CHAPTER 6

The Nations in Jonah

Although it is clear that the nations-theme is second to none in the book of Jonah, there is widespread disagreement regarding its precise contours and its relation to other themes in the book. Some see in the book a tolerant, inclusive approach to religious diversity in which the sailors remain polytheists and the penitent Ninevites are fully forgiven for their wrongs.1 Others affirm that the Ninevites' repentance was merely superficial while the sailors' repentance was authentic, a polarity that would lead one to wonder with J. Jeremias if “die Völkerwelt dann mit Jona 1 und 3 in eine gut . . . und in eine schuldige, gerichtsreife Hälfte aufgeteilt [ist]?"2 Its location within the Twelve raises further questions: if Nineveh repented in a meaningful way, as Jon 3:10 seems to affirm, how should one understand the radically different perspective on Nineveh and Assyria that the book of Nahum presents?3 Further, how can the interpreter relate Jonah's exceptional presentation of the nations as corrigible and an Israelite prophet as incorrigible to the quite different perspectives on the nations in the present elsewhere in the Twelve?4

This chapter will first summarize the language used to refer to the different groups of non-Israelites in Jonah, then compare and contrast their characterizations in order to determine the degree of diversity present in the

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3 The book of Jonah sets its events in the time of Jonah ben Amittai (2 Kgs 14:25), thus in the mid-eighth century. The date of its composition is another question entirely, and need not be settled here.

nations-theme in Jonah. It will then reflect on the various questions that arise when one tries to read Jonah as part of the Twelve.5

6.1 Terminology

6.1.1 Nineveh/Assyria
Nineveh lies at the center of the Jonah narrative, and is the most frequently attested term in the book that designates non-Israelites. In addition to the proper noun (1:2; 3:2, 3 [bis], 4, 5, 6, 7; 4:11), references to the same include ‘the great city’ (עיר גדולה לאלהים, 1:2; 3:2; 4:11), the city ‘great to God’ (עיר גדולה לאלהים, 3:3), and simply ‘the city’ (4:5). Several times the book mentions one or more of its inhabitants, from the ruler (מלך נינוה, 3:6) and his nobles (גדליו, 3:7) down to the ordinary people of Nineveh (אנשי נינוה, 3:5). The whole population is later described as ‘those who do not know their right from their left’ (4:11).

6.1.2 גוי-Language, עם-Language, and Related Terms
Probably due to the prominence of the proper noun גuitka, there is no occurrence of עם in Jonah. The one use of עם, in the sailors’ question to Jonah, “From what people are you?” (1:8), does not figure in the book’s treatment of non-Israelites either.

6.1.3 Geographical Language
The only geographically specific location other than Nineveh that lies outside Israel/Judah is Tarshish, mentioned in 1:3 (bis); 4:2. Since the term in Jonah refers only to a destination far from Israel (probably in Spain) and not to a people group, it is of no significance for our exploration of the nations. Although unusual, the sea should be mentioned here as the setting in which, far from the land of Israel, non-Israelite sailors make a radical commitment to YHWH God of Israel.

6.1.4 Other Language
The sailors are without identification apart from their vocation (מלח, only in 1:5; the captain is רב החבל in 1:6). This group of non-Israelites is given no further description, and masculine plural pronouns or the generic אנשים (110, 13, 16) are the sole means used to refer to them in the rest of the chapter. Their