (53) follows *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (chapter ten) in adding the Red Sea to Jonah’s underwater itinerary. Unlike the other exegetes, however, Japheth proposes that waters from the Red Sea flow into the sea where Jonah finds himself, and not that Jonah travels to the Red Sea.


\^{142} Arabic: *hağā l-qāfal huwa nafūt*. The Hebrew verb *hërâṭef* also appears in Pss 142:4 and 143:4 (Smart, “Jonah,” 887). Japheth uses the Arabic verb *tadawwara*, “to writhe or convulse (in pain or hunger),” to translate Hebrew *hërâṭef*, “to faint away,” in this verse and Hebrew *hërâlāf*, “to swoon” in 4:8. Al-Qumisi glosses *hërâlāf* as *hërâṭef* in his remarks on the latter verse (42).
He informs us that his soul writhed as he longed for a vision of Jerusalem. He mentioned the Lord in his prayer and his petition, and he informs us that God receives his prayer, as it is stated: *my prayer came to you.* He says to *your holy temple* in order to inform us that his petition reached the place in which the Lord answers the petition of those who pray.\(^{145}\)

2:9 *Those who cling to vain idols will abandon their religion.*\(^{146}\)

He reports to us that people who believe in their deities—which are *vain idols*—will abandon their religion. The people to whom he refers are those who were with him in the ship, about whom it is stated, *the men worshipped the LORD even more* (1:16). He says, *"O LORD, when you made this great miracle through me, those who cling to vain idols abandoned their religion and entered your religion."*\(^{148}\)

\(^{144}\) In Ehezer of Beagancy’s commentary, Jonah’s words *‘et-yinwh zākārī* mean that he recalled something about God, namely, that *the mercies of the Lord have not ended, his compassion is not finished* (Lam 3:22). In the Qur'ān, the content of Jonah’s invocation approximates the first clause of *‘al-Sahāda, the Muslim profession of faith: fa‘ādā fi-l-zulūmīt ‘an lillā ‘ilāhu ‘ilāha ‘anatā, “then, he cried out in the darkness: ‘there is no god aside from you!’*” (21:87).

\(^{145}\) Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer turns this chapter into a wondrous travelogue, in which *your holy temple* suggests that the fish has carried Jonah to the waters beneath the temple in Jerusalem. Rashi adopts this explanation (53).


\(^{148}\) Japheth is not alone in interpreting this verse as a reference to the sailors, who spontaneously convert after witnessing God’s power. A dramatic flourish in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer shows the mariners flinging their idols into the sea (32). Rashi suggests that the sailors themselves utter these words when they convert, acknowledging that idolatry constitutes a rejection of divine grace (53). Al-Qumisi and Eliezer of Beagancy identify those who cling to vain idols with all worshippers of other gods and not the mariners specifically. Al-Qumisi glosses mēṣāmērîn as “all who keep [laws] outside of the Law of Moses” and indicates that “the few who seek refuge in [God] will turn from [other] gods” (42). Eliezer of Beagancy understands ḥāsdōm as God’s loving-kindness, which idolaters reject: “the rest of humankind waits expectantly for vain idols to aid them, and they confess gratitude to them when You deliver them. They abandon the loving-kindness that You render them and they do not remember You.”

53
And I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!

He says and I with a conjunctive waw\(^\text{149}\) in order to link him with the Lord’s work. He says: “You heard my prayer in the time of my severe distress, and You responded to me with salvation, and I will sacrifice to you with a thankful voice.” He informs us that he will make offerings, and that he took vows upon himself, and that when he is rescued from his distress he will fulfill his vows.\(^\text{150}\) It may be that he announced that he would make a burnt offering, since it was the loftiest vow for the offering of sacrifices that a person could vow as an individual in the time of the Monarchy.\(^\text{151}\) The statement deliverance belongs to the LORD indicates the arrival of the Lord’s aid.\(^\text{152}\) Thus he says: “O Lord, when you liberate me I will express gratitude to you through the offering of sacrifices. I will offer meat offerings of thanksgiving and offerings in fulfillment of vows\(^\text{153}\) when I reach the house of the Lord. It is without doubt that Jonah—peace be upon him—did this following his return from Nineveh.

Someone may ask a question here: if Jonah only sailed in order to seek out the closest route [to Nineveh], then why did the Lord agitate the sea around him so that he would be cast into the sea? Why did he permit the troubles that he has described to befall him? Should someone ask this question, we would respond by saying that God did this to

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\(^{149}\) Some modern biblical scholars, such as Simon, read this waw as adversive (Jonah, 24).

\(^{150}\) The biblical text does not reveal the content of Jonah’s vows. Jaheth relies on the context of the verse to suggest that Jonah vowed that he would present sacrificial offerings after his rescue. In Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Jonah vows to sacrifice the Leviathan to God on the day of Israel’s salvation. This vow inspires God to signal the fish to spew Jonah onto dry land (33). Eliezer of Beaugency does not speculate on the content of Jonah’s vow but asserts that he made the vow in his time of distress (159).

\(^{151}\) Arabic: zaman al-dawla. Salmon ben Yerušālim, a Jerusalem Karaite exegete of the early tenth century, employs the expression ‘ahl al-dawla to refer to those who lived during the time of Israelite sovereignty (Introduction to the Book of Psalms, cited in Simon, Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms, 63).

\(^{152}\) For Eliezer of Beaugency, this phrase indicates that prayer and praise belong to God (159).

\(^{153}\) Hebrew: qorbôn zebāh tōdā wēʾōlā nēdārīm

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him in a miraculous way\textsuperscript{154} so that when he brought this news to the people of Nineveh and Jonah came and said \textit{forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown} (3:4) they would believe that he was <148\textsuperscript{>} a prophet of God.\textsuperscript{155}

Next, the questioner may ask: if God did this to him in a miraculous fashion,\textsuperscript{156} then why did Jonah need to pray?\textsuperscript{157} And what did he have in mind when he said: \textit{I said, 'I am driven away from your sight'} (2:5) if he knew that God would save him? The answer to this is that when distress befalls a worshipper, he must pray to God in order to merit his aid. We would respond that Jonah knew that when he prayed to God, God would receive his prayer. Likewise, our esteemed David\textsuperscript{158} used to pray to God in times of severe distress for the same reason. Even though he already anticipated the promise that God would assist him, he neither sang about the promise nor the knowledge that he would be saved. The prayer would calm him, as would the vow and the gratitude by which he would be assured of aid. Jonah acted on this principle.\textsuperscript{159}

It is possible for us to say that in the prayers he uttered, he complained\textsuperscript{160} of a difficult situation that [prophetically] alludes\textsuperscript{161} to the two Exiles, which resemble the sinking that he experienced in the depths of the sea. As he said, \textit{Save me, O God, for the

\textsuperscript{154} Arabic: \textit{tariq al-murjiz}
\textsuperscript{155} Japheth introduces this line of interpretation in his comments to 1:15 and revisits it in his comments to 3:5.
\textsuperscript{156} Arabic: \textit{subil al-murjiz}
\textsuperscript{157} Eliezer of Beaugency compares Jonah’s prayer to Hannah’s prayer of praise and thanksgiving in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (159). In Japheth’s Introduction to Psalms, he discusses Hannah’s prayer as an example of prophetic prayer, in which the holy spirit inspires the prophet’s speech. In this way, the prayer has personal significance as well as authority and relevance for the future (Simon, \textit{Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms}, 81, 96). Japheth explicates Jonah’s prayer in the belly of the fish on the model of prophetic prayer.
\textsuperscript{158} Arabic: \textit{sayyiduna david}
\textsuperscript{159} Arabic: \textit{ayyl}
\textsuperscript{160} Arabic: \textit{shakd}. For the purpose of complaint in Japheth’s liturgical theory, see Introduction, 1.4).
\textsuperscript{161} Arabic: \textit{i’tab}. Japheth maintains that Jonah lived in the time of the Monarchy (see Japheth’s comments to 2:10 and notes there) and prophesies about the Exiles in this psalm.
waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold. I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me (Ps. 69:2-3). He said: Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and billows have gone over me (Ps 42:8). Thus, Jonah instructed them in how to complain\(^{162}\) to the Lord about conditions that will obtain during the Exile, when it is likely that they will face difficult conditions and that they will make vows in times of adversity, as it says: I enter Your house with burnt offerings, I pay my vows to You, [vows] that my lips pronounced, that my mouth uttered in my distress (Ps 66:13-14).

2:11 Then the LORD spoke about the fish,\(^{163}\) and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

It could be that the LORD spoke introduces a statement to Jonah, informing him that the fish would vomit him and he would be vomited onto the shore. I translate ladāg as “about the fish,” as in, say about me, He is my brother (Gen 20:13) and Pharaoh will say about the Israelites (Ex 14:3). This statement could mean the LORD said about the fish. This is a miraculous statement which means that God compelled the fish to move toward the shore and spew him onto dry land.\(^{164}\)

People have inquired as to the difference between dāg (v. 11) and dāgā (v. 2). They say that dāgā is the word for a group of fish of a single type, whereas dāg is the word for an individual fish. They imply that dāgā is the word for a group of marine animals, as in the statements the fish in the river shall die (Ex 7:18) and have dominion

\(^{162}\) Arabic: kāyfa yāskāna.

\(^{163}\) Hebrew: dāg, Arabic: hāt, cf. 2:2.

\(^{164}\) Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer also shies away from the suggestion that God spoke directly to the fish. There, wawvōn yēw hēlādāg is glossed as rōnō, “he signaled” (33). Japheth comments further on communication between God and animals in his comments to Jonah 3:8.
over the fish of the sea (Gen 1:28), whereas dāgā is the word that appears concerning a simple fish. It could be that they are two names for a single thing.

3:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying,
3:2 “Get up, go quickly to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

After the fish ejected him, the Lord commanded him to go on to Nineveh. Although the command had come beforehand, God nevertheless repeated it for him under the new circumstances that He had created for him. After he emerged from the sea, He told him, “Jonah, go quickly to Nineveh, for they persist in their reprehensible condition.”

He says to Jonah without saying ben Amitai because this is set forth at the beginning and the entire story follows from this information. The word second means “second in relation to the first words that the Lord spoke regarding the journey to Nineveh.” By the phrase that I tell you he means “which I will tell you when you enter Nineveh; at that time I will tell you what they require.”

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165 Arabic: ‘imādi. Japheth’s translation of 1:2-3 and 3:2-3 obscures a distinction that is apparent in Hebrew. There, God commands Jonah to go (b-l-k) to Nineveh in both 1:2 and 3:2; the first time Jonah fees (b-r-h) but the second time he acquiesces (b-l-k). In Japheth’s translation, however God twice asks Jonah to go quickly (m-d-a) and the same verb suggests Jonah’s obedience in both cases.

166 In Hebrew, God orders Jonah to prophesy against Nineveh (‘alēhā) in 1:2 and to prophesy to Nineveh (‘elēhā) in 3:2. Japheth translates both commands in accordance with the latter version (‘iyayhā).
3:3 So Jonah set out and went quickly to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was God’s large city, a three days’ walk across.

We know that he arose and went to Nineveh. The words according to the word of the LORD mean that he obeyed God’s command to get up, go quickly to Nineveh. In the first instance (1:2) it did not say according to the word of the LORD. Some claim that Jonah intended to resign from the journey to Nineveh in the first instance. [They maintain that] he sought to escape to some marine island so that he would not have to fulfill his prophetic obligation to Nineveh, they would not repent, and God would not have pity on them—which would be a reproach against Israel, in the manner that we recall from the beginning of the story. When he took to the sea, God agitated the sea on his account in order to admonish him, so he prayed to the Lord and He rescued him. When He again sent him on his mission to them, he did not resign as he had resigned in the first instance, and that is why it says here according to the word of the LORD.

According to the other interpretive path, which I have followed from the first part of the story up to the present verse, the purpose of the present placement of according to the word of the LORD is to state that he saw fit to obey. This is like the command [about which it is said] and Moses did as the LORD commanded (Num 17:26). It does not state according to the word of the LORD in the first instance (Jonah 1:2)

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167 Hebrew: 'ir gedole la-olahim. Arabic: madina aza'ina -lah. The meaning of the phrase la-olahim is unclear (for an enumeration of its possible meanings, see Sasso, Jonah, 228-30). For Eliezer of Beaufort, la-olahim is an elliptical exclamation: “Heaven forbid that destruction come over it” (159). For David Kimhi and most English translations, it is an idiomatic expression to denote the magnitude of the city. Japheth resists this interpretation, perhaps because it would render 'ir gedole redundant. Japheth’s literal translation—a city belonging to God—spurs a theological insight: Nineveh belongs to God because God created its inhabitants and rules over them.

168 Hebrew: kerpopa le-yisra'el; Japheth renders this phrase into Arabic in his comments to 1:1 and 4:2.

169 See Japheth’s comment to 1:1, particularly his discussion of the fifth reason that the narrator recorded Jonah’s prophetic mission to Nineveh.

170 Arabic: 'al-madhah 'al-djar, a phrase that also appears in Japheth’s excursus to 4:11.
because he traveled by sea and he immediately went to Tarshish, [intending] to go on to Nineveh from there. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to say\textsuperscript{171} “Jonah set out and went quickly to Tarshish according to the word of the Lord” when the Lord did not command him to go to Tarshish. But here he says \textit{Jonah set out and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD}.

\textit{Now Nineveh was God’s large city} serves as a prefatory comment that informs us that God dispatched the prophet to the city because it was a large city. Because God had compassion on the city, he dispatched a prophet to them. He adds \textit{God’s inasmuch as God created them and he was their ruler, so He felt compassion for them because they were his creatures.}

\textit{A three days’ walk across} informs us of the magnitude of this city. Had it said that Nineveh was \textit{a large city} but not \textit{three days}, we would have excessively thought that it was the largest city in this region or that it was as big as any of the large cities. Therefore it says \textit{a three days’ walk across} in order to inform us of its size and that it was much larger than the larger cities. In the statement \textit{a three days’ walk across} he does not say “a length of three days.” It is possible that it was square, in which case it would be \textit{a three days’ walk across} regardless of whether people traversed its length or its width.

3:4 \textit{Jonah began to enter\textsuperscript{172} the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”}

We know that he was proclaiming that very day, from the time that he began to enter the city, walking one day’s distance. That is why it says \textit{Jonah began} rather than

\textsuperscript{171} Arabic: \textit{lam hassana `an yagal}, it would not be appropriate for the \textit{nudawwin} to employ this expression here.

\textsuperscript{172} Hebrew: \textit{lābāṭ}, Arabic: \textit{iš-dākūl}. In Hebrew, this infinitive also appears in Jonah’s journey with the sailors; Japheth’s translation does not reflect this parallel.
saying, “Jonah went into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out,” in which case we could say that he did not cry out until after he had walked for one day. It is probable that he spent the night in the city and woke up the following morning and began from the outermost part of the city and he was still traversing the city and walking as he cried out in the evening. The statement forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown means that the Lord would give them respite for forty more days “if you return to the Lord,” or the country of Nineveh would be overthrown as well as all the people within it. He says more in this place because in spite of a long extension, they had still persisted in injustice.\textsuperscript{173}

3:5 And the people of Nineveh believed in God\textsuperscript{174} they proclaimed a fast, and great and small, put on sack-cloth.

\textbf{<151> 3:6} When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

3:7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree\textsuperscript{175} 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.”

3:8 Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall pray mightily to God.\textsuperscript{176} All shall turn\textsuperscript{177} from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.

3:9 Whoever knows ... God\textsuperscript{178} may relent so that he changes his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger and we will not perish.”

This verse informs us that [the people of Nineveh] believed in the Lord and they repented and they donned sackcloth and fasted. \textit{They believed} means that they trusted the

\textsuperscript{173} Arabic: zumn


\textsuperscript{175} The Hebrew word ṭōrām here follows the Aramaic sense of injunction or decree, as in Dan 3:10 and Ezra 4:21. Whereas medieval commentators generally misunderstand this Aramaism (Simon, Jonah, 31), Japheth accurately translates ṭōrām as ṭōre, “command.” Rashi (54) and Eliezer of Beaugency (159) both gloss ṭōrām as ṭēqī, “counsel” and al-Qumisi glosses it with the Arabic mīn tārāhi “out of obedience” (42).


\textsuperscript{177} Hebrew: yāšābū, Arabic: yarjū’. The Hebrew root ū-n-b encompasses a variety of meanings related to turning, returning, and repentance (BDB 996-1000). Japheth translates this verb with a literal and theologically neutral Arabic verb, which means “to turn back” in the simplest sense.


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words that Jonah proclaimed to them. The reason for this belief is that part of the report of the miracle\textsuperscript{179} that God performed through him at sea had reached them. It is probable that some of the sailors were in Nineveh and they informed the people of Nineveh of their news.\textsuperscript{180} Therefore, they believed that he was a prophet of God, dispatched to them on this mission, and that their country would be overthrown if they did not repent, so they began to repent. We know that all of them, from the oldest to the youngest, declared the fast and wore sackcloth. They did this after the king called for this action, as it later explains.

The statement \textit{the news reached the king of Nineveh}\textsuperscript{181} connects to \textit{he cried out} (v. 4). It is probable that the king’s palace was close to the place from which Jonah was calling,\textsuperscript{182} for when the news reached him he rose from his royal chair, doffed his cloak, put on sackcloth in place of the royal garments, and sat upon ashes instead of his throne. He did this for two reasons. The first was to humble himself before the Lord. This action is recorded among kings. For example, we know that when Ahab, the king of Israel, was defeated, he wore sackcloth and God considered him. Evil did not come in his time, as it says, \textit{have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster on his house} (1 Kgs 21:29). The second [reason] was so that the people

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\textsuperscript{179} Arabic: \textit{mir`ij}

\textsuperscript{180} This interpretive line is familiar from Japheth’s comments to 1:15 and 2:10. Here it explains why the people of Nineveh believe Jonah’s words and repent without hesitation.

\textsuperscript{181} In characteristic Karaite fashion, the king’s anonymity provokes no comment from Japheth. Rabbinic commentaries, on the other hand, are replete with attempts to connect this unnamed king to a historical personage (Sasson, \textit{Jonah}, 249).

\textsuperscript{182} Another explanation for the king’s instant response to Jonah’s message comes from Eliezer of Beaugency, who suggests that the people who heard Jonah’s prophecy rushed to convey it to the king (159).
would imitate him. When they saw that the king had humbled himself and dressed in sackcloth and sat upon ashes, they would do likewise.

*He had a proclamation made* means that he dispatched heralds to proclaim throughout the city. Perhaps they had a proclamation with them in which this decree was written, and they would read it out loud to the people. They began the decree: “*By the decree of the king and his nobles*” since the king and his nobles commanded this. No one could defy their command. Upon hearing the beginning of the <152> proclamation, *by the decree of the king and his nobles*, the subjects accepted it.

Next he explains who is being commanded by the Sultan and his nobles: *human being* and *animal*. The word *human being* indicates that he included the young and the old. That would only be possible to the extent that children’s lives are not endangered, or that it is [exclusively] incumbent upon one who is capable of fasting. This latter possibility is more enduring.

*Animal* refers to all domestic animals, including horses, mules, donkeys and camels, because he later states *herd or flock*. The injunction that no one shall taste anything pertains to humans; the injunctions *they shall not feed* and *nor shall they drink* water pertain to the *animals* of *herd or flock*. He also commanded that both human and animal wear sackcloth. *They shall pray mightily to God* [pertains] exclusively to

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183 Japheth’s efforts to distinguish between commands for animals and human beings are unique among the exegetes discussed here. Eliezer of Beaugency, for example, remarks that *they shall not feed nor shall they drink* is merely a gloss of *they shall not taste* (159).
human beings, as they are discerning creatures. Since human beings are discerning, they will pray to the Lord [requesting] that he be merciful concerning what he threatened by forty days more (v. 4).

*All shall turn from their evil ways* refers to some of the people, who had an evil way or [practiced] any sort of injustice. This statement means that *all shall turn from their evil ways*. Even though these words come at the end, they are first in execution. It is only that he places what is obligatory for *human being and animal* first. Next he mentions whatever is obligatory for *human beings* alone, and he authenticates this by mentioning whatever is incumbent upon some *human beings* and for this reason it follows *all shall turn from their evil ways*.

*From their evil ways* indicates illicit sexual behavior. The *violence that is in their hands* comprises commerce, sales, purchase and extortion of people’s funds. This is like the actions of *the generation of the flood* and Sodom who acted wickedly in regards to illicit sexual behavior and were tyrannous in business relations. Concerning the deeds of the generation of the flood, it says *the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence* (Gen 6:11). Concerning Sodom, it says *they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me* (Gen 18:21) and *they were haughty, and did*

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184 Arabic: *ta‘al-mumayyizin*. Japheth dismisses the idea that animals pray to God. The restriction of prayer to human beings, coupled with his insistence that God compelled the great fish to spew Jonah rather than speaking directly to it (2:11) reinforce Japheth’s distinction between human beings, who are discerning, and animals, who are not. This distinction is common to Karaite writings under the influence of Mutazilite principles. Al-Qurqasami invokes biblical proof texts to support his contention that human reason enables scriptural interpretation; animals possess instinct alone and are unable to discern their creator (Nento, *Karaite Anthology*, 58-9). Outside of Karaism, Rashi too interprets *they shall pray mightily to God* as a command for human beings alone. However, Rashi envisions the Ninevites’ prayer as little more than bribery: they isolate mothers from their children and cry out, “Our Lord, God of the universe, if you do not have mercy on us, we will not have mercy on them” (54).

185 This explanation again demonstrates Japheth’s notion of biblical redaction as the work of the *madawwin*, who follows a principle akin to the rabbinic hermeneutic of *migdol u-me’athar* (see Introduction, 1.3 and Japheth’s comments to 1:16).
abominable things before me (Ezek. 16:50). “I destroyed the generation of the flood in
the deluge, and I destroyed Sodom by means of the fire and sulfur that rained down upon
them, and I overthrew their city upon them.” In the same vein he says: Nineveh shall be
overthrown (v. 4). If the people of Nineveh would not repent, then their country would be
overthrown upon them. All shall turn from their evil ways indicates every action that
reason deplores, because God, the Mighty and Sublime, exacts retribution of the gentile
nations in this world for their having neglected the revealed commandments. We have
comprehensively explained this in our commentary of thus says the LORD: for <153>
three transgressions of Judah (Amos 2:4). 187

Whoever knows ... God may relent so that he changes his mind means that
everyone who knows that [there] is a forbidden deed or an unjust thing in his hand will
turn to God so that He will immediately be merciful to him and not seek retribution for
his actions. 188 He may turn from his fierce anger means that he may turn back from what

186 Arabic: al-farā'id al-samā'īyya, the commandments that God revealed and made obligatory through his
prophets. This category augments that of al-farā'id al-'aqīlīyya, the rational and moral commandments that
every sane human adult is able to discern. On the rational and revealed commandments in Mutazilite
theology, see Ben-Shammali, “Kalam in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” 121.
187 Amos enumerates the sins of the Israelites and their neighbors. These lists afford Japheth an opportunity
to compare the obligations that Israel and the nations owe to God. In Amos’s oracle, only Judah is held
accountable for spurning the revealed commandments—they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have
not kept his statutes (2-4)—while the nations are rebuked for immoral behavior irrespective of the revealed
commandments. According to Japheth, this omission indicates neither that the nations upheld the revealed
commandments nor that they were not obligated to do so. Rather, Japheth insists, the nations had already
abandoned God’s laws but their punishment would occur in the hereafter. This interpretation does not
square with Japheth’s remarks about Nineveh, where God threatens a this-worldly punishment in response
to the peoples’ rejection of rational commandments, i.e., “every action that reason deplors.”
188 The Hebrew expression mī-yōdē'ā, “who knows,” is a biblical idiom akin to the word ūlāv, “perhaps”
(Sasson, Jonah, 260). Japheth, however, translates this phrase as a fragment within the king’s command
(i.e., as though the complete statement has been elided (ṣiqṣār)), Japheth’s expansion of the sentence
fragment aligns with Rashi’s expansion, “whoever knows that he is responsible for sin must repent.” The
Byzantine translation supplies the missing components to make this meaning explicit: kol mî šeyōdē’ā kī
bevōdō dābhar ra' wēdābar mim belāmdās vāsīb 'el ywhy 'ad šeyimūb ywhy lō, “everyone who knows that
he is responsible for an evil thing or something violent must return to the Lord so that the Lord may forgive
him” (107 i. 83-84).

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he threatened regarding the destruction of the city and the death of its people, as it says, *so that we do not perish.* These words from the *king and his nobles* indicate that they were convinced that [the threat that Nineveh would be overthrown after] *forty days more* was conditional on their repentance, as it said above, *the people of Nineveh believed.* We know that they believed the words of the messenger and did not doubt his words, and they knew that if they repented, God would act mercifully and would not destroy the city. Therefore, they repented and they did what they did.

Someone may ask about the significance of dressing the animals in sackcloth and denying them nourishment. There is no doubt that animals are not obligated\(^{189}\) to perform the divine commandments, so how could they commit disobedient actions? The answer to this is that they sought to inspire divine mercy for themselves by means of this [action], as if to say, “Oh Lord, we have sinned and it is likely that our deeds require the overthrow of the city upon our community and upon all who are in it. Have compassion upon the children and the animals, who have not sinned before you.” It could be that he told them to do this so that the burning that was inside their hearts, which they wished to make manifest, would be exceptionally [apparent].

\(^{189}\) In unpointed Judeo-Arabic, this word is spelled with the Hebrew characters *mkifin.* The *k* could represent either the Arabic letter *k* (unpointed) or *k* (pointed), yielding either the passive participle *mukallafla*fin, “those who are obligated to perform divine commandments,” or the active participle *mukallifin,* “transgressors.” The Byzantine translator hedges his bets by expanding the single Arabic word into a Hebrew pair: *‘en hem haqin im w‘enam meyesewim,* “they are neither sinners nor are they commanded,” (107:1, 91). *Mukallafla*fin seems more likely, since Japheth asserts above that the people of Nineveh deserve punishment because they failed to fulfill their divinely imposed obligations. Here Japheth reinforces the distinction between those human beings with discernment and the animals and children who are not obligated and therefore undeserving of punishment. On *takif,* the imposition of divine commandments, see Introduction, 1.5.
3:10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had threatened to do to them; and he did not do it.  

God saw what they did indicates that they did the group of things that the king and his nobles had called upon them [to do]. They turned from their evil ways includes both things that he mentioned in the statement above, all shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence in their hands, since violence is an evil path as well. He only divided their deeds in the public notice in order to inform everyone who [followed] an evil path or had injustice in his hand that he should repent. He includes both aspects in they turned back from their evil ways.

God changed his mind about the calamity means that God was merciful concerning what he had threatened by the statement forty days more (v. 4) since his statement was conditioned by repentance. He did not do, after the words God changed his mind. <154> could mean that he explained his objective and God changed his mind. It could be that the phrase God changed his mind explains that their repentance was accepted and that they merited that he not bring destruction upon them. It says he did not do it in order to inform us that he dealt with them according to what they merited from him.

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101 In Hebrew, there is an immediate sense of 'measure for measure' in this verse: the people of Nineveh turn back from their evil ways (ḥărāḵā) and God turns back from the evil (ḥărāḵā) that he had threatened. Japheth's translation takes a longer view of reciprocal activity. In this verse, the people turn back from their evil ways (ʿal-ʿadam) and God revokes the calamity (ʿal-baʿliya) that he threatened in response to the initial calamity (ʿal-baʿliya) that arose from Nineveh (1:2).
4:1 This was very difficult for Jonah, and he was distressed.
4:2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I proceeded to Tarshish; for I knew that you are the Capable One, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in grace, and renouncing punishment.

This was very difficult for Jonah means that this whole affair troubled him. He saw that the people of Nineveh sincerely repented when confronted with Jonah’s words, forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown (3:4). Yet Israel—to whom the prophets perpetually came, calling upon them to repent, both admonishing them and addressing them kindly with all different kinds of language, although this was to no avail—was difficult for the prophet. The Israelites were greatly deserving of reproach. We should not believe that the repentance of the people of Nineveh or the Lord’s willingness to forgive them displeased Jonah. The prophet desires that all people turn to God, especially as he already knew that the Lord dispatched him to them in order that they repent and he forgive them. Insofar as something was difficult for Jonah it is only that he was grieved for the sake of Israel, since they had not repented although they had been reprimanded. They were not moved by God’s threats, which his prophets delivered.

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191 Hebrew: ἐνεπείθομαι ἔμπνευσα τὰ υἱοί τοῦ θεοῦ. Arabic: یَعَبِىَ إِلَّا فَنَّدَى مَرْتِبَةٍ. Japheth preserves the vagueness of the Hebrew word by characterizing Jonah’s experience and mental state as difficult (here and in his comments to 4:4). Eliezer of Beaugency likewise emphasizes how difficult this situation is for Jonah; in Eliezer’s paraphrase of 4:10, God acknowledges to Jonah that “it has been difficult for you” (חָשֵׂשׁ בְּכֶנֶקֶדְךָ), (159).

192 Hebrew: לָבֵד, “to flee.” Arabic لَبِّتْرِدَف, “to turn one’s attention to, to proceed to.”

193 Japheth translates the neutral Hebrew word for god, אֱל, to לָשָׁי, “the Capable One,” an attributive name for God.

194 Arabic: یَعَبِىَ عَنَبَا وَسِيِّحَا. This phrasing rebuts the argument that Nineveh’s speedy repentance denotes the people’s insincere or superficial motives.

195 Exegeses have long tried to establish the source of Jonah’s displeasure. These verses—which begin with an elliptical sentence with an implicit subject—are syntactically linked to the preceding scene, designating Nineveh’s salvation as the cause of Jonah’s distress (Simon, Jonah, 36). However, the reason that this event disturbs Jonah remains unclear. According to Rashi, Jonah is distressed because the repentance of Nineveh and God’s mercy toward them undermine his own reputation as a truthful prophet (54). Eliezer of Beaugency charitably suggests that Jonah was upset because he did not yet know that the people of Nineveh had repented and he continued to fear for their welfare (159).
He was distressed means that he became distressed because he knew that it was inevitable that God would carry out his threats against Israel if they did not repent.

Next, he informs us that he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, were these not my words to Israel when I was still in the land of Israel? For I knew that if I went to Nineveh and prophesied to them, they would repent and return to you and you would forgive them, renouncing their punishment, and this would be a shame against Israel, for I had made this known to Israel.”

That is why I proceeded to Tarshish refers to “my knowledge that you would accept their repentance and you would forgive them. That is why I went ahead and did not hesitate to travel to Tarshish, to take the closest route—it was due to my knowledge that you are a gracious God and merciful.” He employed the expressions that it was appropriate to use in this sort of situation. ‘El [God] means “you are master over their destruction should they remain steadfast in their rebellious actions, and master over their salvation should they repent to you.” Gracious means “you have mercy on them when they implore you.” Merciful means “you are merciful and have pity upon your creatures when you see them in distress.” Slow to anger means “you do not rush to exact retribution; rather, you tarry in the fullness of time even when they go to extremes in their rebellious acts. You seek their repentance and their return; if they do not repent, you exact vengeance from them.” Abounding in grace includes three things, the first of which is that “you inform transgressors of their heedlessness through prophets.” The second

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197 Hebrew: ḫānnām wērēhēm. For Japheth, God demonstrates his benevolence more profoundly through his merciful nature (Hebrew: ḫānnām) than through his graciousness (Hebrew: raḥām). God forgives those who repent because he is gracious; because he is merciful he has compassion even on those who do not repent.
[concerns] the blessing that is even upon those who persist in their transgression. The third [concerns your] acceptance of their repentance and [your] forgiveness of them, as it says renouncing punishment. 198

4:3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

After he [Jonah] made known the contents of his soul—his knowledge that God would accept the repentance of the people of Nineveh and that He would forgive them—he also bared his soul concerning Israel. He said, “Oh, Lord, seize my spirit, so that I may not live to return to Israel and behold the wickedness of their deeds. What will befall them? My distress will be everlasting! It would be better for You to seize my spirit at this time than for me to live to see Israel, which causes me such distress.”

This speech from Jonah—peace be upon him—is an expression of grief and a sorrowful heart. When he realized that his death would provide a respite from extreme grief, he asked the Lord to seize his spirit from him unless God would grant his soul relief from sorrow by informing him that [his people had merited] the best possible state. 199 This matter is similar to the words of Moses—peace be upon him: If you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written (Exod 32:32). 200

4:4 And the LORD said to Jonah, “does it make you feel better to be deeply distressed?”

The Lord’s words to Jonah—does it make you feel better to be deeply distressed?—substantiate Jonah’s statement it is better for me to die than to live (4:3). By

198 Modern biblical scholars ask whether the concealment of Jonah’s motives until 4:2 is designed to create suspense. According to Japheth’s commentary, however, the reader discerns Jonah’s motives throughout the book (see Japheth’s remarks to 1:1, which are reiterated here).

199 Arabic: bisalīḥ. The final chapter in Kalām works typically addresses this topic.

200 Eliezer of Beaugency makes the more obvious comparison between Jonah’s death wish and Elijah’s request (1 Kgs 19:4). For the connections between Jonah and Elijah, see Japheth’s remarks in 1:1 and notes there.
the phrase and he was distressed (4:1), the mudawwina\textsuperscript{201} likewise informs us that he was aggrieved on account of Israel. He said to him, “Jonah, you have just witnessed\textsuperscript{202} the repentance of the people of Nineveh. What upsets you concerning Israel? Indeed, at this time it is difficult for you. Likewise, their deeds are reprehensible to me, for I have sent prophets to them continually yet they have not repented.”

4:5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, so as to see what would become of the city.

He informs us that upon crying out forty days more (3:4), he exited the city and did not remain in it. He intended to see what would happen to the people of the city, whether or not they would repent. He took up residence east of the city, which suggests that he stationed himself in an isolated spot, far from the route of passersby, so that they would not trouble him. He made a booth for himself there informs us that he sat in the desert where there was nary a building under which to take shelter. It seems that this was in the summertime and, according to one of the scholars,\textsuperscript{203} his head was bald. Therefore, it was not possible for him to seek shelter in the desert. Although this verse is set down\textsuperscript{204} here, its meaning indicates that it be juxtaposed with forty days more and Nineveh shall

\textsuperscript{201} Japheth identifies the mudawwina by title twice in his Jonah commentary, in his remarks here and in the following verse. The Byzantine translation omits the present reference by translating “he tells us” without an explicit subject (109:1, 22).

\textsuperscript{202} Arabic: šahāda. This verb also appears in Japheth’s comments on Jonah 1:15, when the mariners witness the great sign (šahāda ʿaynaʿ azīma) that God performs through Jonah at sea. In 4:4 God reveals that Jonah has also witnessed a miracle, which God performed through the people of Nineveh. Japheth’s commitment to the doctrine of ʿayna limits his willingness to portray Jonah as a prophet in need of a lesson, yet the repetition of this verb suggests that God dispatched Jonah for the prophet’s edification as well as Nineveh’s salvation. The Qur’an takes up this theme by indicating that Jonah utters a modified version of al-šahāda, the Muslim profession of faith (see Japheth’s comments to 2:8 and notes there).

\textsuperscript{203} Arabic: baṣad al-ʿulemaʿ.

\textsuperscript{204} Arabic: mudawwana
be overthrown (3:4). The *mudawwin* concludes the story of Nineveh, then he returns to the story of Jonah, concluding it also. Our remarks are verified by the statement so as to see what would become of the city.  

4:6 The LORD God provided a gourd, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from discomfort; so Jonah was tremendously happy about the gourd.

This verse should follow the LORD said, "why should you be so deeply distressed?" (v. 4). He placed *Jonah went out of the city* (v. 5) in between the two verses in order to inform us that the *qiṣīyūn* had grown for him and that he was in the desert. The LORD provided indicates that God, Mighty and Sublime, made a gourd plant appear for this particular situation, for it grew until it reached above his head and he was sitting in the shade of the gourd plant. He informs us of its use by the statement to save him from discomfort. The gourd was his second shelter, under the booth, for the booth was large enough for him to sleep beneath it. The *qiṣīyūn* was shading his head, like a dome, to give shade over his head. It soothed his head with its moisture. On account of this, some

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205 Japheth’s second explicit mention of the *mudawwin*. Here the Byzantine translation provides *hashāifer* (1091.33).
206 Eliezer of Beersheba adopts the same chronology: Jonah leaves Nineveh after proclaiming threats against them, then he positions himself east of the city to monitor the situation. He assumes that the people have not repented, and is troubled by the mercy that God bestows on the unrepentant city. God reveals that the people have indeed repented, but asserts His right to have compassion on His creation, regardless of whether or not they repent.
207 Hebrew: *qiṣīyūn*, Arabic: *qara’a*. The biblical term is unique to Jonah. Japheth refers to it variously by the ambiguous Hebrew word, by his Arabic translation (which means a single gourd or pumpkin), and as *ṣajarat-qara’a*, a “gourd plant.” In the following comments, Japheth refers to the *qiṣīyūn* by short-hand as *ʿal-ṣajara*, “the plant;” the Qurʾān uses the same term in its record of this episode (37:146). Al-Qumisi identifies the plant as *qar’at jīrū*, a “caster oil plant” (42), and Rashi describes it as “a plant that grows high, with many branches, that produces shade” (54).
208 Hebrew: *mērāṭūtō*, Arabic: *miʿn boliyatihī*. 

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claim that his head had been scalded\textsuperscript{209} in the belly of the fish, so the plant soothed and quenched the heat. For this reason, he was very happy: \textit{Jonah was tremendously happy about the qiqayon.}

4:7 \textit{But when dawn came up the next day, God provided a worm that attacked the gourd so that it withered.}

After he was happy about the benefit of the plant, the Lord caused a destructive worm to appear. It continued working away at the plant until it had nullified its benefit.

4:8 \textit{When the sun rose, God provided a stifling east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he withered\textsuperscript{210} and asked for death, saying, “it is better for me to die than to live.”}

He informs us of the short time in which the worm annihilated the plant. It appeared at dawn, and at sunrise the eastern wind arrived. These two factors—the heat of the sun and the eastern wind, on account of which things wither—joined forces with the worm that had desiccated the qiqayon by which Jonah was profiting. The wind, coupled with the sun’s heat, overcame him with great agony and he withered with a torturous thirst as it says, \textit{he withered.}

\textit{He asked for death} informs us that he requested death again because this other manifest pain augmented the pain that was already in his heart due to his grief over Israel. Therefore he said, \textit{it is better for me to die than to live.}

It is probable that the qiqayon rose up for him over a short time so that he would be happy about it on account of its benefit and beauty, then profound grief would arise

\textsuperscript{209} This interpretation is a pun based on the shared Arabic root of qara', “a gourd” and the verb sunqara', “to have a scalded head.” The Byzantine translation provides niqārēh, “to be bald” (109 l. 43), which has two radicals in common with the Arabic pair but no connection with the Hebrew word qiqayon.

\textsuperscript{210} For an analysis of this verb, see 2:8 and notes there.
unexpectedly in a short time. The verb he withered derives from [the same root as] your children have fainted (Isa 51:20) and all the trees of the field fainted because of it (Ezek 31:15). Stifling211 means that the wind was clinging and stagnant, not that the wind was stormy for a time and then departed.

4:9 Then the LORD212 said to Jonah,213 “Does it make you feel better to be deeply distressed about the gourd?” He said, “It distresses me to the point that I request death.”

When the Lord saw him writhing from thirst, He said to him, “Is it really so, Jonah, that the withering of the qiqayôn—which was of great benefit to you—has distressed you?” He answered him by saying, “My life has distressed me to the point that I request death.” He means, “If the qiqayôn were present, the wind and sun would not harm me.”214

4:10 Then the LORD said, “You pitied215 the gourd plant,216 for which you did not work and which you did not grow, which came into being in a night and perished217 in a night.

4:11 And should I not have compassion218 on Nineveh, the 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?”

When [God] provided219 him with the qiqayôn plant to benefit him and then deprived him of it, loss overwhelmed him. At this time, [God] informed him of the

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211 Hebrew: hārīṣāh. Arabic: sākata. Bible commentators variously explain the Hebrew hapax as a raging wind, equivalent to the storm that God created in 1:4, or a still, silent wind (Simon, Jonah, 43). Japheth has chosen the latter notion.
212 Hebrew: 'ēlōhîm. Arabic: râbî al-'alâmîn
213 Arabic addition: lâ-yâ'ûnā
214 Likewise for Eliezer of Beaugency, Jonah justifies his frustration over the loss of the qiqayôn (159).
215 Hebrew: hōśà from h-w-s, “to pity, look upon with compassion.” Arabic: râjûtta, from r-j-w, “to lament, bewail; eulogize; pity.”
216 Hebrew: haqiqayôn, Arabic: Sawārat-al-qar'a
218 Hebrew: 'āhâs, from h-w-s, as in the preceding verse; Arabic: 'usfiq, from š-f-q. By representing the occurrences of the Hebrew root h-w-s with two different Arabic roots, Japheth disrupts the biblical parallel between Jonah’s feeling for the gourd and God’s feeling for Nineveh and its inhabitants.
intention behind this [deed]. He said to him, “Jonah, you pited this plant for which you did not toil. Should I not pity the beings whom I have created and upon whom I have bestowed kindness?” These words from God—may he be praised and elevated—are a way of informing Jonah of one of the reasons why he saved Nineveh from destruction. He informs him that he allowed the city to remain for the sake of the children and the animals, who are not obligated and from whom rebellious actions do not come. So, he said, “I pitied this city for the sake of the many children who were inside it: more than one hundred thousand children and people, and many animals besides.”

Someone may say, “If it was for the children’s sake that God, the mighty and sublime, had such compassion on the city that he would not destroy it, then why did he need to say, Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown? (3:4). And why did it state: When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had threatened to do to them; and he did not do it (3:10)? This [verse] informs us that he forgave the city when [the people] repented.” It may be said in reply: the city would only have been overthrown on account of their

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219 Arabic: razaqa. More than a synonym for wafaqa (2:1; 4:6-8), this verb is attributed exclusively to God, who provides his creatures with the means of subsistence and blesses them with material or spiritual possessions.

220 Arabic: 'am'manu

221 Or: “who are not sinners.” Arabic: mukallaifu or mukallifin (See Japheth’s comments on 3:9 and notes there).

222 The same sensibility emerges from Eliezer of Beaugency’s expanded paraphrase of God’s words to Jonah: “Should I not have compassion on my creations, the products of my toil—not one and not two, but rather the great city, which does not know its right hand from its left, good from evil? They did not sin spitefully or with premeditation, and some of them—children and many animals—did not sin at all. It is for their sake that I have mercy over the whole city even if they do not repent” (159-60). For Rashi, “those who do not know” are children, but the many beasts refer to human adults who, like beasts, do not recognize their creator (54).

223 Thus Japheth initiates his recapitulation of the central themes that he has advanced throughout the commentary, and articulates his response to common interpretations. Japheth introduces these and the following hypothetical questions with the kalam formula fa-'in qala qarīl ... yuqala lahu. “Should someone say [as follows], he should be answered [as follows].”
rebellious deeds; therefore, he threatened them with the city’s overthrow. It was not only because they repented to God that they were deserving of salvation and the city was saved; rather, it was also because of the children and animals in it. [He withheld the punishment] not because of the people’s repentance alone, but also for the sake of the children and the animals who were in the city. So we say that the reason for overthrowing the city would have been [their] reprehensible deeds, but He saved them from overthrow for two reasons: [their] repentance, and the children and animals.

Someone may say, “Would [God] really have destroyed the children if the sinners had not repented? And in what way did the children influence [God’s decision] once the sinners had repented?” It may be said in reply: God, the mighty and sublime, provides some benefit for children if they lose their parents, but he does not provide them with a benefit if they remain alive while those who are concerned for their needs perish. Then they will be resurrected with their parents, [although] not by way of punishment. As for the survival of the parents, there could be multiple reasons or a single reason—namely, repentance.

Had God not said, Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, it would suggest that repentance alone was the reason for salvation. However, Should I not have compassion informs us that he had two reasons, repentance and children. Jonah already knew that repentance was one of the reasons for salvation, yet it seemed unlikely to him

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224 This portion of the Arabic text seems to be corrupt; we have translated from the Byzantine witness (1101.74-5).
225 Arabic: al-munkar (see Japheth’s discussion of reprehensible behavior in 1:2).
226 Arabic: maslahah. In Mutazilite theology, an orphaned child is entitled to compensation for the suffering incurred by losing a parent (see Heemskerk. Suffering in Mutazilite Theology. 173; Introduction, 1.5).
that children and animals would be a reason for salvation. Therefore, God, the sublime and praiseworthy, taught him that they are indeed a reason for salvation.227

Someone may say, “His words were should I not care, which means, ‘this guiding principle which I mentioned,’ so why did He need to cause the qiṣqāyôn for him and deny it to him and place it for him as a method of proof? Had He informed him of this [principle] without the [illustration of the] qiṣqāyôn, the prophet would not have comprehended it.” One should argue back, “By my life, the prophet already knew the [content of the] revelation without the qiṣqāyôn! Yet God would do this sort of thing with his prophets. Similarly, He said to Jeremiah, Go and buy yourself a linen loincloth (Jer 13:1), and continued [in this way] to the end of the story. If God had said to Jeremiah, “I brought the Israelites close to me from among the nations, singling them out from the rest of the nations on account of their excellences, but they became the opposite of this when they disobeyed me,” the prophet would have understood the meaning and the intention. But He speaks to [the prophets] in parables in order to augment the influence on the people. If trouble befalls the prophet, it is not the result of any sin that he committed. Rather, God does this to increase the strength of the impression. It is without a doubt that

227 The question of why God spared Nineveh arises throughout the literature on Jonah. Japheth’s remarks, which do not hinge on his peculiar reading of Jonah, are relevant to this broader discussion. Al-Qumisi and Rashi both credit repentance with Nineveh’s salvation. Al-Qumisi insists that the peoples’ repentance inspires God’s mercy, since God declares in Jeremiah that he will revoke punishment when people turn away from evil (18:7-8). Eliezer of Beaugency joins Japheth in giving only partial credit to repentance. He also cites the presence of non-sinners, children and animals as factors in God’s decision to spare the city even if they had not repented. In the Qur’an, the peoples’ belief is alone sufficient for their salvation (10:98; 37:148).
[God] has compensated him\textsuperscript{228} positively and many times over for the suffering that has befallen him."

This is the most plausible explanation that I know of the story of Jonah. I have alluded, above, to the other way of interpretation.\textsuperscript{229} Blessed is he who knows the straight path. We ask the Mighty and Sublime to overlook whatever mistakes and errors occur in the interpretation of his book.\textsuperscript{230} We interpret according to what we have heard, and though we may, perhaps, have added some explanation, it was our intention to [offer] only what the language [of the text] could most plausibly bear.

\textsuperscript{228} Arabic: \textit{ya’ūdabi}. On \textit{wawd}, the doctrine of compensation, see Introduction, 1.5.

\textsuperscript{229} Arabic: \textit{‘al-mađhāb ‘al-ākar}. This expression, which also appears in Japheth’s remarks to 3:3, is discussed in the Introduction, 1.2.2.

\textsuperscript{230} The request that God forgive errors of interpretation appears elsewhere in Japheth’s corpus, e.g., his commentaries to Genesis (see Polliack, \textit{Karaita Tradition}, 44) and Zechariah (see Frank, \textit{Search Scripture Well}, 32).
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