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## **A Biblical Story of Conversion: the Book of Jonah**

Even just attempting to outline schematically the theme of conversion as it appears in Scripture is a very complex task. The word, but even more the category “conversion” is one of the most interesting themes which are rich in nuances, since they belong to the wider question of the covenant (OT) and faith in Jesus (NT).

For this reason, and to try to be in tune with the method of the Conference, which has mainly focused on discussion and debate starting from conversion stories, I chose to investigate a brief narrative of the Old Testament: the story of Jonah which offers various types of conversion. Indeed conversion makes this a key theme to understand the role of this book in the corpus of the Twelve Prophets, becoming, from this point of view, an invitation for the reader to question with respect the need for a “return” to an authentic face of God.

### **1. Brief Lexical Introduction**

In the Old Testament the vocabulary related to conversion primarily illustrates the return movement to which the people of Israel were called to return, guilty of having betrayed the covenant and its requirements. This explains the reason why it is present in particular in the Deuteronomic and in the Prophetic traditions. It is for this reason that conversion has a responsorial character: it is the response that the individual, or more often the people, give in turning back to God who, through the voice of his prophet, moves them to return.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The motif and the vocabulary is also present in the wisdom tradition (especially in the Psalms) and in the Chronicles; cf M. Cimosà, *La conversione nell'Antico Testamento*, in:

In the Masoretic Texts there are two verbal expressions that express in a clearer way the movement in conversion. The most used verb is *shub* – to return. It is derived from the noun *t<sup>c</sup>shubah*, which, in addition to the profane meaning, has a theological meaning and indicates metaphorically the return to God, or returning to observing the commandments and the removal of evil to start something completely new.<sup>2</sup> The transgression in general manifests itself as idolatry, that is, as a distortion of God's face, reduced or combined with other deities, thus distancing God and dissociating him from common history and the benefits received. Listening to the word of the prophet calling them back to the truth, Israel then accepts and starts a movement in the opposite direction to that which led them to serve idols, to get back close to the Lord, acknowledging him as their God, showing that on their part they intend to continue in the covenant. It is not simply an outward ritual, but manifests an interior and radical attitude that involves the whole person in a faithful adherence, response and obedience to the Lord.

Of great interest in this regards is the verb *naham* al *niph'al*, which means to repent, to feel sorry for something wrong done in the past (cf. Jer 18, 6.8.10; Job 42, 6).

Both verbs may also have God as subject and in this case *shub* expresses the change of allegiance of Israel towards God, God's playing an active role in the history of his people that modulates like forgiveness and that arouses in the people a desire to convert, to change their way, returning to the original love with the Lord.<sup>3</sup> *Naham* also assumes a particular nuance: when the Lord repents, an idea of change is introduced from the pre-planned action or from the judgment handed down. It should be noted that this change has

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*Conversione ritorno riconciliazione*, Dizionario di Spiritualità Biblico Patristica, 9, a cura di S. Panimolle, Borla 1995, 17ss.; E. Bianchi, *Conversione*, in: *Nuovo dizionario di teologia biblica*, a cura di P. Rossano – G. Ravasi – A. Girlanda, San Paolo 1988, p. 215–219.

<sup>2</sup> Cf W. L. Holladay, *The Root šûbh in the Old Testament with Particular Reference to its Usages in Covenantal Contexts*, Leiden 1958. The noun *t<sup>c</sup>shubah* entered in Jewish spirituality with great importance. There are numerous texts that exalt the power of conversion and repentance which are present in the feast of Yom Kippur which is the highest liturgical manifestation, cf A. Mello, *Ritorna, Israele! La conversione nella interpretazione rabbinica*, Città Nuova 1985; S. Goodhart, *Prophecy, sacrifice and repentance in the story of Jonah*, "Semeia" 33 (1985), p. 43–63.

<sup>3</sup> Cf for example P. Bovati, *Dio protagonista del ritorno in Geremia*, "Parole Spirito e Vita" 22 (1990), p. 17–34.

nothing capricious, or arbitrary or inconstant and it is not linked to anything necessary. It is rather the complete expression of the complex and paradoxical divine freedom.<sup>4</sup>

In the Old Testament there is a lack of any real interest and a clear statement of conversion as adherence to the faith of Israel from paganism. The examples are very rare and appear rather late. The law provides for the participation of foreigners to some feasts or assemblies of the people, but it does not coincide with the proclamation of the creed of Israel (Deut 16, 9–15; 23, 2–9). Even Ruth's claim to Naomi, "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (1, 16), often considered a formula of adherence to the Jewish religion, should be considered a declaration of a full sharing of everything about the mother-in-law.<sup>5</sup> One of the few characters who converts is Achior, the Ammonite General, who hearing the story of Judith and of what the Lord had done through her, is circumcised becoming part of the people of the covenant (Jdt 14). His is an interesting figure, since he adheres to the faith of Israel having heard the word and having experienced the hospitality of the people of Bethulia in a moment of grave danger to his life (cf. Jdt 6).

The LXX chose to translate *naham* with *metanoeo*, while *shub* employs about eighty different terms, amongst which *strepho* and *epistrepho* dominate. The proximity of *epistrepho* and *metanoeo* in some texts has probably also led the latter verb to mean a radical change in the orientation of one's life in relation to God, that is, to convert. This use, attested already in Judeo-Hellenistic writings from the second century BC is more frequent in the NT. The call to conversion inaugurates the ministry of Jesus (Mt 4, 17; Mk 4, 15) in continuity with that of John the Baptist (Mt 3, 2–11, Mk 1, 5; Lk 3, 7–9). The theme then finds a major development in the Acts of the Apostles: Luke repeatedly tells how members of the Jewish community (2, 37ff; 3, 19), who were people from paganism (10, 1ff; 15, 7ff) are converted to Christ, accepting the word proclaimed by the apostles and became believers. The same perspective can be felt in the Pauline letters

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<sup>4</sup> Cf H. W. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah. A Commentary*, Minneapolis 1986, p. 154; J. P. Sonnet, *Jonas est-il parmi les prophètes*, in: C. Clivaz et Alii (ed.), *Écritures et réécritures: la reprise interprétative des traditions fondatrices par la littérature biblique et extra-biblique*, Cinquième colloque international du RRENAB, Université de Genève et de Lausanne, 10–12 juin 2010, BETL 218, Leuven 2012, p. 142–145.

<sup>5</sup> Cf D. Scaiola, *Rut. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento*, Paoline 2009, p. 86.

and the invitation of the Good News in the NT is open to those who came from a non-Jewish religious tradition.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The story of Jonah

The story of Jonah is a small narrative jewel. In just forty-eight verses, the Author offers an intriguing story, full of suspense, with an open ending, through irony, and with features that bring it closer to the fairy tale world, where everything is great and wonderful (the storm, the fear, the wind, the fish, the city).

The Book belongs to the corpus of the Twelve Prophets, and constitutes a considerably original text. Unlike the others, in fact, in which the word of the prophet prevails in almost absolute manner, the oracle here is limited to a single sentence: “still forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (3.4). On the other hand, the dominating narrative is very close to the cycles in the Book of Elijah and of Elisha (1 Kings 17–22; 2 Kings 1–13). Jonah is also the only one to be sent directly to a hostile and pagan city so that he proclaims his oracle, unlike the other prophets who, while speaking words of condemnation against the nations did so from their own land. From these points of view, therefore, it seems that somehow the figure of the prophet is adjusted. This is helped by the fact that Jonah not only poses an objection in front of the mission entrusted to him by the Lord (as is typical for the prophets), but he runs away from it as far as possible in the first part, and distances himself from his intention to offer salvation in the second.

We also know of a prophet named Jonah from 2 Kings 14, 23–29, where the nationalistic support due to King Jeroboam II (789–748 B.C.) for his military exploits is narrated. The reference is interesting because the eighth century is one in which, in fact, Samaria falls to the Assyrians (722 BC). So Jonah would be sent to talk to the capital of the Kingdom that will destroy Israel – Nineveh, famous for the brutality of its military actions. But thanks to Jonah’s concise words it was converted, avoiding all evil (3, 4–10). It thus appears that Jonah’s prophecy will ultimately lead to the fall of Israel (cf. Is 10, 5–10; Zeph 2, 13–15). In fact, the book is written in the post-exilic period, when Nineveh was gone, swept

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<sup>6</sup> Cf S. Panimolle, *La conversione – penitenza negli scritti del Nuovo Testamento*, in: *Conversione ritorno riconciliazione*, Dizionario di Spiritualità Biblico Patristica, 9, a cura di S. Panimolle, Borla 1995, p. 78ss.; E. Bianchi, *Conversione*, p. 219–222.

away by the advance Babylon (612 BC). So Jonah's preaching was ineffective if the city was later destroyed after all? (cf Nah 2, 4–3, 9)? Or was the conversion of the people of Nineveh temporary and fleeting, as some Jewish Masters maintain (cf. Hos 6, 4)? Why should Jonah go to talk directly to the people of Nineveh? Is it perhaps a sarcastic way to oppose Jewish exclusivism as Ezra (10, 10–11) and Nehemiah (13, 1–23) attest to?<sup>7</sup> Questions are formulated on several occasions over the years, however they do not grasp what is at stake in the theological narrative and its prophetic character. Jonah is not a book to be considered a historical narrative but as a parable.<sup>8</sup> So we commence from the final comments (4, 9–11), a comparison between the figures of Jonah and the itineraries taken by pagan sailors and the people of Nineveh, and some formulas of faith uttered by the prophet, "I am a Jew and I fear the Lord, God of heaven, which has made the sea and the earth" (1, 9), and "I know that you are a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, of great love and that you repent of the evil threatened" (4, 2).

## 2.1. The Structure and the Theme of the Story

The structure of the story, on which there is a consensus, is very precise and easy to note because of the repetition of the same phrase in 1, 1–2a and 3, 1–2a – "the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and in it proclaim'". This divides the book into two symmetrical parts. The first part – chapters 1–2 – take place at sea, the second part, chapters 3–4, at Nineveh. The two sections are articulated in a similar manner, with three series of parallel situations:

1. The mission of Jonah among the Gentiles:  
first in an orderly way and not executed (1, 1–3) // then with order and executed (3, 1–4)
2. The positive reaction of the pagans who convert:  
first the sailors, the captain of the ship (1, 4–16) // then the people of Nineveh, with their king (3, 5–10)

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<sup>7</sup> Cf D. Scaiola, *I Dodici Profeti: perché minori? Egesi e teologia*, EDB 2011, p. 89–92; su una lettura dal punto di vista storico, cf T. M. Bolin, *Should I Not also Pity Nineveh? Divine Freedom in the Book of Jonah*, JSOT 67 (1995), p. 109–120; A. Mello, *Ritorna, Israele!*, p. 117–118.

<sup>8</sup> Cf E. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*, JOTS.SS 367, Sheffield Academic Press 2003, p. 91; J. P. Sonnet, *Jonas est-il parmi les prophètes*, p. 153–155.

3. Jonah and God in the dialogue between them and the concrete response of the Lord

Psalm of thanksgiving of Jonah; the Lord sends the big fish (2, 1–11) // Jonah's lament and the Lord's response who makes a castor-oil plant grow, sends a wind, and a worm (4, 1–11).<sup>9</sup>

The final question leaves an open ending and escapes the rigid symmetry, having no parallel in the first part; it seems to be addressed directly to the reader invited to choose whether to align him/herself to the way of seeing and judging typical of God or to the shock and resentment of the prophet. This suggests that the theme of a universal mission is not the central theme which foreshadows the mission *ad gentes* found in the NT, not even or solely the conversion of pagans. It is true that the word of Jonah changed the lives of the sailors and of the people of Nineveh, but the story does not end at chapter 3 with the repentance of all the inhabitants of Nineveh, and the pardon granted to them by God, even if this is the accomplishment of the divine mandate given from the very beginning (1, 2). The real interest of the story is in fact aimed at the conversion of the prophet who in a stubborn and increasingly subtle way resists God and which the narrator explains only 4, 2. Not only does the Lord remain true to Jonah even after his fleeing to Tarsus, but he renews his choice (3, 1). He also prepared what A. Vignolo called a dual therapy, spectacular, miraculous and wet in the first part (the storm and the fish), then sober, dry, with a wise tone in the second (the castor-oil tree, the warm wind, the worm), with the purpose of curing the prophet from his deep resentment and thus operate a transformation of his sullen vision.<sup>10</sup>

If the issue of the conversion of Jonah is evident, still there is also another character who makes a round-about turn: God who in fact also converts (3, 10), and indeed it is this action which ultimately determines the problem of prophet (4, 2) and also urges the reader to participate in the debate.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf D. Scaiola, *I Dodici Profeti*, p. 92–94; A. Niccacci, M. Pazzini, R. Tadiello, *Il libro di Giona. Analisi del testo ebraico e del racconto*, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum. Analecta 65, Edizioni Terra Santa 2013, p. 20ss., to these studies, one can also add the following for the notes on the style of the narrative; R. Vignolo, *Un profeta tra umido e secco. Sindrome e terapia del risentimento nel libro di Giona*, Glossa 2013, p. 21–23.

<sup>10</sup> R. Vignolo, *Un profeta tra umido e secco*, p. 24–30.

## 2.2. Four Figures of Conversion

I will run through the story by going through the characters involved, stopping only on the path of their transformation: the pagan sailors, the people of Nineveh, Jonah and the Lord, to try to identify the elements placed by the narrator and to see what is at stake in the entire situation.

### 2.2.1. The Pagan Sailors

At the divine command, introduced in the typical mode of a prophecy “the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak against it; for their wickedness is come up to me’” (1, 1–2). Jonah responds by fleeing to Tarsus, the place where the Lord is not known (Is 66, 11), and as the prophet goes to the west, he also performs a descending movement: down to Joppa, where he embarks on a ship and goes to the lowest deck (1, 5) falling deeply asleep. It is a way that signals that Jonah will distance himself from reality, tries to hide, loses interest in what happens around him. All this happens while the Lord unleashes a great storm in the sea (1, 4). God does not manifest himself as the creator who dominates chaos (Gen 1; Is 11, 15–16; 43, 14–21; 38–41; Ps 74, 12–17; 104; etc.), but as the one who produces it.

It is in this context that the narrator introduces the contrast between the pagan sailors and their captain with a highly ironic twist. The closed attitude of Jonah who refrains to involve himself corresponds in fact literally to the description of the ship, “thought to be broken,” as if it were able to assess the situation, and above all the repeated and frantic attempts by the sailors to save themselves. They vainly lighten the ship of its cargo but the only real weight is the prophet who asleep anticipates the death that threatens them all. Meanwhile they pray invoking each his own god.

While not knowing the true God they express genuine religiosity, interpreting the storm as a sign of a deity, and this appears in particular in the manner in which the captain turns to Jonah, “What are you doing asleep? Arise, call upon your God! Maybe God will think of us and we will not perish” (1, 6). It is a discourse very similar to that which the Lord asked of Jonah at the beginning. It expresses amazement to the fact that in a difficult and dangerous situation he does not talk to his God. Jonah is called back to his task, so as to invoke the name of the Lord, so as to know how to interpret what is happening. In addition his words give voice to an important insight: perhaps God thinks about human

beings. This is just what Jonah does not want to accept if it means that God acts differently from his expectations.

In front of the passenger's silence, that even in this way continues to fall short of his vocation as a prophet, the sailors cast lots – a typical way to know God's will. That is how Jonah is found responsible for the storm and questioned. His answer is the first words he utters and forms the focus of the scene: "I am a Jew, and I worship [fear] the Lord, the God of heaven, who has made the sea and the earth" (1.9). The claim is solemn and constitutes a proper and explicit confession of faith to the Gentiles. Jonah testifies that the Lord is the one who gave life to the world, that he exercises total control over nature, and therefore the storm is his work. The prophet professes faith in God the Creator in front of pagans, but then contradicts his claim of the divine power over life, because he is convinced that the Lord, in his case, wants his death because of his disobedience to the mission entrusted to him. From this point of view, the state of "fear of God" means that he respects and then obeys him, or that he is afraid to the point of not recognizing him as a saviour?<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the expression "God of heaven" is attested in the Persian era and probably reflects a formulation that has become common by that time, and of which the prophet ironically does not understand its universal implications.<sup>12</sup> These manifest themselves already in the conclusion of the scene. In fact, the pagans after the confession of Jonah, were first "filled with fear" (1, 10) then even after their experience of the storm and its calming down, turned to the Lord, Yahweh, (v. 14). Then they have great fear again, but this time it is a fear of the Lord. Finally they make sacrifices and make promises to him (v. 16). The vocabulary used here alludes to the faith: "[Pagan sailors] pass from the previous religiosity, which was true, but incorrect, to the discovery, to the recognition of the true God in a very unusual way: through the faith of a believer (words) which was inconsistent (life) and through nature, considered as the revelation and manifestation of a just God. The reader can learn amongst other things that the *gojim* can arrive in some way to faith and recognize the true God being open to God's saving action. It established an opening, docility to God, a capacity to recognize him, then also in an explicit way as God who is concerned

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<sup>11</sup> D. Scaiola, *I Dodici Profeti*, 98; R. Vignolo, *Un profeta tra umido e secco*, p. 118–123.

<sup>12</sup> Cf G. Antoniotti, *La libertà di Dio. La confessione di fede di Gn 4,2 alla luce della sua relazione con Gl 2,13*, "RivBib" 44 (1996), p. 275–276.

for his creatures and wants by all means to bring the prophet (that is, Israel) to obedience.”<sup>13</sup>

### 2.2.2. The People of Nineveh

The scene in which the people of Nineveh are the protagonists is parallel to that of the sailors and the result also seems to be the same, although differences emerge. Though in this case the word of Jonah, although contrary to his intentions, realizes the task of leading the enemy to repent of their actions.

More precisely, however it highlights the role of the Lord with respect to the fate of the great city, which can be seen in various ways: in Nineveh God sends his prophet with a message with a tone of condemnation (1, 2) and does not desist from this purpose (3, 1), and then changes his decision, giving up the evil he had threatened to do (3, 10).

As mentioned before, Nineveh is the emblem of the oppressive and violent city to the point of cruelty with conquered nations. It is the city that is the instrument of injustice in order to assert and secure power throughout the Middle East. The narrator does not mention for what sin the people of Nineveh are precisely condemned. The vagueness of expressions used is functional and aim to highlight the breadth of guilt which has “ascended to God,” as the Lord finds himself at the opening of the story. Four times Nineveh is described as a big city (1, 2; 3, 2–3; 4, 11) with a three days’ journey to cross. Of course all this is indicative of the hyperbolic character of the story, because no ancient city is so huge. However one may remember how in Jer 22, 8 Jerusalem is called “great” not because of its measures, but just to report the size of guilt and the resulting disaster.<sup>14</sup> In 3, 3 the term “very big city” literally sounds “a great city to God.” It is probably the form that expresses the superlative, yet ironically could mean that Nineveh was a city too big even for God, and therefore it will be impossible for Jonah to be able to convince the inhabitants. But it is also possible that the narrator wants to suggest that the city is important for God and considered by

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<sup>13</sup> G. Facchinetti, P. Rota Scalabrini, *Ninive, la grande città*, “Parole Spirito e Vita” 26 (1992), p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> Cf M. Scandroglio, “Ancora quaranta giorni...” (*Gio 3,4*). *Il senso dell’oracolo di distruzione nel libro di Giona*, “La Scuola Cattolica” 139/1 (2011), p. 42.

him with interest.<sup>15</sup> The seriousness of the sin is apparent even from acts of repentance made by the people of Nineveh who in quality and scope appear to be proportionate to the offense for which all are considered as responsible: the king up to the animals, everyone is involved in the request for a pardon that should have an unprecedented quality.

To this city found guilty of boundless brutality to the point of becoming an “archetype of sin”,<sup>16</sup> the Lord sends his prophet as a bearer of a judgment of condemnation. Vignolo writes: “Sending a prophet to deal more closely with the fate of wounded Nineveh rather than with oracles from a distance, thus abandoning it to its ruined fate. It is a divine move which is ever bold and disconcerting and which burdens Jonah with a heavy weight [...]. If God makes him cry out a more threatening oracle of judgement against Nineveh so that the Lord may approach the Assyrian capital – even if to condemn it – through one of his chosen servants, here he still proves himself as an unbalanced God who is already too intimately involved and interested in the fate of Nineveh; a God who is not only punitive, but also saving.”<sup>17</sup>

The reason for sending the Prophet, in fact, is not simply to inform the people of Nineveh of the death that awaits them as the fruit of their sin, but to promote repentance as a result of revealing their sin. This can be seen through some details of the text. In 1, 2 the Lord’s command to Jonah is to “preach against it” (*qara’ al*). But when the command is repeated in 3, 2 the preposition is changed and the prophet must “proclaim it” (*qara’ el*): the proclamation that seems to be against Nineveh is rather a confirmation of a word in favour of the city.

The divine oracle consists of few words: “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” The time frame – forty days – could allude to a fixed destiny, but it can perhaps refer to a period in which the encounter between man and God can take place.<sup>18</sup>

Especially important is the verb used and which is translated as “be destroyed.” The verb *hapak* indicates several times the destruction of a city (cf Gen 19, 21.25.29; Dt 29, 22; 1Sam 10, 3; Jer 20, 16; Am 4, 11; Lam 4, 6). However, this root, just as the conjugation of *niphal* which is used here, may well express the idea of

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<sup>15</sup> Cf A. Niccacci, M. Pazzini, R. Tadiello, *Il libro di Giona*, 39; D. Scaiola, *I Dodici Profeti*, p. 104.

<sup>16</sup> M. Scandroglia, “Ancora quaranta giorni...”, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> R. Vignolo, *Un profeta tra umido e secco*, p. 71–72.

<sup>18</sup> Cf M. Scandroglia, “Ancora quaranta giorni”, p. 52.

a radical change. Therefore uttering the oracle, Jonah intended it as a judgment referring to the complete devastation of the city. However paradoxically the people of Nineveh see in the indictment an announcement of a possible new beginning, as a word that opens the hope of salvation. The word of the prophet underlines Nineveh's ignorance, makes the conscious city of its sin and of the destructive consequences. All this places them in a position to begin a journey of conversion.<sup>19</sup>

It is surprising that there is a lack of signs that corroborate the proclamation, or that support the authenticity of the prophet, or that predict the imminence of the catastrophe. Nevertheless, the people of Nineveh believe that the word of the prophet is credible “because in the revelation of their sin (3, 8) they recognize the very presence of God (3, 9). The understanding of sin and its effects – the result of the ministry of Jonah – opens the inhabitants of the capital city to the way of repentance, without the need for additional signs or evidence.”<sup>20</sup>

The narrator reports the reaction of the people of Nineveh who “believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, both old and young” (3, 5). Whether the verb believe (*aman*) expresses a conversion or gives credit and puts trust in God is disputable. One also notes that, unlike the sailors of chapter 1, for the people of Nineveh and for their king the term YHWH is not used; instead only the generic name *‘elohim* – God is used. The question of the use of the divine name in the book is controversial and cannot simply be resolved by a study of the words used.<sup>21</sup>

However, it is interesting to see the formula used by the king of Nineveh in verse 9: “Who knows, if God changes his mind [*shub* returns] regrets [*repents nhm ni*], and holds back [*shub* returns again] his fierce anger, and we do not perish.” It is an expression of expectation and desire of divine compassion, but it also an awareness that consciousness and even the repentance of man is not sufficient. It is only God who can truly overcome sin, coming back in turn with a free initiative that is not conditioned by human actions.

In this regard, it is also important to note that the decree and the king's words follow what the people of Nineveh have already undertaken. The order of the king comes to ratify and to explain a movement already under way, involving

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<sup>19</sup> Cf D. Scaiola, *I Dodici Profeti*, p. 104–105; J. P. Sonnet, *Jonas est-il parmi les prophètes*, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> M. Scandroglia, “*Ancora quaranta giorni*”, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Cf for example A. Niccacci, M. Pazzini, R. Tadiello, *Il libro di Giona*, p. 121.

everyone from the normal citizen to the sovereign who is stripped of the insignia of greatness, even to animals who are also involved in fasting. This movement would lead them back from violence. This is an important reference as it reminds the reader of the transgressions for which the deluge had occurred (cf Gen 6, 13) and not only in ritual forms of penance. Added to this is the heartfelt invocation of God, which is even a prayer, repeating that of the sailors.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.2.3. Jonah and the Lord

Although the paths of the sailors and of the people of Nineveh are interesting and positive in their outcomes, the overall plot is aimed at a different type of journey: that of Jonah. One may note that if at first the focus of attention is given to Nineveh and to the change brought about by the search for God, then the story could conclude with chapter 3: God's decision to no longer threaten the people with evil (v. 10). Instead the story continues narrating the encounter/close dialogue between the prophet and the Lord in chapter 4 which constitutes the true apex. The success of the mission to Nineveh is that which produces an amazing effect in Jonah, which the narrator presents as something sorrowful, literally a "great evil" and an incredible source of outrage (4, 1). Unlike other prophets who complain with the Lord for the ineffectiveness of their work, which sometimes takes the form of a real failure, here ironically Jonah protests because his job was successful, or rather it produced what he feared that will happen: the revelation of God's mercy.

Therefore, if the sailors and the people of Nineveh are converted, the prophet seems immune to any transformation, and yet God never tires himself to looking for the people as he did with Nineveh. For this reason it is not possible to distinguish Jonah's itinerary from the Lord.

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<sup>22</sup> One could probably see a connection between the proclamation of Jonah in 3, 2 and the prayer of the people of Nineveh: in both cases we find the phrase *qara' el*. In the Jewish tradition the conversion of the people of Nineveh was the subject of an extensive development and of detailed stories of these measures, "if there were ten bricks in each house which had come from theft, even in expensive palaces of kings, these were totally demolished and the bricks given back to their rightful owners. Each garden, each vineyard in which there were two vines or two trees from a theft, these were uprooted and returned to their owners. If there were two threads in a dress that a woman had stolen, they tore the whole dress, curled up the two-threads and gave them back to their owners", cited in: D. Scaiola, *I Dodici Profeti, I Dodici Profeti*, p. 105, n. 58.

a) The prophet and his escape

Our main character is presented in the traditional manner: name and kin.

The name is curious. In fact, Jonah in Hebrew means “dove”, an animal that is often likened to Israel. He is presented as the son of Amittai, which can be translated as “my truth, my loyalty”; it is a name that sounds ironic but it is also symbolic and paradoxical. The dove was considered a naive bird, fearful, but also fickle, foolish and capricious (cf. Hos 7, 8–12, from 11, 11–12) and so did the prophet appear in the course of the story. However he is “the son of my truth/loyalty”, or as Vignolo says, “son who is faithful to me.” In addition, the researcher notes: “Written in Hebrew characters, the name Jonah hnwy [ywnh] contains the same consonants in the name Nineveh hwnyn [nynwh], which, compared to the name of the prophet, has only an additional initial *nun*. The two names are not exactly identical, but one is able to accommodate and fully contain the other. May this mean that Jonah will never get to his own identity without having to reckon with Nineveh? And if Nineveh is a mirror of truth for Jonah, is Jonah the same for Nineveh? Can we then say that our most sworn enemy is still the most generous guardian of our identity?”<sup>23</sup>

This is the man chosen by the Lord for an absolutely amazing mission – to go to Nineveh to give a word of judgment – without being given any reason for such a choice. In the same way, the narrator is silent about why Jonah flees “away from the face of the Lord” (1, 3 [2x]). “Staying ahead of the face of the Lord” is a common expression in the prophetic tradition and indicates the quality of the prophet’s relationship with God, his dependence on him that becomes a crucial element of his identity. The escape of Jonah is not a simple objection or just a strong form of disobedience, but a real betrayal of the Lord and also of himself. The ability of the narrator is evident here in not explaining the reasons; it is necessary to wait for chapter 4 to get to know them, so he creates a certain suspense and makes the reader hypothesise. Is the mission to Nineveh impossible to Jonah? Does he lack faith in God who sends him? Or does he not feel up to such an important task? Maybe Jonah does not want to be the fearsome instrument that will pour God’s wrath on the people of Nineveh in proportion to their unspeakable crimes? What will happen to Jonah if he disobeys God? What will be the fate of Nineveh at this point?

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<sup>23</sup> R. Vignolo, *Un profeta tra umido e secco*, p. 258; cf anche: A. Niccacci, M. Pazzini, R. Tadiello, *Il libro di Giona*, p. 124–125.

In this context, the freedom of God who chooses Jonah stands out. God sends him on a mission without making the purpose of the same task explicit. He even lets him run away, and gives him the freedom even not to respond, but only to quickly decide to take distance. The narrator builds the transition with consummate skill: the freedom to Jonah has a price to pay (the cost of the ticket) and it means facing the sea, a very dangerous place (but it is less so than God!) which brings about chaos and death.

#### b) The first prayer of the Prophet

If Jonah thought (and perhaps challenged) that God wanted his death because of his escape, the Lord however saves his stubborn and reluctant prophet. God does so not only upsetting the expectations of Jonah but also using a big fish which swallows him – an image of a terrible death – which, contrary to expectations and experience, guards his life, leading him to re-find the word of God he had to proclaim. The prophet may well find that he is saved against all expectations not because he deserves it but despite his closed attitude, his disobedience and resentment.

Chapter 2 is dominated by the figure of the fish and especially the first prayer of the Prophet raised right from the belly of the monster.<sup>24</sup>

The prayer is in a poetic form, fit to effectively express the emotional dimension that is particularly intense in the experience that he is living. It is comparable to a psalm that makes a lament in the first part (2, 3–7a) and thanksgiving in the second (2, 7b–10). It adopts numerous traditions, expressions and images typical of the psalms, so much so that it sounds like a great anthology of quotations. However, this still does fit well with the text: though it can be perceived as something formal, at the same time it still gives the impression of the insertion of the prophet in the great prayer tradition of his people, as if he will now assume the ancient words, creating an never uttered poem in a personal way.

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<sup>24</sup> With issues related to the prayer of Jonah and to the fish, cf J. T. Walsh, *Jonah 2,3-10. A Rhetorical Critical Study*, « Bib » 63 (1982), p. 219–229; A. Wenin, *Le “psaume” du livre de Jonas*, « Cahiers de l’École des Sciences Philosophiques et Religieuses » 14 (1993), p. 153–170; C. Lichtert, *La prière de Jonas (Jon 2,3-10) comme élément narratif*, in: C. Focant, A. Wenin (ed.) *Analyse narrative et Bible*, Deuxième Colloque International du RRENAB, Louvain-la-Neuve, Avril 2004, Leuven 2005, p. 407–414; D. Scaiola, *I Dodici Profeti*, p. 99–103; R. Vignolo, *Un profeta tra umido e secco*, p. 133–154.

Jonah describes his experience. The verbs in the past suggest that the perspective is that of salvation which he already feels right in the belly of the fish. But for sure, some formulations chosen show that he had experienced the depth of the abyss, remoteness from salvation, the clear perception of a world that swallows without any chance of escape, an absolute disorientation. From this deadly reality God has withdrew him and it is this promised action that is celebrated to the point of offering sacrifices and to formulate the promise to fulfill the vow (2, 10). It would seem that Jonah had learned his lesson and he went back to the Lord with trust and availability. However his prayer portrays the ambiguous situation of this man, a believer to the point of confessing that “salvation comes from the Lord” (2, 10) but at the same time firm in his perspective, unbending and unwilling to change. It can be noted that he remains totally self-centered (the forms in the first person singular prevail), lacks any mention of his rebellion; indeed the responsibility for his condition is attributed to God (2, 4). He does not mention the sailors who nearly died because of him, and even makes a derogatory reference to the pagans (2, 9), although they at the end of chapter 1 had invoked, sacrificed and made vows to the Lord, the same action that Jonah attributes to himself as he had just proven himself unfaithful. He wishes to return to Jerusalem, to the temple where he can state his supplication (2, 5.8), but God had sent him to Nineveh and he is silent in front of this city and its fate. Now while the luminous confession of faith that concludes the prayer is a really deep conviction or when the divine salvation will assume a non-acceptable form for the vision of Jonah, does it prove to be abstract?

The Lord does not answer the prayerful words of his prophet, so he turns to the fish that once again obeys and throws Jonah on the beach. The story can resume, and this time the divine way takes a more sober but extremely effective manner.

### c) The revelation of God

Chapter 3 ends by the narrator finding a change in the decision taken by God: He sees the reaction of the people of Nineveh with its authenticity, repents (*naḥam, ni.*) and moves away the destruction announced from the city (v. 10). As the king had hoped, so it came to be and the repentance of the Lord is changed to compassion for the wicked city, a stronger compassion which is more faithful than his word of judgment, more urgent than the prophet's guarantee of

credibility which is therefore denied (at least compared to his expectations). Here too we see the freedom of God, so great that he changes his mind and converts without fearing for his good name and even before anyone recognizes the fulfilment of his mercy.<sup>25</sup> What is accomplished speaks of what is also perceived in other passages of the Old Testament: punishment or threat, or just a serious event have led Israel to the birth of a novelty several times to a hope for change (cf Lam 3). This prospect is not limited to the chosen people, but also reaches the nations to the point of involving the same historical enemies of Israel: Egypt and Assyria, as announced by the amazing oracle of Is 19, 18–25. So even in this case: “The God of Israel, Creator and universal redeemer, has a really magnanimous heart, not only large enough to accommodate the nations (Is 2, Mic 4; Ps 87, Mk 7, 28–29), but it is also deep, and he is radically determined in his salvific will. Thus, although he is always ready to be angry and to oppose intransigence toward evil in a clear way, to occasions which seem good in his eyes, he will be even susceptible to extreme surprises in repeating his tireless offer of grace.”<sup>26</sup>

#### d) The reaction of Jonah

The story which began as a mission of judgment against Nineveh, turns out to be a lesson which educates the prophet. The reaction of Jonah to God’s repentance is indeed violent and radical. It is articulated into a second prayer which is the culmination of the story: “He prayed to the Lord: ‘Lord, was not this what I said when I was in my country? That is why I fled to Tarsus; because I know that you are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, great in love and that you repent [regret *niham ni.*] from inflicting disaster. And now, Lord, take my life, for it is better for me to die than to live!’”

The formula in verse 3 (which also returns in verse 9) is known to the biblical scholar. Elijah had already expressed a similar desire when, threatened by Jezebel, he had been forced to flee, claiming the Lord’s lack of (apparent) interest in him. With the call to kill him Jonah seems to put God in check-mate, reporting an injustice: in any case, whether God agrees with his desire, or whether he leaves him alive, he dispels from being merciful and manifests himself incapable of giving joy to his faithful.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cf M. Scandroglia, “*Ancora quaranta giorni*”, p. 56–57.

<sup>26</sup> R. Vignolo, *Un profeta tra umido e secco*, p. 78–79.

<sup>27</sup> Cf R. Vignolo, *Un profeta tra umido e secco*, p. 218.

But this is only one aspect of the matter. The most important aspect is the affirmation of verse 2 which is the real problem of the prophet. This recalls the famous revelation of God's name in Ex 34, 6–7: "The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'"

The quotation of Ex 34 is significant since it recurs explicitly also in Joel 2, 13; Mic 7,18–20 and Nah 1, 2–3 (plus numerous allusions in the other Minor Prophets) while it is absent in the Major Prophets. This observation has led to the hypothesis that the Twelve Prophets should not be regarded only in their singularity, but it is possible to identify an organizational intention and unifying the entire group right around this formula.<sup>28</sup> In particular, "The recurrence of the allusions to the formula in Ex 34 in the body of the Twelve Prophets manifests that the biblical prophet is one who stands on the crests of the attributes of justice and mercy. Witness to the irreducible divine bipolarity, the prophet is the witness (and in some cases the catalyst) of the passage of God from one of these poles, and in particular towards mercy. In concrete terms, the dialectic between the divine attributes is at work along the Twelve Prophets in an alternating way – often sudden – between oracles of judgment and oracles of salvation. A logical disjunctive joins these extreme inexorable judgments and unexpected pardons under mutual pressure."<sup>29</sup>

With respect to this, the text of Jonah has a feature which it shares with Joel.<sup>30</sup> In verse 2, in fact, the attributes related to punishment are omitted and a new one which his absent in Ex 34 is introduced: "who repents of evil." This evokes what is narrated in Ex 32, 12.14, the story of the intercession of Moses that determines the repentance of God in the face of the decision to destroy the people of Israel guilty of having built the golden calf and betraying the alliance.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf J. P. Sonnet, *Jonas est-il parmi les prophètes*, p. 138–140.152–153 e note per la bibliografia; C. Conroy, *Jonah and Nahum in the Book of Twelve: Who has the Last Word?*, PIBA 32 (2009), p. 1–23.

<sup>29</sup> J. P. Sonnet, *Jonas est-il parmi les prophètes*, p. 140.

<sup>30</sup> On the relationship between Jonah and Joel, cf G. Antoniotti, *La libertà di Dio. La confessione di fede di Gn 4,2 alla luce della sua relazione con Gl 2,13*, p. 258–266.

Compared to Ex 32 and Joel 2, 13 this divine quality extends even to the Gentiles, having a universal significance: the God of Jonah is not only the Creator of all, but also their saviour. The prophet, however, does not act like Moses; on the contrary he is opposed to this disclosure.

This is Jonah's problem and it can be articulated in several ways.

The change in God reveals the futility of the prophet. Still, he takes action, whatever his intents and purposes are, and not excluding the principle of divine justice. God does whatever he wants, even to the point of denying his envoy.

It can also be assumed that the prophet calls into question the conversion of the people of Nineveh, or more precisely, he claims that it is more demanding and that is not simply manifested in ritual acts of penitence but that it requires doing good for the evil perpetrated and that it needs to be subject to the test of time to see its scope and authenticity. A forgiveness as that accorded by the Lord in Nineveh appears excessively rapid, it does not account for how difficult and complex it really is to change a mentality (cf. Jer 13, 23) without the gift of a new heart, and it seems to arrogate to itself and to reverse the harm caused without considering the rights of the victims of the violence of the people of Nineveh.<sup>31</sup>

To this element we can link another aspect: God does not act in the demands of justice, he is not its guarantor and guardian; so it is better to die than to continue living in a world in which the will and the divine whim are affirmed instead of justice. The divine inclination towards mercy is the reason of the escape, the scorn, the deep resentment. The compassion of the Lord, in fact, depends solely on him; it is not linked to the action of the human being (4, 11). But if things are so, justice is called into question and what is manifested is an intolerable benevolence towards every human being, even the worst enemy of Israel.

The reader is invited to deal with the objections of Jonah and at the same time experience the paradox of his claims. In verse 2 there is a profession of faith: "I know who you are ...". But the prophet rests squarely on his belief to contest the action of God. On the one hand he confesses that the Lord is able to repent, but on the other hand when repentance is given to the people of Nineveh Jonah does not accept it: "The text seems concerned about the faith of Jonah, with his existential importance for his intimate and dramatic events. In other words, what is at stake is not so much the figure of Jonah in and of itself as that of God

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<sup>31</sup> Cf G. Facchinetti, P. Rota Scalabrini, *Ninive, la grande città*, p. 77–78 e n. 15.

himself. The problem of Jonah in fact is his weakness in recognizing himself in that faith, a weakness in accepting it fully and complying his actions to it, a weakness especially in believing that God acts in this way and who even gives up punishing the pagans, the historical enemies of Israel.”<sup>32</sup>

#### e) Jonah’s call to conversion

Jonah needs to experience the mercy of God himself in order to be able to commence a possible change; for him Yhwh constructs an experience through a series of actions and through a few words which would lead one to become aware of his/her condition and regain a world of common affection for the Lord. If the prophet has distanced himself from Nineveh in order to wait for resentful events, God begins by asking a question, “Is it right to be angry in this way?” (4, 4). This is indirectly a reprimand, a veiled accusation of a wrong state of mind. Still, it sounds better as an interrogation calling the prophet to seek and to explain the reasons for his anger.

Facing the closed silence and thus the lack of dialogue, the Lord tries to erase the distance between them with a small gift: a castor-oil plant which sprouted to protect Jonah (4, 6), and which is an enigma. Actually Jonah does not need it because the hut he built was enough to protect him. The castor-oil plant is thus the sign of God’s care and protection for him in the order of gratuity. The consequence is immediate: Jonah finally feels a positive feeling, a great joy, lives a new beginning in life while appreciating the beauty that it offers. But again through divine action, on the following day a worm dries the castor-oil plant and a humid wind causes great suffering to the prophet. Here again the desire to die and the indignation return. The renewed possibility of dialogue with his “opponent” returns also (4, 7–8).

The final question of the Lord brings together a series of questions aimed at Jonah and equally to the believing Israelite reader (4, 10–11). There is no answer because it has to be a permanent question in the conscience of the believer so that the claims of the faith in which s/he believes can be measured, but which are likely to be void of facts. Can this show an attachment to something that while offering comfort is not dependent on one’s endeavours or ability (such as the castor-oil plant) and feel bad about its disappearance, and then fail to show

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<sup>32</sup> G. Antoniotti, *La libertà di Dio. La confessione di fede di Gn 4,2 alla luce della sua relazione con Gl 2,13*, p. 272.

the same feeling for what, on the contrary, depends on his care and involvement (Nineveh)? Is it better to live in a world where there are effective shelters which are provisional and precarious as the castor-oil plant and which is also a gift of God, or in a world which reveals the mercy of the Lord who bears the existence of Nineveh and pardons it as if it had not previously committed terrible sins? Can one accept to live in a world in which paradoxically through his mission, the enemy is spared so that it could act once again against its own people?

Jonah (and the reader) must choose between the sign of the castor-oil plant or the sign of the city of Nineveh that only survives through God's forgiveness. He must understand whether it is the castor-oil plant or God's mercy that is a true refuge, no matter how provocative and scandalous this may seem.

So Jonah, who suffers from the change of the divine decision is one who as a prophet is asked to show that the God of Israel does not change, that he is invariably merciful because he is just, he is full of compassion for all his creatures, humans and animals, even for those who do not belong to his people, even for those who are evil. He does so without neglecting to denounce evil but responding to evil with an offer of salvation which can move to conversion even if it takes the form of announcing a catastrophe. God does not change because he always acts to bring the sinner to life, he invariably offers mercy to sinners not because they deserve it but because this is his name.<sup>33</sup>

The story of the prophet, recalcitrant and closed in resentment when faced with the "arbitrary" injustice of God reveals the need to recognize that the possibilities of God, demonstrated in his attributes have a form of excess such that events cannot measure them. On the contrary, they are the ones to measure history. They lead to the domain of utopia as a field of possibility that opens beyond that of reality, not in the sense of a non-place but in the imaginative surplus for which the design of God cannot be gridlocked in past and present history.<sup>34</sup>

The prophet just as the figure of the believer is the one who comes in and announces a new possibility.

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<sup>33</sup> Cf G. Facchinetti, P. Rota Scalabrini, *Ninive, la grande città*, p. 75; M. Scandroglia, "Ancora quaranta giorni", p. 59; J. P. Sonnet, *Jonas est-il parmi les prophètes*, p. 151.156, in this article of the interesting excursus: Jonas, l'utopie pour penser (pp. 153–156).

<sup>34</sup> Cf P. Ricoeur, *Dal testo all'azione. Saggi di ermeneutica*, Jaca Book 1989, p. 390–391.

### 3. Conclusion

The story narrated in relation to the theme of “conversion” seems to me to shed light on some interesting elements.

When you consider the story from the point of view of the pagan sailors and of the people of Nineveh, the Author does not seem interested predominantly in the path which they take if not because through it the main figure of the prophet is highlighted. In this sense there is a confirmation that the interest of the biblical text is not directed to the conversion of the pagans. However, Jonah finds himself involved in their stories, by chance in the case of sailors, because he was sent to them by God in the case of the people of Nineveh.

In both of these situations that speak of a transformation to the faith the word of the prophet is crucial.

In the scene of the sailors, this is inserted into an existing religiosity, albeit incorrect in the eyes of Jews, and contemplation/experience of nature which is visible in the revelation of God the Creator of life. The ethnic dimension (“I am Jewish”) is intertwined with a universal perspective (the God I believe in is the Lord of all). In this case, the narrator is not interested in the continuation of the story of the sailors. He signals their access to the fear of the Lord indicated by their sacrifices and vows, outlines a germinal adhesion which is however already open to the saving action of the true God who on his part is not worried about a full recognition of his truth with its previous action in their favour.

The relationship of Jonah with Nineveh is much more complicated. He is forced to accomplish a mission contrary to his will; he interprets it according to his own schemes, announcing a catastrophe; but his word, contrary to expectations has the effect that the Prophet never intended to reach. The scene is thus paradoxical, but the word of the prophet is again decisive even when it is a complaint and a threat. The revelation of evil and the self-destructive consequences that it causes is also one of the functions of the biblical prophet par excellence and the way to meet divine forgiveness.

Even in this case, the narrator adds no details on what happened afterwards. The image of the people of Nineveh so unanimous and so compact in their reply is also hard to imagine, but again beyond the likelihood, what is important is to show the freedom of God and the call that he makes to the believer.

The issue returns on Jonah because it is obvious that the Author throughout the plot targeted his conversion, and for this he outlines a portrait with shadows and flashes of light and the ambiguity of an adhesion, that while faithful to

tradition fails to appreciate the unpredictable divine mercy and stiffens in the vision of evil done and suffered.

It is therefore not indifferent that he is a prophet, that is, the figure of the believer par excellence, nor that his name (“Dove”) evokes Israel. His story thus becomes the paradigm for the whole people sent to ask about what it means to truly confess the Lord beyond the formulas of the faith which can appear abstract to the rough test of history. The experience, in fact, often poses a strong challenge which in some cases is intolerable and forces you to think differently both about God and about the way that he does justice in human affairs, and also is the sense of belonging to a community of faith which has specific rules to be observed.

Therefore what is at stake is the change of mentality in contemplating the mystery of God’s plan; like Jonah, Israel is also invited to transform the desire for revenge and to the demands of justice to the recognition of a mercy addressed to itself, whilst also awaiting a manifestation of forgiveness even to its enemy. Changing the way you see God also brings about a change in the outlook on pagan nations: “With respect to the nations what is primary is not going to actively announce the *gojim* but to model their behaviour and attitudes on the unpredictable divine action, not waiting for more divine judgment and condemnation of people but rather waiting for the manifestation of God’s mercy towards them without clearly stating how and when this mercy will be announced to them.”<sup>35</sup>

Finally, in this perspective the book suggests that the real prophet is the one who agrees with the articulation of the divine attributes of justice and salvation; one who renders the attribute that makes Jonah flee, an active and concrete attribute through word and intercession but which is the highlight of this story and which is the common factor throughout the entire Twelve Prophets: the Lord repents from the evil promised.

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<sup>35</sup> G. Facchinetti, P. Rota Scalabrini, *Ninive, la grande città*, p. 83.