

# A Unique Depiction of a Scene From the Book of Jonah in a 13th Century Illuminated Hebrew Manuscript

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In 1933, Zofja Ameisenowa published an illuminated Hebrew manuscript from the Ostolineum in Lemberg (Ms 141), which had been previously deposited in the G. Pawlikowsky library,<sup>1</sup> dating it to the end of the 13th century. Although an analysis of the script betrays a German background, she proposed that the manuscript was penned in the north of France, in the area between Mozeba and Yonne, where in the Middle Ages several Jewish communities had existed.<sup>2</sup> The Italian-type binding stems from the 14th century. A colophon with a sales deed informs us that the volume was sold by its owner, Rabbi Isaiah, in 1491 (1 Kislev 5252) at 'Trestiani', probably Terracina in Italy, to one Rabbi Isaac, both members of the local community. Two notations show that it was twice checked by papal censors in Bologna, once toward the end of the 16th (1594), and once in the 17th century.<sup>3</sup>

The volume comprises a collection of biblical texts on 480 pages (24.5 × 20.2 cm) of thin vellum:<sup>4</sup> The Pentateuch with the Aramaic translation of Onkelos running alongside the Hebrew text which is surrounded by massoretic notations; the Massora Magna recorded in micrography, an identifying characteristic of French

<sup>1</sup> See M. Gębarowicz, *Katalog Rękopisów biblioteki im. G. Pawlikowskiego* (Lwów). It is now kept in the Wrocław Ossolineum Pawlikowski (Ms 141).

<sup>2</sup> Z. Ameisenowa, "Bestiarius w Biblii hebrajskiej z XIII wieku (Studium ikonograficzne z 6 reprodukcjami)," *Menora* III,1 (Warszawa, 1933) 36 p. incl. pl. (facsim.). I am indebted to Mr. Michael Rosenzweig for valuable help with the Polish text of the article, which was reviewed by M. Narkis in *Kirjath Sefer* 11 (1934–35) 45–46 (no. 157).

<sup>3</sup> One of these entries extols the great value of the ms.

<sup>4</sup> No illustrated ms of the entire Hebrew Bible is known.

and German Hebrew mss<sup>5</sup>—in some instances in the form of griffins or dragons, e.g. on the first page of Genesis (p. 265), and the last pages of Numbers and Esther. There are the *haftarot*—selections from the Prophets, recited in the synagogue on Sabbaths and festivals, after the reading of the prescribed Torah portions; the five *Megillot*—Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Lamentations—read out annually on the festivals of Passover, Shavuot (Pentecost), Sukkot (Festival of Booths), Purim, and on the Ninth of Ab (in commemoration of the destruction of the first and second temple). Also included are the Book of Job—which in many Jewish communities is read on the Ninth of Ab—, Proverbs and Psalms.<sup>6</sup> The selection evinces that the evidently expensive compendium had been commissioned by a prosperous Jew for use as a brevier in the synagogue service throughout the year.

The volume contains 23 beautiful illuminations by an unnamed artist.<sup>7</sup> According to the prevailing custom, several illuminations are related to the specific scriptural texts to which they are linked, and actually reflect events or central motifs which find expression in them.<sup>8</sup> A telling example is the initial-word panel of the Book of Job in which a half-naked man is seen sitting on the ground, scratching his sores-covered body [Illustr. 1].<sup>9</sup> This is evidently a pictorial representation of the verbal description of the suffering Job: “Job stood up and rent his cloak” (Job 1:20),

<sup>5</sup> See B. Narkiss, “Illustrated Bibles in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. IV B (Jerusalem, 1971) 964-965.

<sup>6</sup> On the cover page of the microfilm, the latter books are listed as «tekst “hagiographa”». The order of the diverse components is reversed in the pagination: the colophon with the sales deed precedes the “hagiographa” which occupy pp. 5–163; the Five Books of Moses (Pięcioksiąg Mojżesza) begin on p. 334; the *haftaroth* are sandwiched in between.

<sup>7</sup> In some Hebrew mss, the names of the scribe and the illuminator are given, e.g., in a Bodleian ms written in 1476.

<sup>8</sup> See the general comments by A. Grabar, *The Golden Age of Justinian: From the Death of Theodosius to the Rise of Islam* (New York: Odyssey, 1967) 193: “the original purpose of the illustrations was to help a better understanding of the text. This is why they make their first appearance in scientific works, treatises of mathematics, medicine, siegecraft, cosmography and history.”

<sup>9</sup> Initial-word panels are a typical feature of French and German Hebrew manuscripts. See Narkiss, “Illustrated Bibles” (above, n. 5) 964.



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and: “Satan ... smote Job with running sores from head to foot, so that he took a pot-sherd to scratch himself as he sat among the ashes” (2:7). Equally, on the initial-word panel of the Book of Lamentations two figures are shown mourning the destruction of Jerusalem. They most probably represent the prophet Jeremiah to whom tradition ascribes the writing of the book, and his scribe Baruch [Illustr. 2]. Again, the first word (חיל) אשת in the ‘Praise of the Capable Wife’ (Prov 31:10–31) is placed in a painted frame,



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against which a well-dressed woman leans, an obvious reflection of v. 22: “She makes her own coverings, and clothing of fine linen dyed purple” [Illustr. 3].

In contradistinction, other illuminations are totally unrelated to the contents of the biblical text to which they are appended:



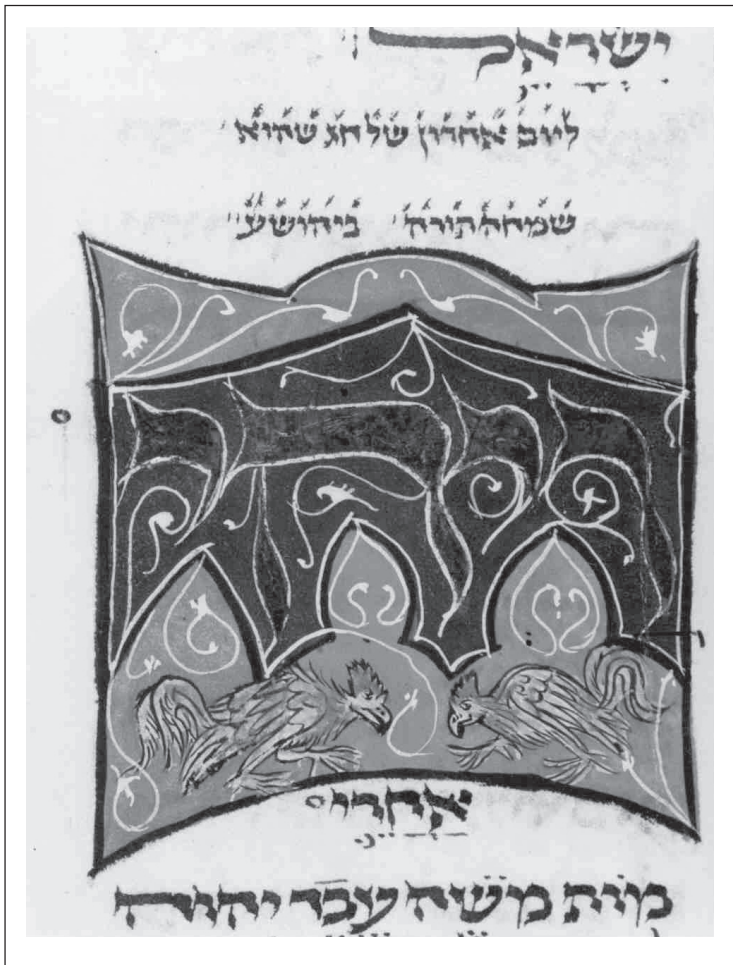


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there are realistic portrayals of domestic fowl—such as two fighting roosters (at the opening of the Book of Joshua) [Illustr. 4]; of livestock—often fantastically or mythically embroidered, e. g. in the initial word-panels of the Books of Exodus [Illustr. 5] and Esther [Illustr. 6, lower register], and at the end of Song of Songs; [Illustr. 6, upper register] of wildlife—e.g. a giraffe pursued by a griffin, at the opening of Job ch. 3 [Illustr. 7]; of woods and deserts, and of hunting scenes—e.g. two dogs chasing a hare (below the first word of the Book of Proverbs) [Illustr. 8], apparently a well-liked scene [Illustr. 9, 10, 11]. Ameisenowa suggested that the artist copied these purely artistic embellishments from the ‘Bestiarius’, a work dealing with animals, which was very popular at the time.

I do not intend to engage here in a comprehensive survey of the manuscript.<sup>10</sup> Rather, I shall direct my remarks to one par-

<sup>10</sup> Such an undertaking requires a separate publication.



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ticular illumination, which differs fundamentally from all others, as Ameisenowa correctly pointed out. It is entered after a *haftarah* which closes with 1 Sam 20:42 [Illustr. 12]. Whereas other pictures cover only about a quarter of a page or even less, either as incipits or as finis pieces, this one extends over a whole page (p. 161), with the tail-end of the text protruding triangle-like into the painting.<sup>11</sup> At the bottom of the lower register two animals are portrayed, apparently fighting over some spoil, presumably in the



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usual 'Bestiarius' fashion. A more complex scene is depicted in the upper register: On the right-hand side a boat equipped with a large sail is shown. There are several men on board. Some are about to lance spears, one blows a horn, while another appears to cast the anchor. In front of the keel of the boat, a big fish sporting a snake-like winding tail is seen swimming in the sea, and in its wake a shoal of small fishes. The left-hand side of this register is occupied by a mermaid, half woman half fish. She cradles an infant sea-nymph in her right arm, and in her outstretched left hand she holds an object which cannot be identified with certainty, but could be a sea-shell. Ameisenowa presumed that the siren is shielding herself against an attack by the sailors.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The technique of fusing the text with the illumination recurs int. al. at the beginnings of the books of Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua 5:2, Job, and Song of Songs. At the end of Genesis, the massoretic summary notation is accommodated in such a triangle.

<sup>12</sup> Fights of sailors against sirens are mentioned in classical literature, as e.g. in the Aenid.



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However, the mermaid's beaming countenance, and the fact that she has an infant in her arms, make this interpretation of the scene unlikely. Rather, it brings to mind the vignette in Homer's *Odyssey* (Book XII) in which Odysseus is shown guarding himself and his men against the lures of the seductive sirens by plugging his ears and their ears with lumps of wax, and instructing them to bind him hard and fast to the mast of the ship. Thus they





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escaped falling to the enchanting songs of the temptresses and ending up in the deep waters [Illustr. 13].<sup>13</sup>

Sirens and nymphs are indeed stock-in-trade motifs of medieval artists. But the 'mythological' interpretation of the above tableau is put in question by other narrative depictions in the manuscript—such as those of Job and the mourners over Zion, mentioned above, which are connected one way or another with the biblical text to which they are appended. In contrast, and against the generally prevailing custom,<sup>14</sup> the illumination under scrutiny has

<sup>13</sup> The scene is depicted in a colorful 6th century mosaic which was recently excavated in Beth Shean.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, A. Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art (200–395)* (London, 1967) 198: "Most of the miniatures in the Vienna Genesis illustrate the text under which they figure, at the bottom of the page. Sometimes we have a single rectangular picture in a landscape setting with bright or cloudy skies, sometimes (and more frequently) there are continuous sequences of actual scenes, set forth on one or two registers on a uniform ground of purple vellum. Both methods are in fact conventional and equally antique."



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no relation whatsoever to the adjacent report of Jonathan's eternal covenant with David (1 Sam 20:41–42). In view of these circumstances, it seems appropriate to search for a biblical text or tradition for which the scene depicted in this item could serve as a pictorial representation.

It is my thesis that what we have here is in fact a *mise en scène* of a well-known passage in the Book of Jonah, which has attracted the attention of artists, painters, sculptors and iconographers from the first centuries of the Christian era<sup>15</sup> to the present day:<sup>16</sup> the tale of the stormy sea which threatened to overturn the ship on which Jonah attempted to flee from before God. Fearing lest their vessel may capsize, the frightened sailors “threw things overboard to lighten the ship” (Jonah 1:5). This detail is

<sup>15</sup> The Jonah-tale was a much developed theme in early Christian funeral art. See P. Styger, *Die altchristliche Grabeskunst* (München: Kösel, 1927).

<sup>16</sup> See the excellent survey by B. Narkiss, “The Sign of Jonah,” *Gesta* XVIII, 1 (1979) 63–74, in which, though, the illumination discussed here is not mentioned. I wish to thank Prof. Bianca Cochanel for bringing this paper to my attention.





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clearly depicted in the middle of the right-hand border of the illumination, where a sailor is seen lowering or throwing a not identifiable object into the water, and a second, seen in front, appears to be lowering the anchor. It is possible that our artist put weapons in the hands of some other sailors to demonstrate the fear which had taken hold of them, rather than to show them defending themselves against an attack by the mermaid. The casting of the anchor may well reflect the biblical author's report that when the storm kept raging, the sailors "rowed hard to put back to land, but in vain" (1:13).



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At that juncture in the biblical story, Jonah made it known that he was the cause of their predicament, and advised the sailors to throw him overboard so as to placate the deity, and then “the sea will go down” (1:12). The sailors reluctantly complied with his wish, and indeed, “the sea stopped raging” (1:15). The recalcitrant prophet was now in an imminent danger of drowning, but was saved from death when God commanded a ‘big fish’, דג גדול,<sup>17</sup> to swallow him (1:17–2:1). Traditional Jewish exegetes and translators conceive of the דג גדול as a ‘big fish’ pure and simple. Thus, the Aramaic Targum rendered דג and דגה (Jonah 2:2) by נונא, which means ‘fish’ and nothing else. In distinction, Christian exegesis tends to follow the LXX rendition κήτος which makes Jonah’s fish a sea-monster.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For an up-to-date survey of the various explanations of this Hebrew term see J. M. Sasson, *Jonah*. AB 24B (1990) 149–152.

<sup>18</sup> The assumption that the depiction of the ‘fish’ as κήτος derives from a Hellenistic-Jewish tradition has no leg to stand upon. There is no proof that Hellenistic Judaism ever produced pictorial or plastic art.



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In Byzantine illuminated manuscripts and miniatures from the 6th–11th centuries,<sup>19</sup> in early medieval Christian manuscripts,<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See H. Schrade, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, vol. I (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932).

<sup>20</sup> H. Strecker, "Mittelalterliche Handschriften," *Festgabe für H. Degering* (Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1926).



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iconography and plastic art related to Jonah, the ship and the monstrous fish are staple elements. These motifs also turn up conspicuously in the Hebrew manuscript under review, although, as said, the conception of the 'fish' as a 'sea monster' is not rooted in Jewish tradition. In fact, a marginal micrographic massorah in a late 13th century or early 14th century Ashkenazi Bible from Germany (London, British Museum, Add. 21160, fol. 292), which





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is almost contemporaneous with our manuscript, depicts the creature which ejects Jonah not as a monster, but rather as a fish, which is about the size of the prophet himself.<sup>21</sup> Now, the artist of our codex most surprisingly added next to the sea monster with its identifying winding tail a second representation of the frightful 'big fish' in the form of a rather appealing mermaid, half woman half fish. This addition could be explained with Ameisenowa to result from the fact that the sea-nymph-motif, drawn from Greek mythology, had wide currency in medieval art.<sup>22</sup> However, I propose to show that the unexpected and unique

<sup>21</sup> *The First Kennicott Bible* (Corunna, Spain 1476), fol. 305 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Kennicott 1) presents Jonah's fish as a 'whale'. Similarly, in the *Cervera Bible* (1300, Lisbon Univ. Library Ms. 72), Jonah is depicted being swallowed by a 'whale'. See Narkiss, "Illustrated Bibles" (above, n. 5) 966, and idem, "Sign" (above, n. 16) 65, 68, 70.



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depiction of Jonah's fish as a female being was probably derived from Jewish midrashic Bible exegesis.

Let me develop this train of thought in more detail:

Several particulars of the illumination under review mirror standard components of the many representations of the Jonah scene in early Christian paintings and iconography.<sup>23</sup> About sixty depictions of this scene are found in Roman catacombs and on numerous sarcophagi.<sup>24</sup> Some may be of Jewish origin and date possibly from before the Christian Era.<sup>25</sup>

A small selection of pertinent particulars will prove the point:

1. A ship with a stretched square sail, almost the prototype of the vessel on our painting, can be seen, e.g., on several pieces

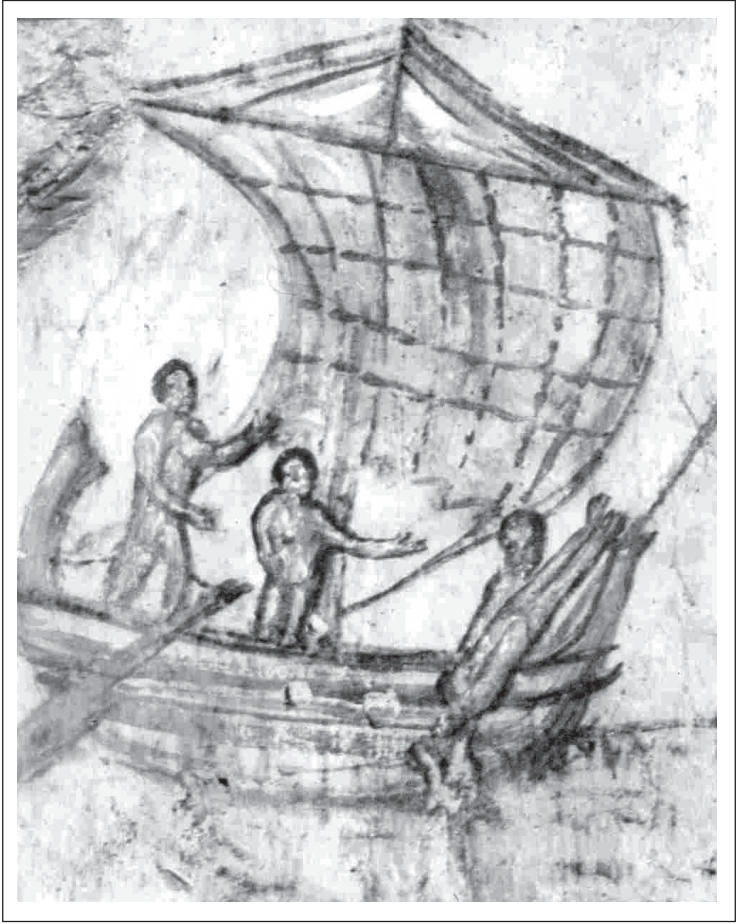
<sup>22</sup> See Ameisenowa, "Bestiarius" (above, n. 2).

<sup>23</sup> See int. al. J. Paul, "Jonas", *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. by E. Kirschbaum SJ, vol. II (Rom/Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder) 414-420; "Jonah, Book of", *Encyclopedia Judaica* X (1971) 172-177.

<sup>24</sup> See int. al. G. Wilpert, *I sarcofagi cristiani antichi*, vol. I (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1929-1936).

<sup>25</sup> Scholars presume that the four-part Jonah cycle on a sarcophagus in the British Museum reflects a Jewish tradition.

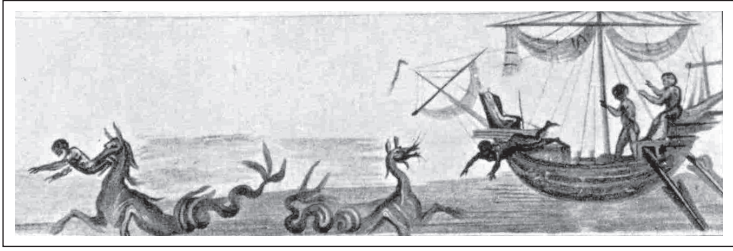




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of ancient Christian art in Rome: a relief on a sarcophagus of the 1st century CE; a sarcophagus in the Lateran Museum [Illustr. 14]; and a painting on the tomb of the Aurelii [Illustr. 15].

2. Like in our illumination, also in these pictorial representations of the narrative scene in question, two sailors are shown throwing a man overboard [Illustr. 16]. In some items, a third sailor is portrayed standing by [Illustr. 17].<sup>26</sup> It is of utmost significance that in all the above illustrations, including ours, the sailors and



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Jonah are bare-headed.<sup>27</sup> In some mediaveal portrayals, Jonah is actually depicted bald.<sup>28</sup> Only in the illumination under review [Illustr. 12], the man thrown into the sea, viz. Jonah, dons a peaked cap of the kind worn by the two men who mourn the downfall of Jerusalem in the initial-word panel of the Book of Lamentations [Illustr. 2]. This is evidently the type of headgear which Jews were forced to wear in mediaveal western Europe as a degrading symbol of identification.<sup>29</sup> It stands to reason that the artist of our manuscript provided the figures in these two illuminations with such peaked caps to identify them as Jews, in one as the prophet Jonah, in the other, as said, as Jeremiah and Baruch.

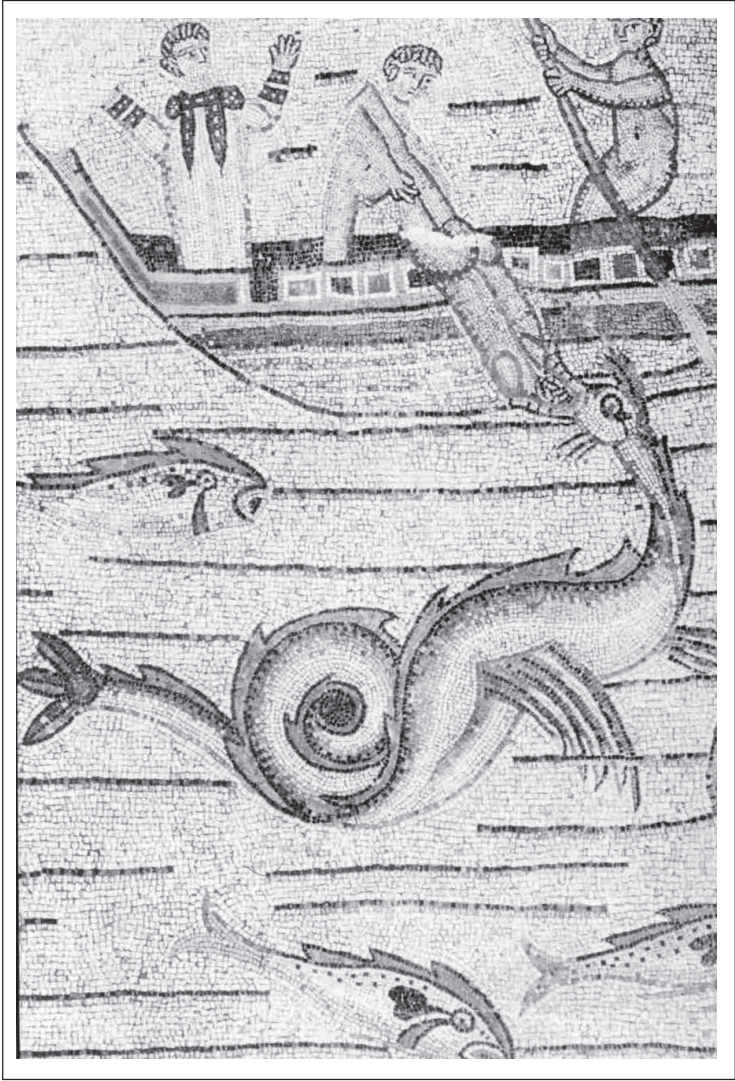
3. The 'big fish' with its enormous winding tail, seen in our illustration moving towards the mermaid, is a hallmark of Christian Jonah-iconography already in the first century. The monstrous tail is conspicuously depicted on the already mentioned sarcophag in the Lateran Museum [Illustr. 14], on a mosaic [Illustr. 17]; on wall paintings in the Catacombs of Priscilla, of San Callisto (Chapel of the Sacraments) [Illustr. 16], and Vigna Massimo, all in Rome;

<sup>26</sup> According to J. Paul, "Jonas" (above, n. 23) 418, after the middle of the 13th century, the manned boat is replaced by a portrait of Jonah praying before the city of Niniveh.

<sup>27</sup> But this is not the case in other items.

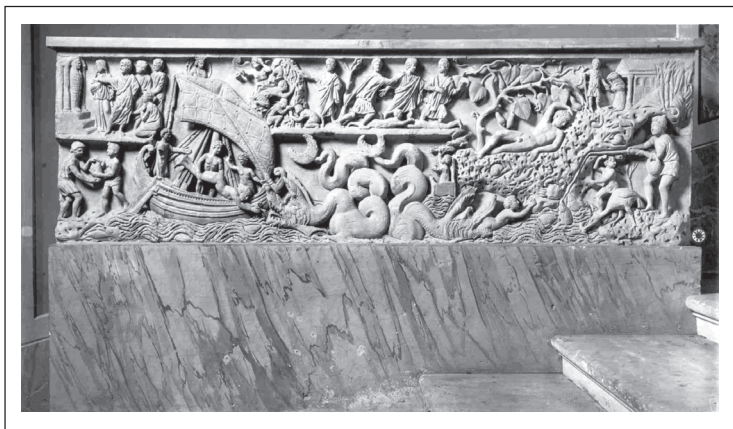
<sup>28</sup> E.g. in the Cathedral of Bamberg, at Klosterneuburg near Vienna, a statue by Donatello of 1435/36 in the Campanile at Florence, in a *machzor* from Germany (Academy of Sciences, Budapest) *et al.*

<sup>29</sup> See: R. Mellinkoff, *Antisemitic Hate Signs in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts from Medieval Germany* (Jerusalem: Center for Jewish Art, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1999).



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on an ivory relief (border Panel) on the front of the Lipsanoteca, Museo Civica Cristiano at Brescia (4th century), and on many more Jonah-related pieces of art.<sup>30</sup>



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There are further considerations which buttress my thesis that the illumination under review pertained originally to the Book of Jonah:

4. Let me turn attention on the invocation **חֹזֶק וַיִּתְחַזֵּק**, which translates somewhat freely “take courage”, or “let us be confident”, and is prominently displayed in the lower register [Illustr. 12]. In Jewish tradition, this invocation, quoted from 2 Sam 10:12, is routinely proclaimed in the synagogue service after the recital of the last verse of a biblical book. It also serves as a *finis* notation in manuscripts and printed editions of the Hebrew Bible. But this custom cannot be applied in our case since, as said, the text which precedes the illumination culminates in 1 Sam 20:42, viz. approximately after the second third of the book which holds 31 chapters altogether. Further, 1 Samuel is part of a larger unit which includes also 2 Samuel. For this reason, the Massorettes quite

<sup>30</sup> D. C. Baramki, *A Byzantine Church at Mahat el Urdi, Beit Jibrin, 1941–1942. Liber Annuus 32* (Jerusalem 1972) 130–152, identified on the mosaic pavement at Beth Guvrin a figure of “Jonah reclining in the belly of the whale, with his head outside... Over the whale there is a branch with green foliage.” However, this interpretation of the item is rejected by R. Ovadia, *IEJ* 24 (1974) 214–215, pl. 46, who maintains that the mosaic depicts Jonah lying under the plant which sprang up miraculously and threw its shade over him (Jonah 3:6).

logically did not append a finis notation at the end of 1 Samuel, but only at the end of 2 Samuel. The artist who produced the illuminations of our manuscript must have been aware of this fact. If he was a Jew, as Ameisenowa posits, we may presume that he was familiar with the Hebrew text and the massoretic tradition, and would have realized that at this juncture any finis notation is totally inappropriate. If he was a gentile, he probably adopted his motifs “from an existing Jewish midrashic narrative cycle of the life of Jonah, which was available to him as a model”, to quote Narkiss,<sup>31</sup> or that he was alerted to these sources by the Jewish householder who had commissioned his work. These considerations prompt the suggestion that the illumination under review, which, as posited, depicts a Jonah-scene together with the finis invocation **חֵזֶק וְנִתְחַזֵּק**,<sup>32</sup> is out of place in its present position.

I would tentatively offer the following explanation of the misplacement. Ameisenowa pointed out that for producing animal and wildlife-scenes the artist had recourse to illustrations in the ‘Bestiarius’, and probably also to ‘naturalistic’ depictions in other publications known in the Middle Ages. It may be equally assumed that for producing paintings directly related to the biblical text, he relied, at least in some instances, on available prototypes found in earlier or contemporary Hebrew, especially biblical manuscripts.

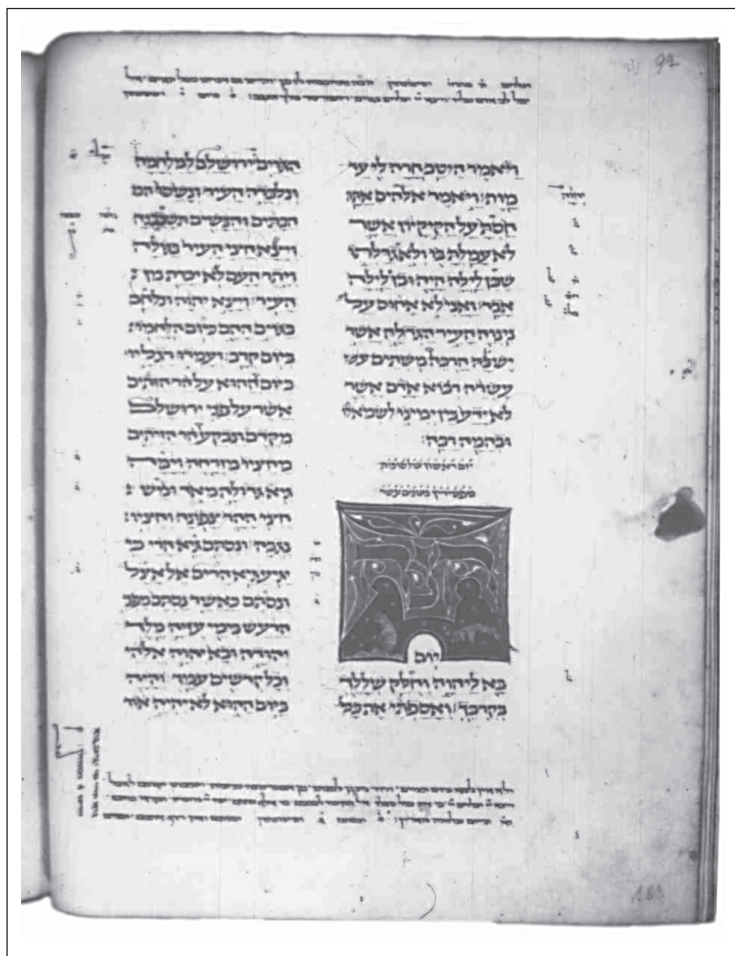
Now, we should be reminded that the Book of Jonah is recited in the synagogue in the afternoon service of the Day of Atonement following the reading of the prescribed Torah portion.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, it is included in our manuscript among the *haftarot*. It stands to reason that the illumination with the **חֵזֶק וְנִתְחַזֵּק** invocation was originally meant to be entered at the end of the Book of Jonah, on p. 183. But here a technical problem arose. In our manuscript, that book is written in two columns. Therefore, an illumination which covers the whole width of the page, with the biblical text intruding triangle-like into it, could not be accommodated where it belongs by right. Moreover, on the last page of the

<sup>31</sup> See Narkiss, “Sign”, (above, n. 16) 71.

<sup>32</sup> This significant fact was not noted by Ameisenowa.

<sup>33</sup> See *b. Meg.* 31a.





Book of Jonah, the written text comes down close to the bottom, leaving no room for any sizeable illustration, so that there the artist had to content himself with appending a small rectangular panel which contains only the customary finis invocation חזק חזק וינתחזק and nothing else [Illustr. 19].<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> A comparable situation obtains in the Book of Ruth. Also there, the text fills the last page almost to the bottom, with no room left for an illumination.



We still have to consider the question, of how to account for the unexpected appearance of a mermaid in the scene which shows the sailors throwing the prophet in the sea? The answer may be found in a midrash which attempts to settle an apparent discrepancy in the biblical text that has exercised the minds of ancient and modern interpreters alike. As said, the biblical author designated the aquatic creature that swallowed the prophet once by the apparent masculine, somewhat indeterminate, designation גדול, 'big fish'. He drops the descriptive adjective גדול, 'big', when he comes to inform the reader that "Jonah remained for three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, במעי הדג" (Jonah 2:1; cp. 2:11).<sup>35</sup> However, in the ensuing verse (2:2), he refers to the 'fish' by הדגה, grammatically a feminine noun: "Jonah prayed to God from the belly of the she-fish, במעי הדגה" (2:2).<sup>36</sup> Ancient and modern rationalist interpreters variously explain away the apparent difficulty.<sup>37</sup> But a midrash takes the text at face value,<sup>38</sup> and offers a fanciful explanation of the interchange of the formally masculine and feminine nouns. This involves an amusing dialogue between the two fishes, the דג and הדגה, which runs as follows (*Yalkut Shim'oni* II, 550):<sup>39</sup>

Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the fish (הדג) and did not pray. So the Holy One praised be he

<sup>35</sup> This statement became a point d'appui for Mt 12:40: "In the same way the Son of Man will be for three days and three nights in the bowels of the earth." The comparison opened the door for the exceeding attention which Christian iconographers gave to the Jonah scene. See J. Paul, "Jonas" (above, n. 23) 418.

<sup>36</sup> *Tg. Neb.* renders both Hebrew expressions by נווא = 'fish'. Equally, the LXX translates both κῆτος. See above.

<sup>37</sup> E.g. J. A. Bewer, *Jonah*. ICC (Edinburgh: Scribner, 1912) 42: "הדגה, the fem. form is used only here of a single fish, elsewhere it is used collectively. Since the masc. הדג occurs three times in this ch. (vv. 1<sup>a,b</sup>, 11) we are justified in regarding הדגה as a scribal error for הדג (so also Kue[nen]). Others think that the use of the fem. is a sign of late date." See also Sasson, *Jonah* (above, n. 17).

<sup>38</sup> For a survey of the Book of Jonah in rabbinic literature, see M. Zlotowitz, *Yonah/Jonah. A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized From Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources* (New York: Menorah Publications, 1980).

<sup>39</sup> The text is quoted in *Midrash Jona*, ed. A. Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, part 2 (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1938<sup>2</sup>) 97–98.

said: I afforded him ample room in the belly of a male fish (דג זכר) that he should not feel cramped, and yet he doesn't pray. I'll (now) let him encounter (be swallowed by) a female fish, pregnant (מעוברת דגה) with 365 million little fishes inside her so that he shall be walled in. Then he (surely) will pray to me...<sup>40</sup> Immediately, the Holy One appointed for him (זמן לוי) a pregnant female fish (דגה), who said to the male fish (לדג):<sup>41</sup> 'The Holy One sent me to swallow the prophet whom you have in your belly. If you spew him out, fine, if not I swallow you together with him.' Answered the he-fish: 'How do I know that what you say is true?' Said the she-fish to Leviathan, king of all fish in the sea: 'Don't you know that the Holy One sent me to this fish to swallow the prophet who is in his belly?' Said Leviathan: 'Yes (indeed I know).' Said the he-fish to Leviathan: 'When (did God say this)?' Answered (Leviathan): 'I heard it three hours ago when God descended (from heaven) to play with me' (Ps 104:26; cf. Jub 10:22–29). The he-fish immediately spew Jonah out and the she-fish swallowed him. Now, Jonah was in sore trouble because of the cramped conditions and the filth, and immediately turned his heart to prayer...

The complex scene which is related verbally in the midrash is intriguingly captured by our artist in the pictorial presentation of the she-fish as a siren with a baby-nymph in her arm, facing the big he-fish, with a shoal of little fishes in tow.

The unique depiction of Jonah's fish as a mermaid in the illumination in a 13th century Hebrew manuscript, gives persuasive evidence to the absorption of classical mythological motifs and of themes drawn from Christian plastic art in the traditional culture and ritual practice of 'open-minded' European Jews in the Middle Ages.

<sup>40</sup> The Talmud (*b. Ned* 51b) speaks of a 'big' and a 'small' fish, without specifying their gender.

<sup>41</sup> Some traditional commentators, like Ibn Ezra and Kimchi, reject this fantastic midrashic adumbration and stress the synonymy of דג and דגה which both serve as generic nouns.