



The prophecy against Nineveh (Jon 3:4)

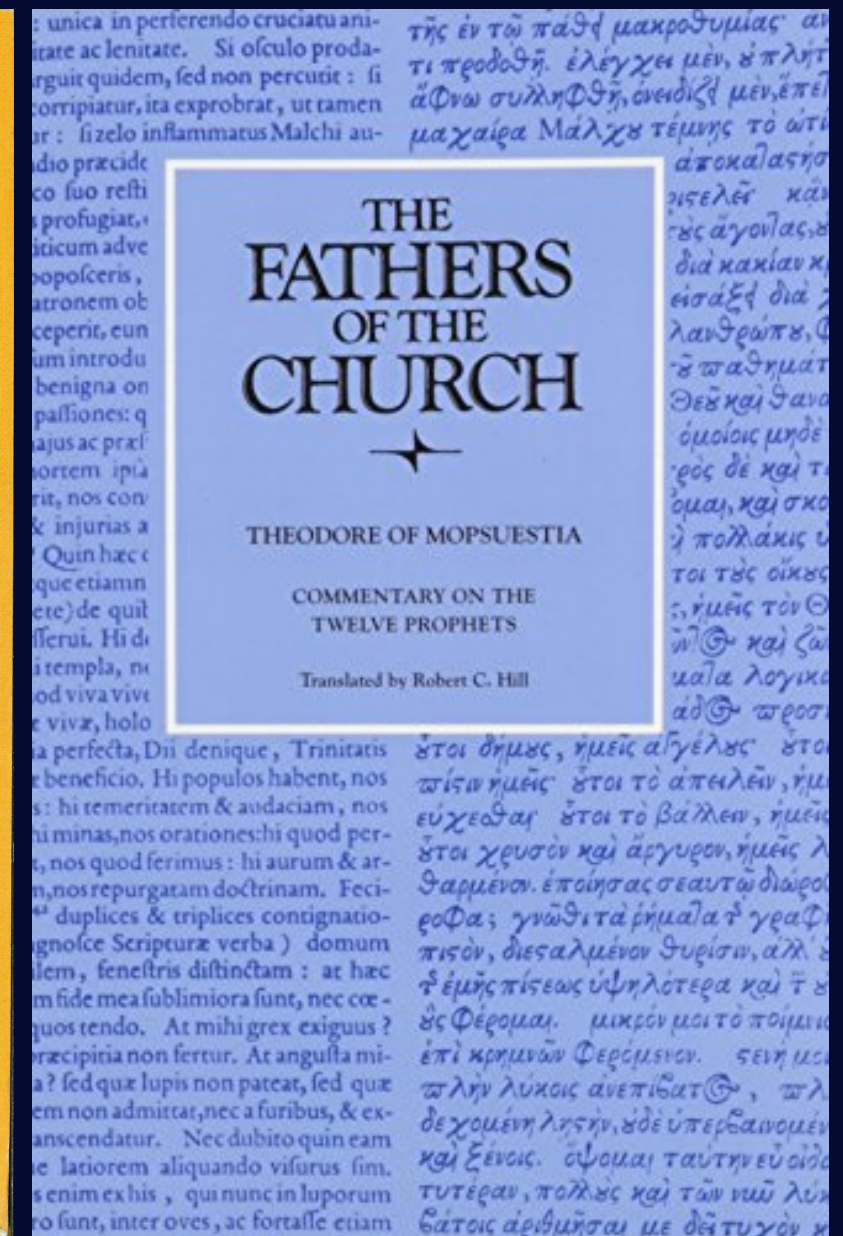
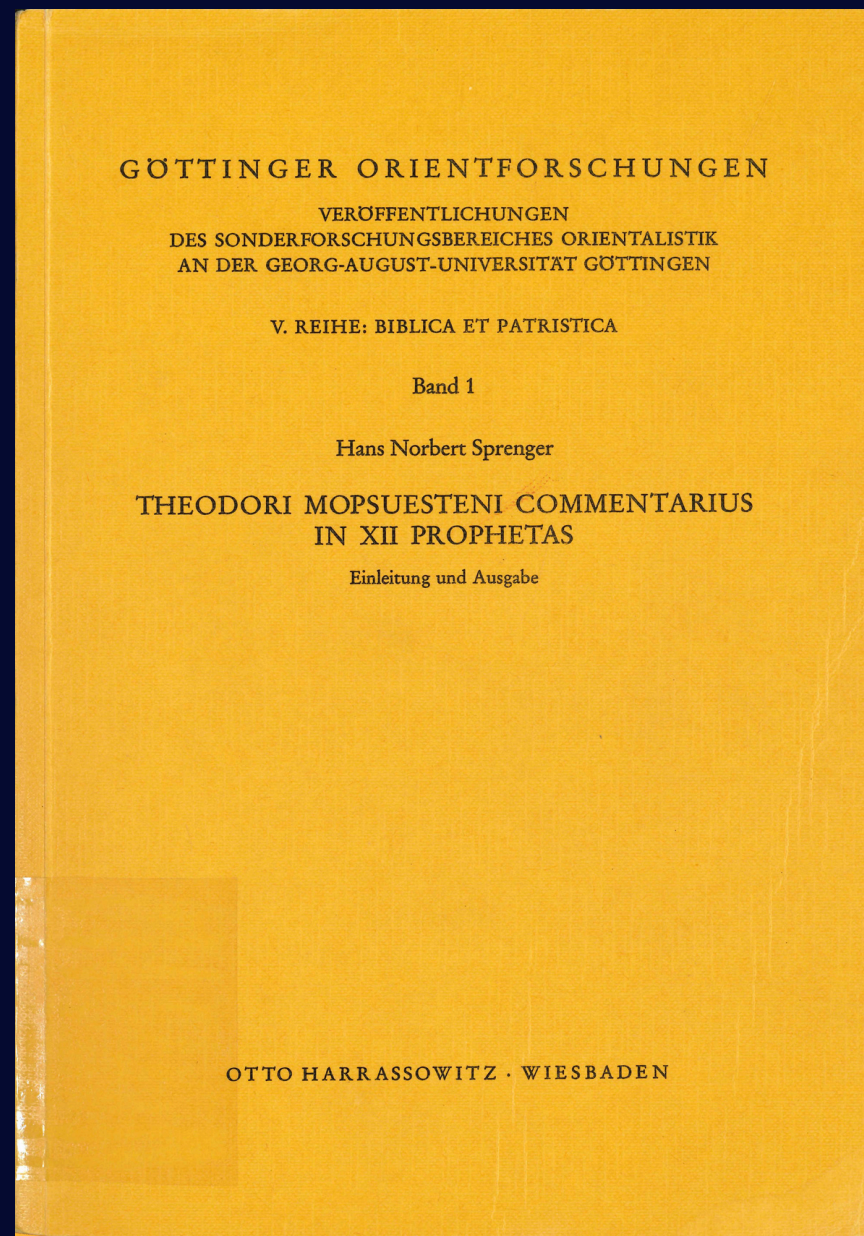
Divine pedagogy and hermeneutics in Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on the book of Jonah

Theodore of Mopsuestia

A litteralist

The Commentary on the Twelve Prophets

One resistance to literalism...



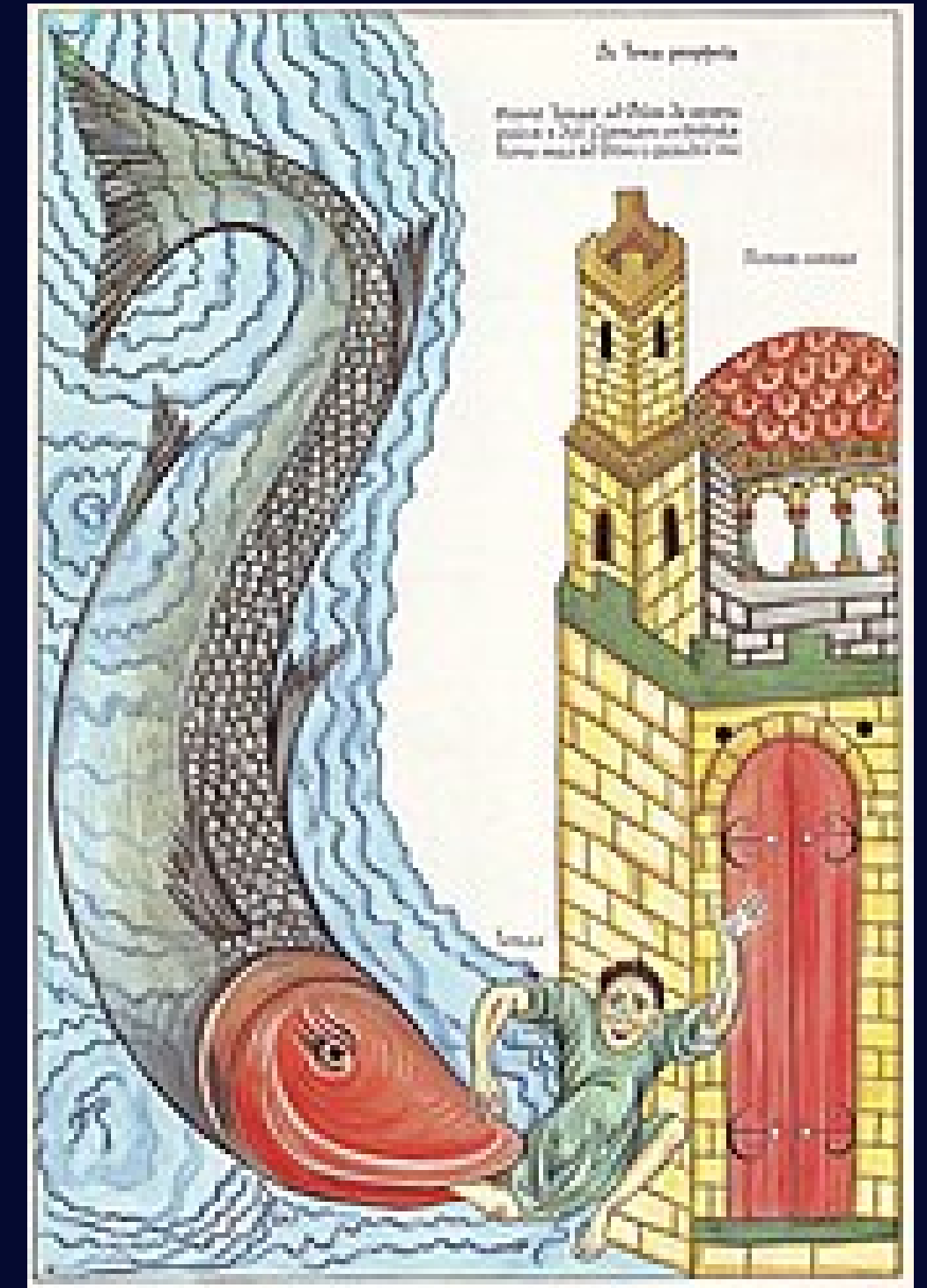
Jonah and the extraordinary

A narrative book

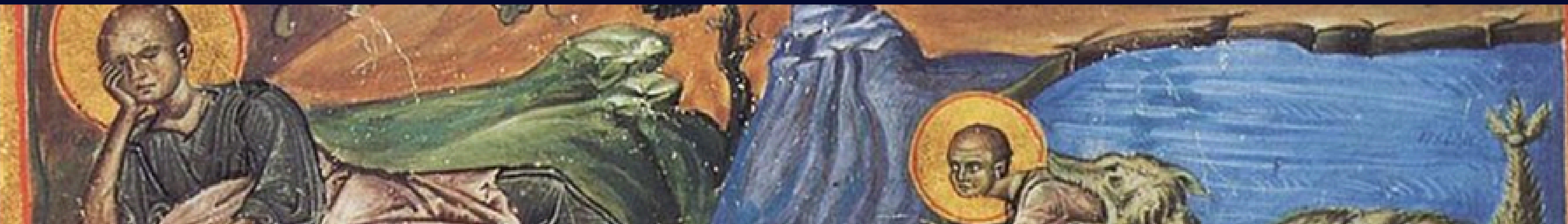
A satirical work

“Presented in the form of a legend, Jonah clearly employs humor, satire and exaggeration.”

(R. Jacobson & M. Chan, *Introducing the Old Testament. A historical, literary, and theological survey*, 2023)



I. A first solution : reading Jonah through the lens of “types”



Typological interpretation of the prologue

Jonah as a figure of Christ

“Then, after remarkably keeping him [Jonah] safe inside the sea monster for three days and nights, he brought him to the city [Nineveh](...), and caused him to preach repentance, and become a source of salvation for all in that place, so that from the comparison we might not lack faith in Christ the Lord’s being kept incorrupt for the same number of days, rising from the dead and providing all nations in general with salvation by way of repentance and enjoying immortal life.”

(transl. R. Hill)

Traditional interpretation

Jonah's sojourn
in the sea monster

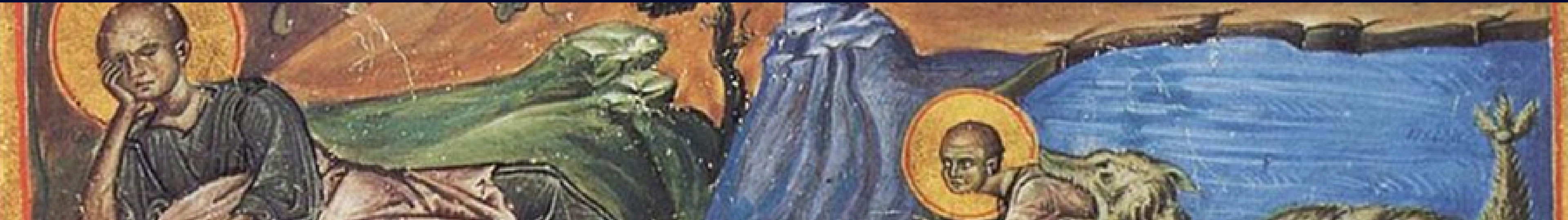
Christ's sojourn in death



Salvation for the Ninevites

Salvation for all nations

II. A contrast: the body of the commentary and its literal explanations



a. Short comments

Paraphrase: the storm's waves (Jon 1:11)

"It goes on, *The sea as continuing to work up bigger waves*, bringing out that the storm was increasing, a fact those on board could not ignore."

(transl. R. Hill)

Short explanation: the sailors' vows (Jon 1:16)

"It then goes on, *They sacrificed to the Lord and made vows*, (...) in the sense that they (...) devoted themselves to worship of God, promising in future to join his service (...)."

(transl. R. Hill)



Carlo Tavella, *Jonah and the whale*, Royal Museums Greenwich, London (XVIIIe)

b. Long explanations

The contrast of Jon 1:3a

*“But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the face of the Lord.
He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish”*

Flight to Tarshish

“For my part however, I consider this entire chase after detail (ἀκριβολογίαν) to be irrelevant to the subject in hand in so far as the account by the prophet is just as equally beyond question, no matter which city you think it to be.”

(transl. R. Hill)



Flight from the face of the Lord

“it said, not He fled from God, but from the face of the Lord: the prophet did not see himself fleeing from God, considering him to be lord and maker of all thing, and believing him to be present everywhere.”

(transl. R. Hill)



c. No need to explain

Emerging from the sea monster's belly
(Jon 2:11)

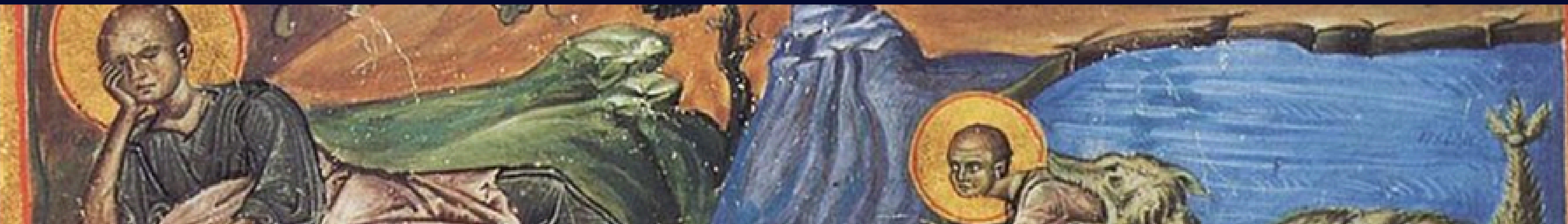
"It would, in fact, be a mark of extreme folly, after such extraordinary things happened to him, (...) to pry into the prophet's egress from the sea monster, and to think that could grasp it by human reasoning (...)."

(transl. R. Hill)



Joseph Vernet, Jonah and the whale, Musée des Beaux Arts, Lyon (1753)

III. A third method: the “increased letter”



a. The prophecy against Nineveh (Jon 3:4)

An ellipse

"Preach in it" (Jon 1:2)

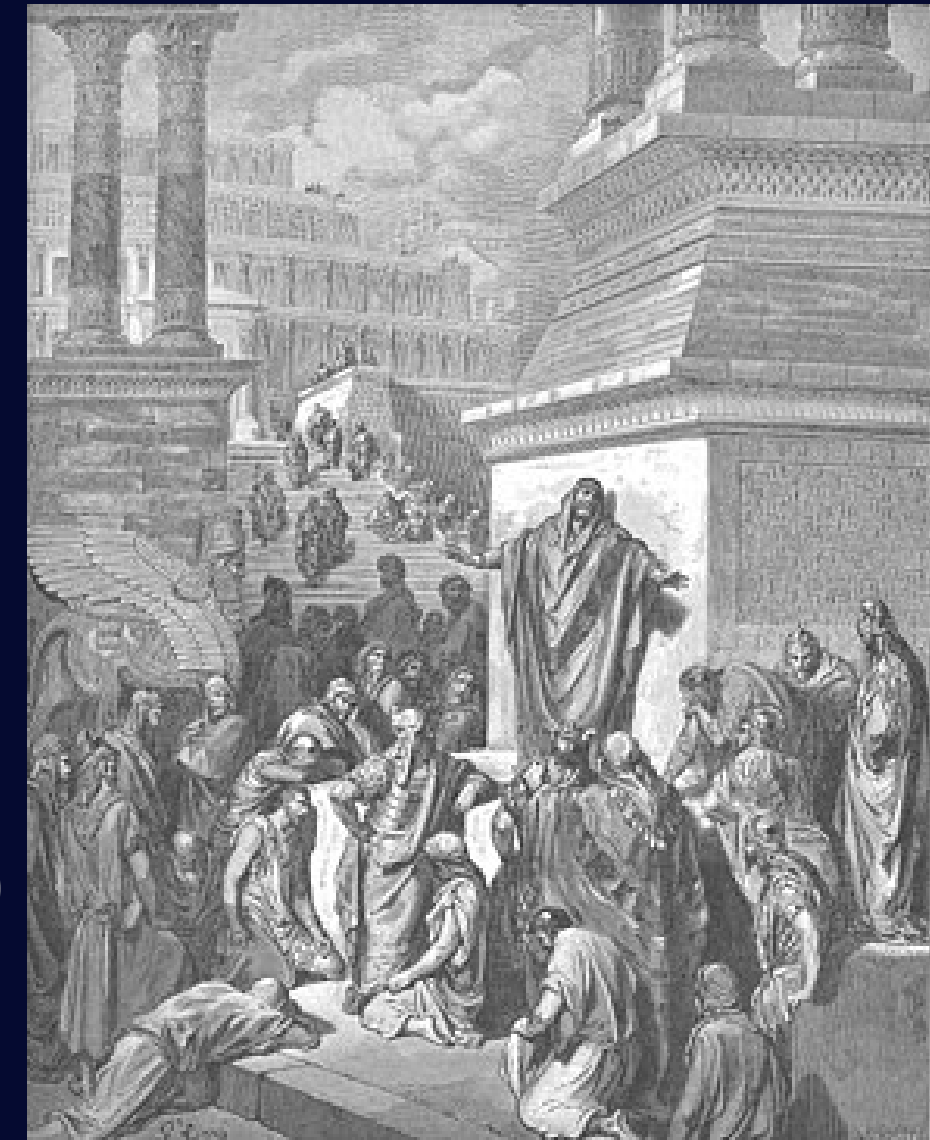
"The divine Scripture is in the habit of abbreviating things when it is possible for the readers to divine the sense, as in this case *Preach in it* did not mean God sent the prophet only with this intent without also teaching him what he had to preach."

(transl. R. Hill)

"Three days more and Nineveh will be destroyed" (Jon 3:4)

"It would have been futile for him [Jonah] to threaten destruction if it absolutely had to happen, since there would have been no point in the threat;"

(Transl. R. Hill)



Theodore reconstructs the prophecy

Jonah is a prophet sent by God.

Jonah delivers the message of destruction.

But Jonah calls to repentance.

“The text says, in fact, Who knows if God will repent, yield to supplication, and turn from his anger, and we shall not perish? This could not have been said by them unless they had been instructed by statements of the prophet.”
(transl. R. Hill)

The proclamation of destruction with the possibility of repentance

b. Jonah's complaint (Jon 4)

A damaged reputation

Reason for complaint

"he was alarmed at the thought that he was likely to gain the reputation for being a sham and charlatan for threatening that destruction would occur in three days, whereas nothing happened."

(transl. R. Hill)

Reason for flight



The proclamation of destruction without the possibility of repentance

c. Another reason for Jonah's flight

Back to the prologue

The salvation of the nations and the condemnation of the Jews

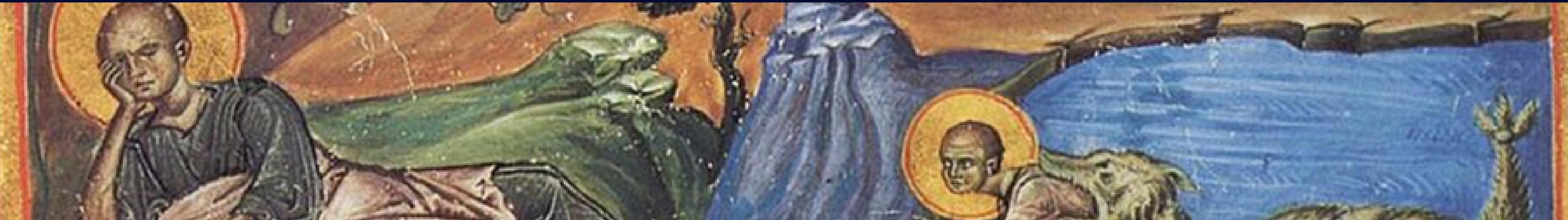
"Hence the blessed prophet realized from the events of the time that Jews would be shown to be deserving of extreme punishment (...). (...) he lamented that by comparison with the Ninevites they were obviously liable to punishment in the present situation, and later would suffer complete rejection by comparison with the nations (...)."

(transl. R. Hill)

Jonah flees his mission to avoid giving the Ninevites an opportunity for repentance and showing the Jews' incredulity.

Conclusion

The divine pedagogy to unify the interpretations



Three dynamics

1

Typology

2

“Increased letter”

3

Litteralism

Three lessons

1

Typology



**Lesson on Unity of
God's Design
for the Readers**

2

"Increased letter"



**Lesson on Salvation
as a Result of Human
Repentance and
God's Mercy
for the Ninevites**

3

Litteralism



**Lesson on God's
Compassion
for the Prophet**

Three dynamics : one purpose

Divine pedagogy



Jonah's miniature from the Paris Psalter, gr. 139, fol. 431v (Xe)

