PART IV

A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF PIRQE DE-RABBI ELIEZER
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN

JONAH’S SOJOURN IN THE NETHERWORLD

Introduction

In this study, many of the principles deployed in modular fashion in previous chapters will be applied to a literary analysis of PRE 10. Initially, the author sets out to address the central conundrum in the Book of Jonah: Why does the prophet flee from the presence of God? Commanded to rise up and go to Nineveh [“ויהי אל נביה”], Jonah defies the divine command, resolutely sailing westward, sea-bound to Tarshish, rather than eastward and overland to Nineveh. Instead of ‘rising up’, he undergoes a series of descents – to Joppa, into the recesses of the ship, and into a deep slumber, and then into the sea and the belly of a great fish. The classic exegetical question about this “strange book of the Bible”\(^1\) is framed in terms the challenge to divine omniscience: how could the prophet presume to evade God’s gaze? The author of PRE, however, ignores the theological issue and essentially re-frames the question in terms of Jonah’s ideological resistance to his mission. In a surprising twist, the midrash alludes to an alternative mission for the prophet, to which he is exposed solely through this series of descents. He goes deeper and deeper down and away in order to be brought to even greater heights as God’s emissary. The journey in the belly of the great fish is described as a descent into the underworld and a resurrection. In this chapter, Jonah is deployed as “a sign,” pre-figuration of the messiah, as in the Christian Gospels. The tone of the midrash, however, is essentially satirical, and the image of the prophet as a messianic figure, like Elijah, is described in highly particularistic terms; both Jonah and Elijah are lauded as prophets who zealously guard the interests of the Israelite nation.

As a narrative expansion on the first two chapters of the Book of Jonah, the midrash seems to divide itself along two distinct lines – two approaches to the biblical figure, expressed in quite different genres.

\(^1\) Bickerman’s term (Bickerman 1967).