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INTERPRETING THE NINEVITES' REPENTANCE: JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN EXEGETES IN LATE ANTIQUE MESOPOTAMIA

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ABSTRACT

The story of Jonah and the repentance of the Ninevites has a rich history of interpretation in Jewish and Christian communities, and the Syriac Christian mēmrā on Jonah attributed to Ephrem proves particularly interesting in light of exegetical differences between the Yerushalmi and the Bavli. Like the Bavli, this Christian mēmrā describes the Ninevites' repentance in superlative terms, but in the Christian text high praise for their repentance leads directly to sharp contrasts between the praiseworthy gentile Ninevites and Jonah's sinful people. This mēmrā's anti-Jewish expansion of the Jonah story, side by side with the mēmrā's and Bavli's shared vulnerable uses of the Ninevites as superior role models for their own communities, attests to the intricate and unique complexities of "Christian" and "Jewish" biblical interpretation—and their relation to one another—in late antique Mesopotamia.

INTERPRETING THE NINEVITES' REPENTANCE: JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN EXEGETES IN LATE ANTIQUE MESOPOTAMIA[1]

The story of Jonah and the repentance of the Ninevites has long had a rich history of interpretation in Jewish and Christian communities. Scholars have noted that the Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi) and the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli) have a noticeably different interpretation of the Ninevites' repentance. As Yvonne Sherwood, for example, describes, "In *Bavli* the Ninevites repent superlatively, excessively," while "in *Yerushalmi* the same excessive repentance of the Ninevites becomes a pantomime farce, a 'repentance of deception'."[2] Like others before her, Sherwood attributes this difference, in passing, to "their respective geographical and political contexts," feeling that the Yerushalmi's reading is "the most obvious example of the impact of Christian polemic on Jewish readings."[3] That is, scholars have reasonably concluded that Greek-speaking Christians' interest in reading the Jonah text as a story of the superiority of gentile (representing "Christian") behavior over that of Jonah's people (representing "Jews") led Palestinian rabbis to criticize the gentile Ninevites'

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[1] I first presented this paper at the 2008 SBL meeting in Boston. I would like to thank Robert Kitchen for his conversations on early Syriac exegesis of the Jonah story, and Jenny Bledsoe, an undergraduate student who worked with me through a University of Tennessee Summer Research Internship. I am indebted to Lucas Van Rompay, who generously answered my questions about the Syriac translations, although of course any errors are my own. My thanks to the two anonymous readers.

[2] Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 106–107. See Beate Ego, "The Repentance of Nineveh in the Story of Jonah and Nahum's Prophecy of the City's Destruction: Aggadic Solutions for an Exegetical Problem in the Book of the Twelve," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 39 (2000): 243–53; Ego cites Ephraim Urbach's early recognition of the implications of this difference in a Hebrew article from 1949/50 (Ego, "Repentance," 250). See also Elias Bickerman, "Les deux erreurs du prophète Jonas," *RHPhR* 45 (1965): 232–64.

[3] Sherwood, *Biblical*, 107.

allegedly repentant behavior.[4] In contrast, Sherwood claims, "the Babylonian interpreters are responding to the text in a free, relatively uncluttered interpretative space," suggesting that they wrote as if unencumbered by the same threat of Christian interference.[5]

The Syriac Christian mēmrā, or verse homily, on Jonah attributed to the fourth-century deacon Ephrem proves particularly interesting in light of these Talmudic differences, as it provides an early Christian interpretation of the story of Jonah and the Ninevites close to the Bavli's own Mesopotamian context. Like the Bavli, this Christian mēmrā describes the Ninevites' repentance in superlative terms (and at much greater length than the Talmud). Not surprisingly, given that it is a Christian mēmrā and in the tradition of Ephrem, whose sharp and complex anti-Jewish rhetoric is well recognized,[6] high praise for the Ninevites' repentance leads directly in this text to sharp contrasts between the praiseworthy gentile Ninevites and Jonah's own sinful people, whom the text associates with contemporary Jews.[7] This mēmrā thus embodies the very dangers that Sherwood perceives the Yerushalmi to be working to prevent: taking advantage of interpretations of the Ninevites as laudatory examples of penance, the mēmrā midrashicly expands the biblical story to present a reading that not only raises up the Ninevites as worthy of extraordinary praise, but also depicts in lavish detail the contrasting depravities of the "children of Abraham." Examining these texts

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[4] This text, like others by Ephrem, consistently uses the singular form of "the people" to refer to Jews or their ancestors, and the plural "the peoples" to refer to uncircumcised Gentiles.

[5] Sherwood, *Biblical*, 107.

[6] See Christine Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2008).

[7] The text is explicit in connecting Jonah's people, whom he calls "the circumcised," "the Hebrews," and "the children with Abraham," with "the Jews" (see *Sermo* II.1.1161, referring to the first sermon in Beck's second collection of Ephrem's untitled sermons, *Sermones II*). All translations are from the Syriac edition: Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones II*, CSCO 311, SS 135 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CSCO, 1970).

will reveal that unlike the Jerusalem Talmud, the Bavli and this Christian homily were written in contexts of rich and overlapping Jewish and Christian histories that allowed rabbis and Christian homilists alike to associate their own congregants unfavorably with the Ninevites, and also to endure the inter-religious polemic to which such interpretations left them vulnerable.[8]

JONAH: THE BIBLE AND ITS INTERPRETERS

As with any complex biblical story, the book of Jonah developed a rich exegetical tradition. Part of the "Book of the Twelve" in Jewish tradition, or one of the so-called "Minor Prophets," Jonah tells the story of an unwilling prophet who fled God's instruction to go preach to Nineveh (Jonah 1.1–3), and who told his shipmates to throw him into the sea to calm a terrible storm (1.4–16), where a great fish swallowed him and then expelled him onto dry land after three days (1.17–2.10). No longer able to avoid God's assignment, Jonah traveled to Nineveh to warn its inhabitants that God would destroy their city if they did not turn from their evil way (3.1–4). To Jonah's displeasure, all of the Ninevites repented and God did not destroy them (3.5–10). Jonah angrily retreated to a booth outside the city where God instructed him by means of a plant (4.1–11). Set in the time of Jeroboam II in the eighth century BCE, the narrative includes warnings about divine punishment for a people's unacceptable behavior as well as a model of repentance that resulted in divine mercy; later interpreters' individual contexts often led them to highlight one or the other of these two central themes.
Beate Ego has demonstrated that comparisons with the biblical book of Nahum sometimes led later Jewish readers to ignore the Ninevites' repentance in favor of highlighting Jonah's warnings about the city's imminent destruction.[9] Tobit, for example, most likely written around 200 BCE,[10] and Josephus,[11] writing in Rome at the end of the first century CE, both recall Jonah warning the

[8] This essay is a preliminary examination of this fascinating, lengthy, and unusual Christian mēmrā. It is very much my hope that making some of the text's intriguing content more widely available will prompt others to continue these conversations.

[9] Ego, "Repentance," 243–53.

[10] Tobit 14.

[11] Josephus, *Antiquities* IX.10.

Ninevites of their city's destruction while making no mention of their repentance. Ego argues that this exegetical emphasis resolved the potential scriptural difficulty that the story of Jonah is set in a time before that of Nahum, and yet Nahum also warned Nineveh of destruction "after its people [were supposed to have] already repented in the time of Jonah."[12] Highlighting Jonah's warning about destruction and avoiding mention of the Ninevites' repentance, Ego notes, created "a coherent relationship between Jonah and Nahum."[13]

While some Jewish exegetes around the turn of the millennium focused on the dilemma of whether or not Jonah was a false prophet for prophesying a destruction that did not take place,[14] most rabbinic interpretations fell into two general categories: those that raised up the Ninevites as an exemplary model of repentance, and those that criticized the Ninevites' repentance as deceptive and short-lived. Sherwood and others have noted that the former tradition was preserved in the Bavli and the latter in the Yerushalmi.

The Mishnah, compiled by sometime around 200 CE, presents the Ninevites as a biblical model of good behavior, as "the elder" teaches: "Our brothers, it is not said about the people of Nineveh: 'And God saw their sackcloth and their fast,' but rather 'And God saw their actions, how they turned from their evil way'."[15] The Gemara in the Babylonian Talmud, fully written by the sixth century CE, expanded this observation by stressing the great lengths to which the Ninevites went in their repentance, thereby emphasizing that the repentance was both genuine and exceptionally thorough. Rabbi Abaye quotes Jonah 3.8 to remind readers of the actions that the Ninevites took, covering themselves and their animals with sackcloth, crying to God, and turning from their evil way.[16] Abaye extrapolated from the biblical text by

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[12] Ego, "Repentance," 243.

[13] Ego, "Repentance," 244.

[14] See Ego, "Repentance," 246.

[15] m. Taan. 2.1. All quotations from the Bavli are from the Hebrew text in *The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition, vol. 14 Tractae Ta'anit, part ii*, translated and edited by Israel Berman (New York: Random House, 1995).

[16] b. Taan. 16a.

explaining, "They tied the animals separately and the young separately. They said before [God]: 'Lord of the Universe, if you do not have mercy on us, we will not have mercy on these!'"[17] Rabbi Shmuel likewise further explained the biblical text that said that the Ninevites wanted to turn from their evil way and "from the violence that is in their hands" (Jonah 3.8) by saying, "Even if he stole a beam and built it into a large residence, he must take down the whole entire building and return the beam to the one who owns it."[18] As scholars have noted,[19] each of these expansions of the biblical text elaborates on the specific details of the Ninevites' repentance, with the result that these Gentiles emerge from the Babylonian Talmud as consummate role models for (Jewish) repentance.[20]

Another exegetical trend, however, developed in the traditions preserved in the region of Roman Palestine, one that dismissed the Ninevites' repentance as fraudulent and temporary. The Palestinian Gemara records that Rabbi Simeon b. Laqish said, "The people of Nineveh made a deceitful repentance."[21] Similar to the Bavli, the Yerushalmi records that Rabbi Hunah replied, in the name of Rabbi Simeon b. Halaputa, "They placed calves inside and their mothers outside, foals inside and their mothers outside, and these lowed from here, and those lowed from there. They said, 'If we are not shown mercy, we shall not show mercy to them'."[22] In contrast to the Bavli, however, the Yerushalmi contains a sharply critical interpretation of the Ninevites' commitment to turn from "the violence that is in their hands":[23] "Rabbi Yohanan said, 'That which was in their hands they gave back; that which was in boxes,

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[17] b. Taan. 16a.

[18] b. Taan. 16a.

[19] See, for example, Sherwood, *Biblical*, 106–107; Ego, "Repentance."

[20] Ego, "Repentance," 248, notes some further medieval expansions of this Gemara; see her article for a more detailed account of Jewish exegesis of the Jonah text. I am here concerned primarily with the interpretations documented in late antiquity.

[21] y. Taan. 2.1. All quotations from the Yerushalmi are from the Hebrew text available online at http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il/b/r/r2902_008b.htm and http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il/b/r/r2902_009a.htm.

[22] y. Taan. 2.1.

[23] Jonah 3.8.

chests, and turrets, they did not give back'."[24] Whereas the Bavli expanded this biblical phrase by highlighting the depth of the Ninevites' ideal repentance, the Yerushalmi interpreted it in such a way as to diminish the act while attributing deceptive motives to the Ninevites. This tradition is echoed in later Jewish traditions, such as in the *Pēsikta de-Rav Kahāna*, a text that privileges Palestinian over Babylonian Rabbis.[25] While scholars have already noted the significance of contemporary Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric in shaping this Palestinian rabbinic tradition that criticizes the Gentiles' repentance as false, they have done comparatively little to examine Syriac Christian traditions that could shed further light on Jonah's complicated exegetical history.

When Christians adopted Jewish scripture as their own, they also read the story of Jonah, and of course did so in light of their uniquely Christian beliefs about the Messiah and God's covenant. Jonah's popularity among early Christians appears to be related both to the noteworthy role of the uncircumcised Ninevites in the biblical story of Jonah, and to the easy symbolic parallel between Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish and Jesus' three days in the tomb. Jonah appears throughout early Christian literature and art, and it is easy to see why early Christians found the narrative useful not only in teaching the value of fasting and repentance but also in demonstrating God's mercy and God's choice of the Gentiles over the circumcised descendants of Abraham.

The New Testament records the earliest references to the comparison between Jonah and Jesus,[26] and other early Greek Christian texts likewise mined the biblical Jonah story for lessons for their Christian communities.[27] By the fourth and fifth centuries,

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[24] y. Taan. 2.1.

[25] *Pēsiq. Rav Kah.* 24.11. Ego identifies and discusses many of these later sources in some detail ("Repentance," 249); Beate Ego, "Denn die Heiden sind der Umkehr nahe: Rabbinische Interpretationen zur Busse der Leute von Ninive," in *Die Heiden: Juden, Christen und das Problem des Fremden*, edited by Reinhard Feldmeier and Ulrich Heckel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 158–76.

[26] See Mt 12.38–42.

[27] For a thorough study of Greek and Latin Christian discussions and interpretations of the Jonah story, see Yves-Marie Duval's foundational work, *Le Livre de Jonas dans la littérature chrétienne grecque et latine, vols. 1–2*

such Christian rhetoric was even more prevalent in Latin as well as in Greek,[28] while Christian catacombs in Rome were being painted since the third century with images of Jonah entering and then emerging from the great fish.[29] In light of such strongly

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(Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1973). In this study, Duval discovers that 1 Clement, Justin Martyr, and Origen were among many early Greek writers who used Jonah's story for their Christian arguments. Others have also surveyed this material, as well as Jonah's appearance in later Christian authors. See, for example, Ego, "Repentance"; Bickerman, "Les deux erreurs"; and Eugen Biser, "Zum frühchristlichen Verständnis des Buches Jonas," *Bibel und Kirche* 17 (1962): 19–21.

[28] See Duval, *Le Livre*; Ego, "Repentance"; Bickerman, "Les deux erreurs"; Biser, "Zum frühchristlichen." In this later period, numerous Greek Christians used the Jonah story extensively, including such leaders as Cyril of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Jerusalem, and the *Commentary on Jonah* attributed to Theodore of Mopsuestia, although this attribution has been challenged: S.C. Winter, "A Fifth-Century Christian Commentary on Jonah," in *On the Way to Nineveh: Studies in Honor of George M. Landes*, edited by Stephen Cook and S.C. Winter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 238–56. Latin authors of the period likewise used the text to show Gentiles' superiority over Jews, most notably Jerome in his lengthy commentary, but also Augustine and Prudentius, among others.

[29] See Gregory Snyder, *Ante-Pacem. Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Rev. ed.; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 87; David Balch, "From Endymion in Roman *Domus* to Jonah in Christian Catacombs: From Houses of the Living to House of the Dead. Iconography and Religion in Transition," in *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context, Studies of Roman, Jewish, and Christian Burials*, edited by Laurie Brink and Deborah Green (New York: De Gruyter, 2008), 273–301; this essay was republished in the same year in David Balch, *Roman Domestic Art and Early House Churches* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008). According to Snyder's count, Jonah appears being cast into the sea thirty-eight times, with the giant fish twenty-eight times, and resting under the plant forty-two times in pre-Constantinian mosaics, sarcophagi, and wall paintings (Snyder, *Ante-Pacem*, 87). Christian images of Jonah appear in Rome's catacomb paintings in the third through fifth centuries, on Christian sarcophagi as early as the late third century, and in a church mosaic in Aquileia in the early fourth century (Balch, "From Endymion," 273, 277).

Christianizing readings of the Jonah story, perhaps it is little surprise that the rabbinic traditions recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud rejected the reading of the biblical text that allowed the uncircumcised Ninevites to become role models at the expense of the circumcised, instead interpreting the Ninevites' repentance as false. Nevertheless, despite a focus on the Ninevites as biblical models of gentile repentance and superiority over Jonah's own people, an interpretation that most early Christian texts share, none of these sources mirrors the specific content of the Syriac mēmrā in question.

Fourth- and fifth-century Syriac Christians Ephrem, Narsai, and Jacob of Serugh likewise commented on the Jonah story and its usefulness for understanding God's (Christian) message. Robert Kitchen contrasts Jacob's lengthy text on Jonah and the Ninevites with Christian Greek and Latin traditions that Sherwood claimed buried the Old Testament story, particularly Jonah's resistance to God, under the weight of Jonah's New Testament significance.[30] Kitchen notes, "While Jacob explicitly calls Jonah a type for Christ, he does not allow the text to be consumed by the New Testament, and Jonah continues to be painted in darker hues throughout Jacob's retelling. … the heroic figures turn out to be the King of Nineveh and his subjects, the people of Nineveh."[31] Like Jacob's text, this mēmrā attributed to Ephrem focuses on the prophet's story with reference to other Hebrew Bible texts, and surprisingly without explicit reference to Jesus, "the Messiah," or "the Lord," which might further explain why Jewish traditions in a Syriac context were less reactionary to Christian exegesis than the Yerushalmi seems to have been. Despite a shared interest in demonstrating that Jonah emerging from the fish foretold Jesus' three days in the tomb, and that the gentile Ninevites' repentance pointed toward the triumph of gentile Christianity over Judaism, these Syriac Christian exegetes appear to have taken a slightly

[30] Robert Kitchen, "Jonah's Oar: Christian Typology in Jacob of Serug's *Mēmrā* 122 on Jonah," *Hugoye* 11.1 (2008); Sherwood, *Biblical*, 17. See also Robert Kitchen, "Winking at Jonah: Narsai's Interpretation of Jonah for the Church of the East," in *The Old Testament as Authoritative Scripture in the Early Church of the East*, ed. Vahan Hovhanessian (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 51–56.

[31] Kitchen, "Jonah's Oar," paragraph 5.

different approach to this text than did their Greek neighbors. These Syriac texts also, however, do not reflect the particular story-line and interpretation contained in the mēmrā attributed to Ephrem, which appears to be unique in many significant ways among interpretations of the Jonah story in late antiquity.

EPHREM, JONAH, AND THE NINEVITES

The Syriac mēmrā on Jonah and the Ninevites that is attributed to Ephrem (d. 373 CE) is extant from the sixth century, and at least some of the narrative seems already to have been known in Latin to Caesarius of Arles (d. 542 CE).[32] While it cannot be attributed to the fourth-century deacon Ephrem with complete certainty, both Edmund Beck and Sebastian Brock agree that the attribution is quite plausible.[33] If this is the case, it would certainly enhance discussion of the text, in part because Ephrem's complex relation to contemporary Jewish exegesis is already a rich topic of study. Comparison of this mēmrā to Ephrem's more certainly genuine texts, however, leaves the claim to his authorship still unresolved.

In some ways this mēmrā closely echoes texts that are more certainly by Ephrem, suggesting that it was at the very least written by someone who was intimately familiar with Ephrem's genuine writings. In one of Ephrem's madrāshē, for example, the Ninevites appear as "a good model of our repentance," as the mēmrā likewise portrays them.[34] Like Ephrem's genuine writings generally, the mēmrā in question uses the metaphors of a mirror,[35] of clothing oneself and undressing,[36] and of God as a physician who brings

[32] Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo* 143.

[33] For discussion of the text's manuscript tradition, and additional traditions not included in Beck's critical edition, see Sebastian Brock, "Ephrem's Verse Homily on Jonah and the Repentance of Nineveh: Notes on the Textual Tradition," *Philohistor* (1994): 71–86. This current study uses Beck's critical edition, with the hope that future work will expand this conversation: Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem*. This leaves room for future investigations into the content's transmission in different times and places, particularly including the mēmrā's continued use in Syriac liturgies with significant changes to the most anti-Jewish passages.

[34] Ephrem, *HdF* 87.3.

[35] *Sermo* II.1.687.

[36] See, for example, *Sermo* II.1.1923–38.

healing medicine.[37] Furthermore, the mēmrā's discussion of names recalls Ephrem's discussions regarding the names of God and the Son.[38] The text likewise echoes Ephrem's characteristic use of oppositions, contrasting things hidden and revealed, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, and more lengthy contrasts between the "children of Abraham" and the Ninevites.

The elaborate oppositions of Jonah's people and the Ninevites mimic in their form many of Ephrem's writings, but most notably a series of madrāshē found in the collection *On Virginity*,[39] which like the mēmrā highlight that the Ninevites should be read as proto-Christians.[40] Like Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginity* 42–50, the mēmrā emphasizes the Ninevites' extreme and genuine repentance, and the two share a metaphor of Nineveh as a ship and as beaten by storms and waves.[41] Also like these madrāshē, the mēmrā frequently includes series of contrasts. The few times when the mēmrā criticizes Jonah in contrast to the Ninevites, it echoes the madrāshē. The mēmrā says, "While Jonah was losing hope, with fasting [the Ninevites'] hope was increasing. While Jonah was breaking the heart, prayer was supporting the [Ninevites'] heart";[42] the language of Hymn 44 is similar: "While I sent you [Jonah], you were not leaving me; while you preached, [the Ninevites] made haste and believed you. You who are yourself downtrodden broke the yoke, but those rebellious ones were running to the yoke."[43]

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[37] This is a frequent metaphor in this mēmrā. See, for example, *Sermo* II.1.111–62.

[38] Compare, for example, Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith*; *Sermo* II.1.1873–1888.

[39] Although he continued to number these madrāshē 42–50, Edmund Beck has persuasively demonstrated that what had been transmitted as nine hymns are more likely in fact seven hymns, with the last two original hymns each divided in half to make nine: Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem*, vii.

[40] See, for example, the language of bringing dead people to life, which echoes Ephrem's understanding of the role of baptism (Ephrem, *Virg.* 43.2).

[41] See Ephrem, *Virg.* 47.19–20; *Virg.* 49.18–19. Compare *Sermo* II.1.7–10, 33–34, 2122.

[42] *Sermo* II.1.957–60.

[43] Ephrem, *Virg.* 44.3–4.

More frequently, however, the mēmrā compares Jonah and the Ninevites positively, unlike these madrāshē: "He prayed in the great fish, and the Ninevites [prayed] in the great walled city. Prayer redeemed Jonah, and supplication [redeemed] the Ninevites."[44] Similarly, the mēmrā repeatedly depicts Jonah as greatly ashamed of his people when he compares them to the Ninevites,[45] and only briefly mentions his anger when God does not destroy the city.[46] The *Hymns on Virginity* also attribute both shame and anger to Jonah, but strongly highlight his angry indignation and only briefly reference his shame, thus giving a different picture of Jonah in the mēmrā than in these madrāshē.[47] Likewise, Hymn 47 offers another example of similar language that is used to opposite effect. Hymn 47 says, "Through mercy [Jonah] had come up, but he had forgotten mercy. What he had learned at sea, he rejected on land";[48] the mēmrā says, "From himself Jonah learned that it is proper that the penitent should live. Grace gave him in himself an example on behalf of sinners."[49] Thus in Hymn 47 Jonah's lesson was more short-lived than the mēmrā suggests. The lengthy discussion of "the children of Abraham" is unique to the mēmrā, further distinguishing it, and particularly the content of the formally similar lists of contrasts, from the madrāshē.

In his genuine writings more generally, Ephrem mentions Jonah far more frequently than he discusses the Ninevites themselves, whereas this mēmrā glosses over Jonah's story in favor of focusing on the Ninevites, leaving his authorship of the mēmrā difficult to assess. Jonah appears in different contexts through Ephrem's numerous madrāshē. Sometimes Ephrem used Jonah to remind his audience of the futility of trying to flee from God.[50] Other times Jonah's prayer from the fish's belly became for Ephrem an example of the efficacy of heart-felt prayer.[51] At least

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[44] *Sermo* II.1.17–20.

[45] See, for example, *Sermo* II.1.902, 1568–78, 1675–76.

[46] See *Sermo* II.1.1327.

[47] On Jonah as angry, indignant, sad, see *Virg.* 43.2; 44.2; 45.3; 49.14, 17, 18; 50.18, 19. On Jonah as ashamed of his people, see *Virg.* 49.3.

[48] Ephrem, *Virg.* 47.24.

[49] *Sermo* II.1.29–32.

[50] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.16; *CH* 49.2.

[51] Ephrem, *HdP* 13.14; *HdF* 20.9.

once Ephrem made the common Christian claim that Jonah's three days inside the great fish foreshadowed Jesus' three days in the tomb,[52] and once he even used the plant that God made to shade Jonah and then wither to teach his audience about their own lives.[53] In each of these passages, however, it is Jonah himself rather than the Ninevites who are the focus of Ephrem's attention. Their contents thus bear little resemblance to the mēmrā, which passes over Jonah's flight from God, his stormy ship journey, and his time in the fish with only a few references to past events, to focus instead in elaborate detail on the Ninevites' behavior.

Perhaps the most striking differences between the mēmrā and Ephrem's madrāshē, however, not to mention other Christian discussions of the Jonah story, is the uncharacteristic dearth of references to "the Lord," "the Son," or Jesus, and a surprising softening of the anti-Jewish rhetoric as the mēmrā frames the polemic with a more humble criticism of the Christian audience as people who likewise do not live up to the Ninevites' example. Nevertheless, even Ephrem's genuine texts contain significant differences among them that reflect different genres and contexts.[54] The generally opposite valuation of Jonah as largely positive in the mēmrā and primarily negative in the madrāshē, the mēmrā's atypical focus on the Ninevites instead of Jonah, its unusual absence of explicit references to "the Lord," and its tempering of the anti-Jewish message call into question whether the mēmrā is genuinely by Ephrem or by a later writer adopting Ephrem's metaphorical poetry. In the end, however, this homily attests to a significantly anti-Jewish Syriac interpretation of the Ninevites' story whether it is by Ephrem himself or another late antique Christian following in his footsteps.

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[52] Ephrem, *Cruc.* 6.1.

[53] Ephrem, *SdF* 6.224.

[54] Different genres might be particularly relevant in this case, since Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*, like this mēmrā, maintains a stronger focus on the Old Testament text for its own sake, with less anti-Judaism and fewer references to the Messiah, than Ephrem's madrāshē might have led us to expect.

THE SYRIAC MĒMRĀ ON THE REPENTANCE OF THE NINEVITES

It is noteworthy of early Christian history that although Christianity relied on Judaism for its God, texts, history, and messianic expectations, the Christianities that survived were predominantly gentile, and this is true even in Ephrem's Syriac context.[55] The prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible thus became for early Christians ideal texts that praised God and the abstraction of God's chosen people (who could be made "Christian"), while criticizing in detail the often unacceptable behavior of the people whom Christians read as Jews. Thus the foundation of the biblical text of the prophet Jonah already sufficed for Christians to argue that the Gentiles (Ninevites, Christians) were superior to the children of Abraham (the Jews); the Bavli's fortuitous elaboration would only have aided this Christian argument.

The mēmrā attributed to Ephrem advantageously, and uniquely among extant texts, expanded the biblical text even further than the Bavli in page after page of additional praises for the Ninevites' good behavior, as well as in several explicitly anti-Jewish passages that are the focus here. Lines 901–916 present Jonah's first lament against his people as he contrasts them with the humble and penitent Ninevites. Jonah "was ashamed of his people,"[56] and elaborates through a series of contrasts:

> With the Ninevites he saw a victory, and he wept over the offspring of Abraham. He saw that the offspring of Canaan had become upright, and the offspring of Jacob acted foolishly. He saw the uncircumcised, who had circumcised the heart, and the circumcised, who had hardened the heart. He saw that the Sabbaths were not kept, that the commandments were kept.[57] Without the

[55] "Even," because while Syriac Christianity had closer ties to contemporary Jewish exegesis and practices than many other places in the Roman Empire, Ephrem's fourth-century rhetoric could not be clearer that his Christians are narratively uncircumcised Gentiles, and not circumcised Jews.

[56] *Sermo* II.1.902.

[57] I understand this to mean that even though the Ninevites were not bound to keep the Sabbath, they nevertheless still kept God's commandments, and to imply that this is in contrast to Jonah's people

> Sabbath there was salvation, and without circumcision [there was] victory.[58]

So discouraged was Jonah by this comparison that he "despised his people, who had boasted of the Sabbaths."[59] In these verses, Jonah makes clear that the distinction he sees is importantly between the circumcised people with whom God made a covenant and those uncircumcised "offspring of Canaan" who did not have the Torah. Fittingly for the homily's late antique Christian context, the text criticizes the circumcised, and transfers correct Sabbath-observance to the Gentiles, drawing a sharp and unflattering contrast between the Gentiles who properly honored God, and the children of Abraham who hardened their hearts. The shame that Jonah narrates in this homily on account of the children of Abraham would have spoken loudly in the mēmrā's late antique context for the superiority of gentile Christianity over Judaism.

The conclusion of the forty days of penance in Nineveh in this mēmrā's expanded retelling of the biblical text brings another opportunity for Jonah to mourn the sharp contrast between the behavior of the Ninevites and that of his own people, allowing the author to iterate more strongly his criticisms of his people.[60]

> [Jonah] saw the elderly [of Nineveh] while they were weeping, while the elderly of his people were lascivious. He saw Nineveh when she mourned, and Zion when she ran wild. He saw Assyria and greatly despised

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who were bound to keep the Sabbath and God's commandments but were not doing so.

[58] *Sermo* II.1.903–912.

[59] *Sermo* II.1.913–14.

[60] While the Hebrew tradition maintained that the Ninevites fasted for forty days while they waited for their judgment, the Greek Septuagint text says that they waited only three days. The Septuagint's translation understandably influenced many Greek and Latin exegetes, both Christians and Jews, but not the Syriac and Aramaic traditions, which upheld the reading of forty days. See R.W.L. Moberly, "Preaching for a Response? Jonah's Message to the Ninevites Reconsidered," *Vetus Testamentum* 53.2 (2003): 156–67. It is noteworthy that the Mesopotamian exegetes who preserved the story of the longer forty-day fast represent the tradition that also emphasized the sincerity and depth of the Ninevites' repentance.

> Jerusalem of the proud ones. He saw impure women who became chaste, and the daughters of his people who defiled themselves. He saw in Nineveh the contentious ones who became peaceful and learned truth; and he saw in Zion the false prophets who were filled with deceit.[61]

In these verses, the individual people of each city mirror the larger contradictions that Jonah had articulated, with those in Nineveh acting well and putting to shame their counterparts in Zion.

The text continues with more comparisons that reflect not only the elderly and the women, but also those who practiced what in Jonah's view was the worship of false gods:

> He saw the idols that were publicly smashed among the Gentiles, and he looked and saw the inner chambers of [Jonah's] people that were full of idolatry…. He saw the daughters of the Gentiles who renounced the cults of their fathers, and he mourned the daughters of his people who mourned Tammuz.[62] He saw that in Nineveh divination, augurs, and Zodiac signs had been annulled, and he saw in Judah the magicians roaming around with the Chaldeans.[63]

In like manner, not only the everyday people of the two cities behaved in these representative ways, but the religious and political leaders as well. Jonah continues his lament with the behaviors of the priests and kings:

> He saw the priests [of the Ninevites] who pulled down with their own hands the altars of Assyria; and he saw when in Zion each erected his own altar at his door. Jonah saw it was Nineveh who gathered all together like a church. Nineveh's womb was purified; the fast was glorified in her. The holy Temple in Zion they made into a den of thieves. He saw the king of Nineveh who worshipped God; and he saw Jeroboam who worshipped before the calves.[64]

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[61] *Sermo* II.1.1099–1110.

[62] Cf., Ezekiel 8.14. Tammuz was a god worshipped in Mesopotamia by mourning followed by celebration.

[63] *Sermo* II.1.1111–14, 1125–32.

[64] *Sermo* II.1.1133–46.

There is no mistaking the associations that the text makes between the Ninevites and Christians, particularly with the choice of the word ᶜēdtā to describe the Ninevites' gathering, a word that Ephrem and those after him regularly used to refer to the gathering (ecclesia) of Christians, or the church, usually in clear contrast to another word for assembly, knushtā, that Syriac authors used for a synagogue, or Jewish assembly.

This section of the mēmrā concludes with yet more contrasts that praise the Ninevites at the expense of "the people":

> The Ninevites cast down their children, imploring before God.[65] The Hebrews sacrificed their sons and slaughtered their daughters to demons. The Ninevites poured out their tears to God through fasting; the Hebrews poured out their wines to their graven images. From the Ninevites a scent of mourning appeared; and in Zion there blew perfumes and the incense of idols.[66] The people cut off its hope; hope increased for the Gentiles. Luxury with the Jews; humility with the Ninevites. In Judah there was open iniquity; in Nineveh, great mourning. There, the living wept over the dead; the Ninevites wept over the living.[67]

A reader cannot miss either the starkness of the contrast between the two groups, or the explicit associations that this Christian homily makes with its contemporary context, as it not only describes the Ninevites gathering together "like a church" but also describes "the people"—usually in this text "the Hebrews"—as "the Jews." This section of the mēmrā thus not only elaborates on the biblical story of Jonah, but does so in a way that provides a Christian audience with evidence of the gentile Ninevites' outstanding behavior in contrast to the deplorable actions of "the Jews."

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[65] While the idea of the Ninevites casting down their children is a little ambiguous, I understand this to be an allusion to the Ninevites' extreme repentance during which their fasting even included separating nursing infants from their mothers' breasts.

[66] For a discussion of the significance of scents in early Christianity, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[67] *Sermo* II.1.1147–62.

Perhaps most exegetically unusual in this text, however, is the longest of the explicitly anti-Jewish passages, which contains an elaborate addition to the biblical Jonah story that is otherwise unattested. After reiterating Jonah's biblically recorded disgruntledness at having prophesied a destruction that never came, the text describes that the Ninevites continued to thank Jonah, and the king insisted that Jonah be led back to the land from which he came. Thus, interestingly, in this text the Ninevites accompany Jonah on a journey back to the land of his people. Jonah becomes distraught as they approach the border of his people's land, out of shame that these repentant Gentiles would see "the idolatry of his people,"[68] and out of concern that the Ninevites might "learn iniquity from the people:"[69]

> "As Jonah came to his land and to the border of his people, he dismissed his companions so they would go from him in peace, because he was ashamed that they might see the idolatry of his people, and that the repentant ones might enter and be corrupted amid the iniquitous ones, and that those from the nations might enter and learn iniquity from the people."[70]

In short, his people would be "a bad example" and could corrupt the Ninevites,[71] and at the border of his country he told the Ninevites that they must return to their home.

The Ninevites, however, did not wish to be deprived of seeing the people and land that they imagined surpassed all the world in godliness and good behavior, and the text details at length all that they hoped to gain from Jonah's people: to learn righteousness, purity, victory; to see victory, belief, the Sabbath; to see where there are no idols, no magic, no injustice.[72] The newly repentant Ninevites hope that Jonah's people and city will be good role models for their daughters, their youth, their children, their king, and their judges.[73] Jonah, however, "ashamed of his people who

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[68] *Sermo* II.1.1574.
[69] *Sermo* II.1.1578.
[70] *Sermo* II.1.1569–78.
[71] *Sermo* II.1.1581, 1594.
[72] *Sermo* II.1.1617–38.
[73] *Sermo* II.1.1656–68.

were filled with iniquity and acting wickedly,"[74] and concerned to "conceal the blemishes of his people,"[75] lied to the Ninevites and told them that they were forbidden to follow him further, as his people were about to celebrate a great festival that did not allow the uncircumcised strangers to attend. Notably, Jonah is explicitly more afraid of the repercussions of the Ninevites seeing the shame of his people than of the repercussions of the lie that he told to prevent it.[76]

Disappointed, the Ninevites bid goodbye to Jonah at the border, and true to their word, do not set foot into the land. Nevertheless, as Jonah left them, they noticed a high mountain nearby, and they quickly climbed to the peak "so that they might see the promised land."[77] Their nervousness and ecstasy at seeing the promised land turned quickly, however, to horror, as they saw the countless depravities that were laid out below them:

> There were altars on the hills, and idols' shrines on the high places. Among the groves there was idolatry; among the trees there was uncleanness. Their graven images were by their doors, so that one entering and one leaving apostasized. Their idols were without number; their priests were innumerable. In their springs were ablutions, and washings were by the gushing founts. Their offering cakes were upon the roofs, and their gods of fortune were within the gardens. Soothsayers were in the streets, and diviners were in the alleys. [The Ninevites] went up and saw on their roofs altars that could not be counted. One was worshipping a graven image; another was pouring out a drink-offering to a demon. The calves that Jeroboam made were placed in their territories…. Before those dead calves, living calves were sacrificed; and each was bowing his head before his graven image and his idol.[78]

Ironically, these errors of Jonah's people are in fact the very wrongdoings that the gentile Ninevites had so recently rejected, behaviors that belie his people's claim to be children of Abraham

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[74] *Sermo* II.1.1675–76.

[75] *Sermo* II.1.1685–86.

[76] *Sermo* II.1.1719–22.

[77] *Sermo* II.1.1732.

[78] *Sermo* II.1.1739–66.

and reveal that they had yet again (in the context of the biblical prophets) fallen into idolatry to the most egregious degree.

Along with this rampant idolatry, came additional iniquities of every sort, including precisely the things that the Ninevites anticipated they would not see if they accompanied Jonah home:

> "There also was avarice, and its companion, greed; there was gluttony, with its sister, drunkenness. There also was licentiousness, with its partner, adultery. There was falsehood, and its kin, theft. There was enchantment, and its co-conspirator, magic. There was Chaldaeism, and its companion, soothsaying; there was open iniquity and its yoke-mate, hidden impiety."[79]

The mēmrā likewise details the bad behavior of the land's inhabitants, the exact opposite of the role models that they had told Jonah they expected to see. They saw that "a father and his son, as it was written, were going to the prostitute;[80] a mother, the bride, and her daughter stood like snares in the streets. Every sort of death was there, and its advisor, Satan."[81] The Ninevites saw the sinful behavior of the leaders and judges who were corrupt;[82] they looked with horror on the poor and the wealthy, on those who borrowed and those who loaned.[83] Even "their children," the Ninevites saw, "were swearing by the names of their gods."[84] It is little wonder that from their mountain perch the Ninevites "were terrified by the iniquity that they saw there. A man said to his companion, 'Perhaps we are seeing a dream. Is this the promised land, or Sodom we are seeing? Is this the offspring of Abraham, or perhaps evil spirits afflict us'?"[85] In a late antique context in which Christians and Jews both claimed to inherit God's covenant with Abraham, this language is very powerful and freighted with significance.

In this mēmrā all the defilements associated with uncircumcised Gentiles are attributed to Jonah's people—the two

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[79] *Sermo* II.1.1767–80.

[80] Cf., Amos 2.7, in which father and son go to the same prostitute.

[81] *Sermo* II.1.1783–88.

[82] *Sermo* II.1.1789–90.

[83] *Sermo* II.1.1791–94.

[84] *Sermo* II.1.1799–1800.

[85] *Sermo* II.1.1807–14.

have switched places, as the Ninevites themselves contemplate at great length from the top of the mountain:

> Did the iniquity that fled our region transfer here? Have the idols that we broke there been set back up here? Again, have the altars that we pulled down acquired wings and flown and come here? Tammuz, which is obsolete in our land, how is he celebrated here?[86] The morning star, which we have renounced, how is it honored here? Divination, which was overcome in our region, there is a great market for it here. The idolatry that left us looks out of all the windows here. Here on their doors the signs of the Zodiac are painted, those that we destroyed.… The wantonness that fled from us reclines here…. The sun, which is not worshipped there, how is it honored here? The calves, which are little thought of there, how are they here worshipped?[87]

The Ninevites quickly reject this conclusion, however, and decide that it is not possible that their own wrongdoings have migrated to Jonah's land. The only remaining conclusion is that Zion herself is filled of her own accord with these surprisingly ungodly behaviors:

> But if we say that the things from our region fled and were translated here, there are many new things here, utterly hateful. For there are evil things here that were not in our region. Here sins are committed that were not performed in our region…. We did not sacrifice infants to demons; here we see they are slaughtered. Our animals were sacrificed; here their daughters are sacrificed.[88]

The Ninevites revile Jonah's people and their actions as evil, filthy, and accursed,[89] and conclude, "The people whose god this is has become a source of graven images. The people whose creator is one makes and sells idols."[90] The contemporary implications are

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[86] Literally the text says that Tammuz "is mourned," but the mourning is a reference to the celebration of the god.

[87] *Sermo* II.1.1817–42.

[88] *Sermo* II.1.1843–50, 1859–62.

[89] *Sermo* II.1.1864, 1866, 1868.

[90] *Sermo* II.1.1869–72.

clear, as Christians who coexisted with Jews reshaped the shared biblical narrative in ways that suggested the superiority of Gentiles (Christians) over Jews. In this case, the Ninevites' elaborate criticisms in this Christian text follow seamlessly upon a contemporary Jewish interpretation, expanding the story as the Babylonian Talmud itself does.

Toward the end of this homily, the Ninevites even attack the names by which the people call themselves, a stake that was high for Jesus' followers from the beginning (as in Paul's allegorical reading of the Abraham/Sarah/Hagar story in Galatians 4). In light of the success of contemporary Judaism in the region (which therefore could present a strong claim for its biblical inheritance), Syriac Christians faced stiffer competition than elsewhere to claim the name "Israel" and all that it stood for. In such a context, the text's Ninevites complain that Jonah's people:

> are puffed up with pride by names alone, because they are called the children of the just ones; they think that it is sufficient that they are called children of Jacob. Through upright names that they wear the foolish ones think they are made righteous. They think they are children of righteousness on account of Abraham. Their entire pride is [based] on names only, for the name of Israel is upon them. This is the sum of their boasting, that they are circumcised, and [yet they are] Sodomites.[91] Not in their behavior does it appear that they are the children of Abraham.[92]

This text grants that the world recognizes this circumcised people as the "children of Abraham," much as Syriac Christians in late

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[91] This sentence in Beck's edition literally reads, "This is the sum of their boasting, that they are circumcised and Sodomites." This translation is problematic, however, since Jonah's people might easily have been accused of boasting that they were circumcised, but it is hard to imagine a context in which they might have been accused of boasting that they were Sodomites. Another manuscript tradition (Vat. Syr. 117) reads that they boast "that they are circumcised, even though they are sinners," suggesting that Beck's text might also best be translated such that the accusation of Jonah's people being Sodomites is the text's author's accusation in contrast to their own boasts.

[92] *Sermo* II.1.1873–88.

antiquity struggled against a cultural knowledge that contemporary Jews claimed these titles despite Christian texts that argued for their transition to the Christian community. But the Ninevites comment in this Christian retelling "not in their behavior does it appear that they are the children of Abraham," creating an opening for Syriac Christians to argue that like the Ninevites, their own good behavior earns them (not Jews) the right to claim these covenanted and coveted titles.

The retold biblical story in this mēmrā is rife with anti-Jewish implications that take advantage of the same general tradition—that the Ninevites repented superlatively—that the Bavli records, along with several explicit clarifications that the gentile Ninevites should be understood as representing Christians, and Jonah's people as Jews, and the typically Christian criticisms that Jews focus inappropriately on biblical laws and sacrifices and miss the crux of God's message:

> The name of Abraham is greater to them than the behavior of Abraham, and circumcision is much greater to them than [Abraham's] precious faith. The Sabbath, which God gave, is greater to them than God. They even blame God if he breaks his laws. They place a law even on the one who issued the law. They themselves have become lawless and [they place] God under the law, not in order to keep the law, but in order to blame its giver. In their eyes Moses and the prophets are inferior to a libation. Their whole glorying is in slaughters, and their pride is in a holocaust. It is sufficient to those swollen with pride that they glorify themselves with smoke. It is sufficient to those blind ones that they are sprinkled with blood and dung, as if they think [God] loves the smoke more than the beautiful truth that [God] taught.[93]

The story of Jonah has thus become, in this Christian form, an anti-Jewish text. Taking advantage of a tradition of the Ninevites' repentance as an extreme and true repentance that serves as a role model and shaming device for Jonah's people, this mēmrā creates of the biblical text a narrative that describes in great detail not only the height of the gentile Ninevites' praiseworthy behavior, but, in contrast, the depths of the depravities of Jonah's people.

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[93] *Sermo* II.1.1889–1914.

Given these sharply critical additions to the biblical Jonah text, it may seem somewhat surprising that the beginning and end of this homily turn unexpectedly inward to the question of Christian repentance not at all in relation to Judaism.[94] The homily certainly includes sharp criticism of "the Hebrews" as the Ninevites turn their eyes from the land, which by then they hated, to return home:[95]

> Iniquity, which the repentant [Ninevites] took off, the Hebrews were putting on. The idolatry that the Gentiles took off, the foolish people bore. Each person said to his companion, "Rise and let us escape from here, lest we be swallowed up in their sins, for this people is a bitter one… Perhaps this will be destroyed instead of Nineveh… This is the people that truly is a people to be plucked up and uprooted. This people is not beautiful; they are adorned in our hatefulness."[96]

The mēmrā frames this exegesis, however, by addressing the preacher's Christian audience, not praising that they equal or surpass the Ninevites, but finding the audience wanting in their own repentance, and offering the Ninevites as role models. In the beginning, the mēmrā emphasized about the Ninevites: "the repentance was true!"[97]—in consonance with the Bavli and in contrast to the Yerushalmi. The mēmrā's author chastens a Christian audience: "Before that repentance, this of ours is like a dream; and before that intercession, this of ours is a shadow; and before that humility, [ours] is a likeness of humility. For they easily left their debts behind in that fast. The Ninevites gave alms; let us desist from groanings. The Ninevites set their slaves free; have pity on the free-born."[98] At its conclusion the mēmrā reminds its audience that they should not compare their own false repentance

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[94] This raises the possibility that a writer who was interested in encouraging repentance for his Christian audience used a pre-existing narrative that included hostile anti-Jewish rhetoric, but the sixth-century text nevertheless exists with both of these elements side by side.

[95] *Sermo* II.1.1916–20.

[96] *Sermo* II.1.1923–38.

[97] *Sermo* II.1.97.

[98] *Sermo* II.1.99–1010.

to that of the Ninevites.[99] Such rhetoric suggests a much less confrontational situation with Judaism than the scriptural expansions themselves imply, and in fact softens the anti-Jewish rhetoric inherent in the narrative by suggesting that like Jonah's people, the church audience also has not lived up to the high standards of the Ninevites and should look to them as models for improving their behavior.

THE LATE ANTIQUE CONTEXT

This message to the listeners of this mēmrā raises interesting questions about the interpretational traditions surrounding Jonah and the Ninevites in late antique Syria and Mesopotamia. Scholars have persuasively demonstrated that Syriac Christian exegetical traditions often overlapped more closely with regional Jewish traditions than did those of their Latin and Greek neighbors; this is true for Ephrem within the Roman Empire, as well as for Aphrahat in Persia. Predictably, this Syriac Christian author, like Greek Christians, recognized the opportunities that the Jonah story provided for Christians to argue for the superiority of repentant Gentiles over Jews. This Syriac mēmrā takes advantage of a retelling of the biblical text that exaggerated the Ninevites' repentance as superlative, a tradition also reflected in the Babylonian Talmud, by adding a correspondingly unflattering negative contrast with the circumcised children of Abraham. The result is that the gentile Ninevites emerge as a type for Christians... and Jonah's people, a type for contemporary Jews, appear as idolaters undeserving of the covenanted names that they claim. The circumcised and uncircumcised have thus switched places, as the Ninevites' behavior pleases God while the behavior of Jonah's people echoes all that the previously idolatrous Gentiles have renounced. Ironically, of course, despite the intervening Christian anti-Jewish arguments that distinguish the Christian mēmrā's commentary from the Bavli's, these texts nevertheless reflect one more example of Christian and Jewish exegesis overlapping in the region, as both exaggerate the Ninevites' outstanding repentance

[99] *Sermo* II.1.2097–98.

and hold up their repentance as a model for their own audience (Christian or Jewish).[100]

It remains unclear if the mēmrā's author explicitly knew of the tradition preserved in the Bavli, and if so whether it was an identifiably "Jewish" tradition; likewise, it is unclear whether or not those who preserved the Bavli's traditions were aware of Syriac Christian texts such as this mēmrā that manipulated the Ninevites' repentance to such anti-Jewish ends. It is certainly plausible that Syriac Christians knew of the Jewish exegetical tradition and intentionally wrote this mēmrā to take advantage of its polemical possibilities. Furthermore, it is clear that if the Babylonian rabbis did know of such Christian traditions, it did not persuade them to change their exegesis of Jonah's story to be less conducive to such Christian uses, as the Yerushalmi's tradition of the falsely repentant Ninevites was. Yet it is also clear that whether Mesopotamian Jews were aware of the Christian tradition or not, the Syriac Christian polemic did not successfully challenge the existence, identity, or success of Judaism in Syria or Mesopotamia.

Returning to Sherwood's claim that "the Babylonian interpreters were responding to the text in a free, relatively uncluttered interpretive space," we see that the Babylonian context is more complex than her quick comparison revealed.[101] Although the Bavli's tradition did not evolve to preclude such hostile Christian readings, there were Christians living in the context in which the Bavli developed, and the mēmrā demonstrates that Christians did take advantage of the openings that traditions such as that recorded in the Bavli provided for the Christian argument of the Gentiles' superiority over, and replacement of, the circumcised children of Abraham.

While the anti-Judaism of the Christian interpretation stands in sharp relief to the Talmudic interpretations, the mēmrā's framing contrast between the Ninevites and the Christians highlights

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[100] It is quite possible that the Roman/Persian border is of key importance to this discussion, in that the Babylonian Talmud was preserved in a community that was centered outside the Roman Empire, and thus in a context that was not under a pro-Christian government. There is much room for future investigation in this area, including the Christian works of Aphrahat from outside the Roman Empire.

[101] Sherwood, *Biblical*, 106.

further the extreme complexity of Christian/Jewish relations in late antique Mesopotamia. The Bavli and the mēmrā both vulnerably contrast themselves (the children of Abraham) with the praiseworthy Ninevites who begin the narrative outside of God's covenant and favor. This intriguing Christian text exploits the reading of Jonah in the Bavli through a sharply anti-Jewish retelling of the Jonah story, but couches that narrative within a Christian homily that unusually admonishes a church audience to look to the Ninevites as aspirational role models, since their own behavior as yet lags behind. This region produced both Jewish redactors who felt safe to include praise for the Ninevites despite neighboring Syriac Christians who could use it to strengthen anti-Jewish arguments, and also a Christian mēmrā that includes praise for the Ninevites' genuine repentance in the context not only of arguing for the superiority of Gentiles (Christians) over Jews, but also of trying to get a church audience to see the Ninevites not as mirrors of themselves but as superior role models for them to follow. Comparing these texts reaffirms the complexity of what we retrospectively distinguish as "Christian" and "Jewish" exegetical traditions (and communities) in late antiquity.

Late antique Mesopotamia produced both a Talmud that applauds, and elaborates on, the gentile Ninevites' repentance (in contrast to a Jerusalem tradition that highlights its short-lived nature), and a Christian homily that preserves an anti-Jewish use of a similarly laudatory tradition of the Ninevites' repentance, but that couches it not within explicit warnings to its listeners about contemporary Jews, Judaizing, or Judaism (such as are found in Ephrem's *Madrāshē on Unleavened Bread*), but rather within gentle disappointment that like the people of Jonah who call themselves the children of Abraham, the repentance of the church audience also does not measure up to the high standards that the Ninevites have established. The anti-Jewish force of the Christian text is mitigated by the use to which the author puts it in contrasting rather than comparing his church listeners to the Ninevites. Ironically, in the same way that the Bavli's interpretation leaves it vulnerable to anti-Jewish accusations, the mēmrā's own use of the biblical story likewise leaves the church audience vulnerable to being conflated rhetorically with Jonah's people rather than with the gentile Ninevites, since in the Bavli and the mēmrā those claiming to be Israel—in light of the exaggerated goodness of the

Ninevites' behavior—cannot help but fall short of the author's ideals for the audience's own behavior. This Christian mēmrā's anti-Jewish expansion of the Jonah story (particularly noteworthy in relation to the two Talmudic interpretations), side by side with the mēmrā's and the Bavli's shared vulnerable uses of the Ninevites as superior role models for their own communities, attest to the intricate and unique complexities of "Christian" and "Jewish" biblical interpretation—and their relation to one another—in the large region of late antique Mesopotamia.

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