

IDENTITY AND ALTERITY IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

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Abstract: The relationship between identity and alterity is always a matter of tension. This becomes all the more true, when it deals with the dialectic of identity of a major insider group *vis a vis* the alterity of a minority outsider group. A harmonious co-existence of between a group with strong identity consciousness and an alterity is possible only if they develop a reciprocal reconciling attitude. Memories of the past can influence this relation positively and negatively depending on their openness to forgive and repair. In this article the various aspects of the identity-alterity relation is studied taking the biblical prophet Jonah as a paradigm.

Keywords: Alterity, Forgiveness, God's Nature, Identity, Jonah, Reconciliation.

1. Introduction

The dialectics of the relationship between identity and alterity is a vexing theme: it can be a relationship of harmony if one's identity does not consider the presence of an alterity a threat and can grow to a relationship of mutual friendship; it can be a relationship of mutual distrust, when one becomes suspicious of the truth of the other; it can be a relationship of nullification of the other, especially when one's identity is projected as the only

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truth to the denial of all alterity. As some authors maintain, it is a matter of plurality of possible relationships between self and other, which is a fundamental binary of human existence.¹ For a peaceful co-existence of persons, ethnicities, religions, etc., what is needed is a relationship of reciprocity and acceptance between identity of the majority and alterity of the minority and vice versa. For example, when the identity of the people of a land is equated with a religion, the people of the same land with different religious affiliations may be hated, or rated as alterity to be expelled, or nullified, if there is no respect for the minority religions. On the other hand, if a minority group of any sort keeps itself aloof and excluded from the culture and language of the land of its domicile, it may be seen as an 'outsider' by the people of the land.

The Book of the Prophet *Jonah* is generally considered to be a post-exilic prophetic work. It may not be the prophetic oracles of a prophet called Jonah, rather, it is a narrative in the style of a prophetic parable to highlight some important values and approaches desired of the post-exilic Jewish community.²

In this article, the dynamics of identity-alterity relationship is studied from the perspective of intersubjectivity referring to "the variety of possible relations between people's perspectives"³ based on the biblical Book of Jonah.⁴

¹Michelle Voss Roberts, *Dualities: A Theology of Difference*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, xxi.

²Lester L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, vol. 1*, London: T&T Clark International, 2004, 95.

³Author,

"Title," <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/38709/1/Intersubjectivity_towards_a_dialogical_analysis_doc_%28LSERO%29.pdf> (3 March 2018).

⁴The Book of *Jonah* narrates the story of a prophetic personality called Jonah, who was asked by God to go to Nineveh, to warn them of God's impending punishment if they do not abandon their sinful ways. Jonah, initially refused to obey the divine command, and tried to flee from God by going to Tarsish by a ship. However, the ship was capsized in a heavy storm. The sailors cast lot to find the reason for the storm and the lot fell on Jonah and he was thrown out of the ship into

2. Short History of Israel's Attitude to "Outsiders"

Since the Book of *Jonah* discusses the relation between Israel's attitudes towards people outside of their cultural and religious identity, it is necessary to see a brief sketch of the development of Israel's attitude to outsiders. The people of Israel, who enjoyed the identity of a covenant community marked with a land, temple and covenant relationship with Yahweh, tried to safeguard the right of people outside of the covenant through various legal stipulations, especially in Exodus (22:20-21) and Deuteronomy (10:18; 14:19; 16:11; 27:19, etc.). According to some scholars, the concern for the alien (*ger*) becomes significant only after the exile, and those texts with openness to the non-Israelites were the result of post-exilic editorial work.⁵ At any rate, the pre-exilic equation of Israel's identity and the non-Israelites' alterity was more of giving an identity to those who lived amidst the covenant community. Since Israel had lucidity of its own identity as the chosen people due to the covenant formula, "I will be your God and you will be my people," Israel did not have much of an identity crisis due to the presence of the "*ger*."

Nonetheless, there existed some tension among the Israelites in their attitude towards the marginalized alterity of the widow, the orphan, the alien, etc., as evidenced from various prophetic texts (Isaiah 1:17; 3:14-15; 10:2; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10). The prophets advocated a higher sense of justice and righteousness which takes these into account. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah are unequivocal in warning the covenant community of their disregard for the marginalized, whose identity was not recognized and respected by the dominant group. The words of

the sea. Jonah was swallowed by a fish and was vomited alive at Nineveh after three days. Finally, Jonah obeyed God and preached to the people of Nineveh. The people of Nineveh responded positively to Jonah's preaching. As result God decided to pardon them, which irritated Jonah. Through the dialogue between Jonah and God, they book conveys the message of universality of God's mercy.

⁵See for example, M. David Stanley Kumar, *Justice and Righteousness and Concern for the Poor in Jer 21:1-23*, Bengaluru: Theological Publication of India, 2016, 83-84.

Prophet Jeremiah are illustrative: "...if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever" (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

There was a growing awareness that all those who suffer due to marginalization should be specially taken care of. This concern for the 'deprived other' is called for, especially based on Israel's own experience of being a "*ger*" in Egypt: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry..." (Exodus 22:21-23). The benevolent attitude towards the *ger* is not just a matter of refraining from oppression. Israel is asked to love them in imitation of Yahweh, their God, who loves the stranger (Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:18-19). As Brian Klug notes, "In short, God takes a marginalized people and makes a double move: he moves them to the centre and he places the marginalized at the heart of their ethics."⁶ Leviticus 25:23 and Psalm 39:13 show further broadening of the understating of *ger*. There is no permanent resident and permanent alien on earth, as Leviticus 25:13 states, "The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants." All human beings are *ger* on earth: it is the human condition.

Alterity becomes an issue mainly when a dominant group tries to set limits to the contours of identity, which may push many who enjoy identity to the margins of 'alterity.' It implies, the more one upholds one's identity as the benchmark for all those who are marked as 'outsider' by the identity group, the outsiders are forced either to abandon their alterity or to abandon the territory of the identity group if they are not ready to accept the benchmark of the dominant group. This happens in theocratic states which define their identity based on a religion and also in other totalitarian regimes - dictatorships, Nazism,

⁶Brian Klug, "Moses: The Significant Other," in Ulrich Schmiedel and James M. Matarazzo Jr., *Dynamics of Difference: Christianity and Alterity*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, 23.

fascism, communism, etc. Hence, all those who belong to other religions are considered 'other,' having no rights and privileges. "Commitment to alterity and its disavowal" depends on your ability to extend the "spectrum of identification practice with different degrees, shades, and contours of belonging" of your identity as a dominant group to minorities residing among you.⁷ In a secular democratic state, identity is decided by birth and not by religion, caste, or race. They are all substrata within the common identity. It may sound a contradiction that the same people who kept in remembrance the identity crisis they experienced in Egypt because of their alterity based on race and were pushed to the margins making them bonded labourers (Exodus 2:22-24), later were reluctant to recognize the alterity of people on the margins. That is the reason the prophets insistently admonished the people to have concern for those people. For example, Isaiah says: "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17).

The Book of *Jonah*, being a post-exilic work,⁸ discusses the dialectic of identity and alterity of the post-exilic Jewish community with others outside of it. If welcoming alterity was a magnanimity shown by Israel to others during the time of the Israelite monarchy, the experience of exile made them to taste the bitter reality of being an alien when they suffered the trauma of being the alterity in Babylon. The exile pushed them to a huge identity crisis, because all the symbols of identity of the Israelite covenant community, such as land, covenant and temple were in

⁷For details, see Neriko Musha Doerr, "Introduction to the Special Issue, Commitment to Alterity and Its Disavowal: The Politics of Display of Belonging," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 80.2 (Apr 2015), 149-167.

⁸Various indicators in the text permit us to conclude that the Book of *Jonah* is a post-exilic work, a protest literature against Jewish particularism on social as well as religious spheres. See for example, Erik Eynikel, "Jonah," in *The International Bible Commentary*, edited by William E. Farmer, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998, 1147-1148.

jeopardy. Now in the Babylon Exile, Israel had to come to terms with the newly created identity crisis due to their forced sojourn in a foreign land. The lament of Psalm 137:1-5 communicates this crisis:

By the rivers of Babylon-- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!⁹

However, in the exile, Israel experienced also the broadmindedness of Babylonian power, which respected the alterity of Israel and permitted the people to have their own enclave to practice their religion and keep important traits of their culture and tradition. This experience of acceptance of their alterity both in culture and religion by the Babylonians opened a new vista of tolerance towards an alterity of the minority, who are different from the identity of the majority. As a result, there arose "a new and positive mission to the Gentile world, transcending all boundaries."¹⁰ However, there were also trends in the exilic and post-exilic Judaism showing exclusivist tendencies which resisted an open attitude to other cultures (Ezra 10; Nehemiah 13 etc). This rigid attitude of conservative

⁹Though there are differences of opinion regarding the origin and date of composition of the Psalm, it clearly indicates a reflection on Israel's coping with the negative experience of Babylonian Exile, especially in the realm of cult. This Psalm communicates "a sorrowful homesickness for Jerusalem," "a dull feeling of powerlessness, an inability to alter anything in the world-political conditions," and can be understood also as a post-exilic reflection "as a look back to the exile." For details, see Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Eric Zenger, *Psalm 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, Hermeneia, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011, 512-523.

¹⁰For details, Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003, 132-138.

nationalism and intolerant disposition towards other religions and cultures could be explained as "the phenomenon of struggle for survival, which was a historical necessity at that time."¹¹ In the person of Jonah we see the struggle of the Jewish people to come to terms with the universalism and particularism in their relation to an alterity represented by the Ninevites. As Paul L. Reddit argues, "The narrative Jonah answers the question of 'us' versus 'them' in theological terms." As a correction to the intolerant attitude visible in some texts which endorses Israel to execute all the non-Israelites when they inherit the land (e.g., Deuteronomy 20:16-19), "the Jonah narrative seems to envision a different way of thinking about 'them,' a way toward a more humane treatment offered on the basis of a more compassionate God."¹²

Thus, in Jonah we can see a search for finding a healthy approach for the relationship between Jewish identity in relation to others, including those who inflicted harm to their religious and political identity. Instead of insisting on separation between identity and alterity based on religion and culture, Jonah suggests a search for finding connectivity between the two through prophetic proclamation and God's nature. It is also a search for a peaceful coexistence with other nations.

3. Jonah's Reluctance to be a Prophet to Inimical Alterity

Among all the prophetic personalities mentioned in the Old Testament, Jonah is the only one who is asked to go to a foreign nation to preach the divine message (Jonah 1:2). All others had the mandate to address the covenant community, either Israel or Judah separately, or sometimes as a whole "people of Israel." By sending Jonah to Nineveh, the prophetic ministry is given a new openness. The Israelite prophet is not only to remain confined to the borders of the Jewish people, rather if needed, he/she is also sent to other nations to deliver a message of conversion. This

¹¹Paul Kalluveettil, CMI, "Sojourners and Foreigner: Biblical Perspectives," *Aisian Horizons* 8.4 (December 2014), 689.

¹²Paul L. Reddit, *Introduction to the Prophets*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008, 265-266.

new identity of the prophet with openness to the inimical alterity of Nineveh was not easily acceptable to Jonah, because going to Nineveh implies for Jonah reconciling with Assyrian power, which did enormous harm to Israel. As Gaines notes, "As everyone, Jonah shoulders the burden of our unresolved conflicts about accepting those around us who look different, hold different values, and follow different value systems."¹³

The more one is obsessed with one's identity the more difficult it would be to reconcile with someone who marred this identity. If not reconciled with this wound, it could become apathy and even hatred towards all those involved in inflicting this identity crisis. In Jonah, we have a representative of one who carries the wound of a bruised Jewish identity because of the exile. "Forgiveness would be a difficult topic among the Israelites immediately after they experience the horrors of war against the Babylonians."¹⁴ Thus, the command to go to Nineveh was intended both as a healing for Jonah and for the post-exilic Jewish community, and simultaneously an invitation for those powers who trivialized the Jewish community as insignificant to give due regard to God's chosen ones. It is a process of healing for the victim to go to preach God's project to the perpetrator, knowing the nature of God as overwhelming mercy (Jon 4:2). This would involve reconciliation between the identity of the victim and the alterity of the perpetrator.¹⁵

For Jonah, going to Nineveh also would mean to open the horizon of God's mercy to others outside Israel. It may be understood as allowing forgiveness to take place which "opens new pathways to relationship."¹⁶ Thus, the flight of Jonah from his prophetic call may be motivated by various factors: "his faith that the Lord will not destroy the Ninevites who were not raised to know God, his indifference to outsiders, his reluctance to

¹³Janet Howe Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World: Jonah's Dilemma*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003, 10.

¹⁴Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*, 27.

¹⁵See Roger Burggraeve, "The Difficult but Possible Path towards Forgiveness and Reconciliation," *Louvain Studies* 41 (2018), 44-45.

¹⁶Burggraeve, "The Difficult but Possible Path," 49.

minister to hostile heathens, or his belief that God belongs to the Israelites alone."¹⁷ Thus, Jonah's flight from God is caused by his identity crisis: a crisis resulting from his inability to forgive the Ninevites and to accept the truth of the all-embracing nature of God's love and pardon extended to all alterities.¹⁸ Ultimately for Jonah, going to Nineveh is not merely to encounter the otherness of a foreign nation, but to have a prophetic vision of "meeting the one who comes from outside."¹⁹

4. Sailors and Jonah: Proactive Lesson in Respecting Alterity

It is quite an interesting paradox to see Jonah who was reluctant to accept the divine call to be a prophet to a foreign nation, which was an unfriendly alterity, now trying to get the assistance of a ship and its sailors, an unknown alterity, to flee from God's call (Jonah 1:3). In order that his Jewish identity consciousness not be forfeited by reconciling with the alterity of Nineveh, he relies on the assistance of another alterity, the sailors. According to Gaines, the sailors "are a microcosm of humanity, but mainly they are non-Jews, the rest of the world, the opposite of Jonah's people."²⁰ The ship he entered was sailing to Tarshish, a non-Jewish territory. Hence, he had to encounter an unknown alterity, which he hoped would welcome him, the outsider. In order to avoid reconciling with an unfriendly alterity, Jonah decided to seek anonymity among an unknown alterity, hiding his identity. When one is too preoccupied with one's own ego, the result will be alienation: alienation from one's own self, people, mission and identity. From the narration of the ship and the sailors, we can deduce that Jonah was the only Jew among them. Hence, he had to abandon the claims of his identity of a chosen one to get along with the people on board. In the turmoil of the capsized ship,

¹⁷Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*, 10.

¹⁸Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*, 34.

¹⁹Pierre Buehler, "Foreignness as Focal Point of Otherness," in Schmiedel and Matarazzo Jr., *Dynamics of Difference*, 2016, 154.

²⁰Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*, 45.

Jonah experiences the tolerance and gentlemanly attitude of the sailors, who were a friendly alterity for him.

The attitude of the sailors in the wake of the storm shows tolerance as all of them prayed “each one to his god,” while Jonah slept. The captain respected the freedom of Jonah to sleep even while inviting him to join in their prayer. Finally Jonah is forced to reveal his identity. Even then the sailors show respect to him, who is totally alien to them both in faith and profession. The sailors teach us that if we can go beyond the identities of religion, race, etc., we can appreciate any human being as a distinct and unique person.²¹ Even when they come to know of the God of Jonah, they respected him (Jonah 1:6-9).²² The sailors’ attitude to Jonah points to a truth: if we want to understand and respect the otherness of the other, we need to enter their spiritual reality. The sailors tried to understand the spiritual world of Jonah to the extent of paying homage to the Lord whom he made known to them (Jon 1:14-26).

In troubles and disasters, people abandon the claims of identity and apathy to alterity, and try to harness common ground which binds all of them together. That is, in disasters such as storms and floods and epidemics, people rely more on their basic identity of humanity than on the identities that separate them. This is the reason in times of disasters that affect all people, people rise beyond religions, ethnicities, nationalities, ideologies, class, caste, etc., to come to their common identity as humans and all pray in one voice, which becomes a prayer of humanity, without any religious specifications. In such a prayer, each may be calling on one’s own god in whom he or she believes, but the language becomes fluid without any separation of the identity of one’s religion from that of others. For example, in Luke 17:13 the ten lepers, nine Jews and one Samaritan, cried together to Jesus for healing, not as Jews or Samaritan, but as lepers.

²¹Tomáš Halík, *I Want You to Be*, trans. Gerald Turner, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016, 25.

²²Eynikel, “Jonah,” 1149.

5. Nature: A Disciplining Alterity

In the Jonah story, various forces of nature, namely, tempest, sea and fish, tree, etc., play key roles in teaching Jonah to realize his prophetic identity. In grappling with his identity as a prophet to the Gentiles, Jonah was made to interact with the forces of nature, either as hostile alterities or as friendly ones. All of them taught Jonah the lesson of interconnectedness between identity and alterity. Non-human alterities can also play a role in shaping human relations and purposes. Jonah, knowing that Yahweh is the Lord of creation (Jonah 1:9), could make use of the elements of nature to correct his wrong options, acknowledging the reason for the tempest that capsized the ship, offering the captain the way of saving the ship and the people on board. What motivated Jonah to take the responsibility of the storm on himself and offering the saving plan through his self-sacrifice is not clear. Gaines' observation is illuminating:

He realizes that he is the cause of the sea's tumult, just as most of us tend to know deep down that we cause many of our dilemmas. True, if he had not acted selfishly earlier when he boarded ship, there would be no calamity at sea now, but Jonah is at last awakened out of the "slumber" of irresponsibility and into the nobility of action ... Jonah begins to realize that no life exists outside obedience to God's will. Perhaps he now sees the foreigners as people, not just as unknown heathens; perhaps Jonah feels compassion for humanity... The gesture may also represent his enduring stubbornness, his death wish, his desire to be removed from the presence of the foreigners he hates, or even his belief that God will benevolently direct events.²³

Similarly, the belly of the fish offers Jonah an encounter with an unknown other, which helps him to save his life from the sea. It becomes a lesson for Jonah of getting along with a hostile alterity. When confronted with death, the belly of the fish becomes God's agent of a welcoming alterity for Jonah. Very often, the alterity trivialized as insignificant or avoided as

²³Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*, 50.

hostile, becomes the significant other, especially in the extremities of life. Jonah's encounter with these natural elements highlights the "interconnectedness of all life."²⁴

6. Jonah in Nineveh: Coping with Alterities

The experience of Jonah during his flight and his humbling of himself before the sailors and in the belly of the fish compelled Jonah to obey the divine prompting to preach to Nineveh. However, he had not reconciled with the idea of God showing mercy to Nineveh as we see later. He preached to the Ninevites halfheartedly without much conviction or hope of their conversion which would ensure a better future for them. In fact, he either withholds the information of the possibility of salvation through conversion or tacitly avoided it in his preaching. What Jonah desires is God punishing Nineveh by destroying it.²⁵ He finds satisfaction, not in the success of his prophetic ministry through the conversion of Nineveh, but rather in the refusal of Nineveh to accept the divine invitation for conversion uttered through him, which would lead to their destruction. Jonah seems to have been preoccupied to maintain his otherness even while entering into a vulnerable relation with the alterity of Nineveh, by conveying to them the Divine message.²⁶

The people of Nineveh, by contrast, responded proactively to the message of Jonah, an unknown other, with a 'receptive generosity',²⁷ which opened the way for them to receive the reconciling generosity of Yahweh, the Other. In response to Jonah's warning "in forty days Nineveh will be overthrown," the people of Nineveh adopted a positive response of remedying their evil through correction: "Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands" (Jonah 3:10). God saw their good works to

²⁴Voss Roberts, *Dualities*, 155.

²⁵Eynikel, "Jonah," 1150.

²⁶Curtis W. Freeman, "Alterity and its Cure," *Cross Currents* 59.4 (2009), 422

²⁷Freeman, "Alterity and its Cure," 428.

change their ways and "changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:10).

Only if we love the alterity beyond the otherness of our own identity, can we push aside the claims of our identity for the betterment of others, known and unknown. Then we can start considering our common identity – human beings – more important than all other divisive identities and alterity. This going beyond all differences to respect the "worth and dignity of our fellow human beings" presupposes, in Anders Nygren's view, a relationship of *agape*, which "creates values in its object."²⁸

7. Jonah's Anger: Refusal to Accept God's Mercy to Alterity

Why does Jonah get angry with God? (Jonah 4:1; 9). His anger is the fruit of a twofold confusion of his identity as a Jew and a prophet in relation to an alterity. As a Jew, it appears that Jonah wants to claim exclusive monopoly of God's mercy only for the chosen ones. He was so happy when God showed mercy in saving him from the abysmal alterity of the sea through a fish (Jonah 2:1-6). But when God showed mercy to the Ninevites by changing his earlier plan to punish them, it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry (Jonah 4:1). His anger resulted from the prospect of losing this monopoly because against his expectation and wish "a dramatic act of repentance on the part of Nineveh authorizes and evokes Yahweh's positive and forgiving response" (3:5-10).²⁹ For Jonah, the difficulty is not with the character of God, which he knew from his childhood, as "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2), a beacon of hope of restoration and reconciliation for him and his

²⁸Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, 210 as cited in TAGE KURTEN, "The Value of the Other," in Schmiedel and Matarazzo Jr., *Dynamics of Difference*, 81.

²⁹Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, 524.

people, but that this nature becomes a source of hope also for non-Israelites, who are outsiders. As Brueggemann writes, "Jonah wants to keep YHWH safely in his own agenda of willful parochialism; but YHWH breaks out of every such formulation."³⁰

As a prophet, it appears that he considered himself a failure as his prophetic utterance was not to be fulfilled. Jonah misunderstood the success of his mission to be the destruction of the city, in fulfillment of the divine message which he uttered: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). He failed to grasp the divine intent behind the prophetic proclamation, namely, a delay of forty days was granted for the people of Nineveh to amend their ways so that they could avert the impending punishment. Again Jonah gave more importance to his identity than to his constructive engagement with his mission to make known God's boundless mercy, which surpasses judgment. Thus, the anger of Jonah is the result of a clash of identities: his own identity as a prophet with the "inscrutable and sovereign otherness" of God's mercy.³¹

A part of the mission of Jonah was to cry to the city of Nineveh (Jonah 3:4); however, this cry included also to cry for and with the city. To cry to an alterity (Nineveh) was easy, but to cry for and with it was the challenging part of the mission. To cry for and with others, one needs to feel with them, to have an understanding for them. If there are any grievances against them, they are to be settled through forgiveness and reconciliation, which would cause one to cry on behalf of them. Jonah did the first part, but failed to accomplish the second cry, because he could not reconcile with the offender, Nineveh. Hence, he did not include in his message to the Ninevites the possibility of their salvation should they convert: a truth he

³⁰Walter Brueggemann, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, 67.

³¹Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy*, New York: Paulist Press, 2013, 50. See also Joy Philip Kakkanattu, *God's Enduring Love in the Book of Hosea*, FAT 2 Reihe 14, Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006.

knew well from tradition (4:2-3) and from his own personal experience. He wanted them to be punished.³²

The anger of Jonah is also the result of his failure to recognize the alterity of God manifested in a merciful relationality open to all humans. God cannot be confined to one's expectations. In *Jonah* we trace the tendency to close the narrative of God's compassionate love within the limits of the chosen ones. However, in the name of love, expressed in forgiveness and mercy, God enters into the history of both Jonah and the people of Nineveh to open the closed narrative. Jonah is angry with God because he cannot envisage the prospect of opening the narrative of God's love beyond the identity of the chosen ones.³³ The Lord makes Jonah understand the need to have openness to God's narrative of love, which is not bound by identity of a nation or culture, through the lesson of a plant that He provided to shade Jonah while he rested. While Jonah wants to die lamenting on the absence of divine compassion towards the plant by letting it die, God explains to him the meaning of compassion. Jonah felt compassion for the plant not because of its intrinsic value, but because it was useful for him. So Jonah's concern for the plant was not genuine mercy, but rather, a love determined by the usefulness and worth of the plant, the other, for him. In reply to Jonah's complaint, God clarifies the otherness of God as boundless mercy.

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

In his decision not to punish the repentant Ninevites, we see God manifesting his sovereign power in forgiveness and His

³²Eynikel, "Jonah," 1150.

³³Lieven Boeve, "The Other and the Interruption of Love," in Schmiedel and Matarazzo Jr., *Dynamics of Difference*, 282-283.

predilection toward restoration and rehabilitation. Heschel has a point when he states:

God's answer to Jonah, stressing the supremacy of compassion, upsets the possibility of looking for a rational coherence of God's ways with the world. History would be more intelligible if God's word were the last word, final and unambiguous like a dogma or an unconditional decree. It would be easier if God's anger became effective automatically... Yet beyond justice and anger lies the mystery of compassion.³⁴

8. Prophetic Role of Jonah: to Make God's Identity Known

What is the overall message of Jonah? It is first and foremost to make the identity of God known to Israel as not something reserved only for them. It is an identity experienced by Israel as trustworthy, which is to be made known to others also. Jonah was asked to abandon his self-love to make the love of God known to people other than his own. The separation between Jonah's knowledge of God as a "gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (4:2) and his hesitancy to proclaim this knowledge to others shows his reluctance to surrender his imagined identity to the identity of God, whom he is to proclaim. Only when a prophet tries merging one's own identity to the identity of God, whom he/she mediates and proclaims, can he/she be proactive to the divine designs. In that, Jonah fails to give due credit to the freedom of the otherness of God: a freedom that is manifested in mercy.

Ultimately mercy is openness to an undeserving alterity, forfeiting one's own supremacy of power and anger. Such an attitude will never close the initiatives of reconciliation among peoples of differences. Rather, as the Book of *Jonah* teaches, new perspectives must be thought out to keep the relation between an identity and alterity towards harmonious coexistence, especially when this relation is threatened due to rancor of past

³⁴Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophets II*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Prince Press, 1962, 67.

history. Thus, it is an invitation to work for relational fluidity through forgiveness and reconciliation; a fluidity which can heal many ruptures of separation and distance caused by various identity divides and differences.

9. Conclusion

The world we are living in can be described as a flux of contradictions on various levels. On the one hand, the whole world is well connected through information technology and other networking. As a result, many elements which were unknown or alien in the past are no longer unknown or strange. The world has become a global village, many say. The divide of spatial separation is practically abolished, especially in communication. On the other hand, the rise of identity claims based on religion, caste, economy, and colour widens the rift between peoples. The recent refugee crises give a clear indication of the growing intolerance towards 'outsiders.' They are seen as alterity threatening the identity of the land and its culture. The temple-mosque dispute, which has become a political tool for many parties in India brings to light the danger of destroying the harmony between religious communities by sowing into their stream of thought a venomous rift between the identity of a temple and alterity of a mosque, drawing on history and archeology. In this scenario, the lessons of the Book of *Jonah* regarding the possible relational dynamics between identity and alterity will surely help us find a more sustainable and peaceful coexistence.

Jonah was asked to be a prophet with a special mission. He was sent to an outsider nation, which had been a hostile power that attacked Israel and inflicted enormous damage on it, to be a prophet of divine pedagogy of reconciliation. However, to accept this call *Jonah* needed to reconcile with history, especially the sentiment of anger and hurt that he as a representative of the Jews might have harbored against Nineveh, the 'offender alterity.' Thus the role of Prophet *Jonah* was to be catalyst in building a bridge between a 'wounded identity' and an 'offender alterity.' Thus *Jonah* becomes a lesson for all religious and

political leaders to play the role of a catalyst in reducing hostility and hatred between peoples, religions, ethnicities, etc., due to the memory of unreconciled and unforgiven episodes in history. However, this task is demanding because it involves compassionate magnanimity to reconcile the freedom of existence of one's own identity and that of an alterity. It gives also a corrective lesson to the ultra-right strategists to give space to the outsider alterity while defining identity parameters based on nationalistic ideologies. Ultimately the call of Jonah is a divine invitation for "an Encounter Beyond the Boundaries"³⁵ of circumscribed identity claims.

³⁵Bernadeta Jojko, "At the Well: An Encounter Beyond the Boundaries (Jn 4:1-42)," *Gregorianum* 99.1 (2018), 5-27.