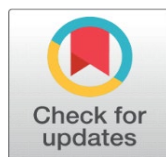


THE CALL TO NINEVEH: AN EXISTENTIAL ENVIRONMENTAL ODYSSEY OF JONAH THROUGH SYMBOLS

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ABSTRACT

The Book of Jonah, a distinctive text within the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament in the Bible, differs from conventional prophetic literature by presenting a narrative centered on repentance, divine mercy, and ecological consciousness. This study employs an existential-ecocritical approach—termed existential environmentalism—which integrates existential philosophy, concerned with individual existence and choice, with ecocriticism, which examines literature's engagement with environmental concerns. By synthesising these theoretical perspectives, the analysis reveals a meaningful exploration of the interplay between divine command, human resistance, natural phenomena, and communal transformation.

This research examines the symbolic and structural elements of the *Book of Jonah*, including its use of names, objects, and numerology, to elucidate its philosophical and ecological dimensions. The study posits that existential environmentalism, as an intersection of existential thought and ecological ethics, demonstrates how ancient wisdom traditions—particularly those emphasising repentance and renewal—offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary environmental crises. Additionally, it highlights the interconnection between individual agency, spiritual growth, and ecological responsibility as fundamental to a sustainable and meaningful human existence. The findings suggest that the environmental crisis is fundamentally an existential crisis, requiring both individual transformation and collective action. Through Jonah's journey, it becomes clear that genuine spiritual awakening necessitates environmental awareness and that freedom entails ecological responsibility. Existential environmentalism renders the *Book of Jonah* remarkably relevant to contemporary environmental discourse.

Keywords: Book of Jonah, Existential Environmentalism, Ecocriticism, Existentialism, Symbols, Names, Numerology, Objects

1. INTRODUCTION

Jonah, the son of Amittai, is traditionally identified as a prophet from Gath-Hepher, a town within the tribe of Zebulun, located approximately two miles northeast of Nazareth. *The Book of Jonah*, the fifth book in the Minor Prophets section of the Old Testament, occupies a distinctive place within the biblical canon. It diverges from the typical structure of prophetic writings by focusing on a narrative rather than a collection of oracles. The book comprises four chapters and forty-eight verses, presenting eight divine commands, twelve questions, and one prophecy, all woven into a narrative framework that focuses on themes of repentance and divine mercy.

The narrative unfolds with Jonah receiving a divine command to proclaim Nineveh's impending destruction. Choosing to flee to Tarshish instead, Jonah attempts to evade his mission but is intercepted by natural phenomena orchestrated by God—a violent storm and a great fish that swallows him. During three days in the fish's belly, Jonah undergoes a transformative period of reflection and repentance. Emerging with renewed resolve, he journeys to Nineveh and proclaims its doom. The response of the Ninevites, led by their king, is collective repentance, prompting divine mercy and the sparing of the city. Jonah, however, reacts with frustration, grappling with questions of free will, divine justice,

and human agency. His journey is often encapsulated as a movement of running from God, running to God, running with God, and running ahead of God.

This narrative aligns with core themes of existential philosophy, a movement that explores self-discovery, free will, and the search for meaning. Existentialism, pioneered by thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in the 19th century, asserts that existence precedes essence, emphasising that individuals define their own essence through lived experiences. In the 20th century, existentialists such as Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir expanded on these ideas, addressing themes of freedom, alienation, the absurd, and human responsibility. As Sartre (1956) articulates, “Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (p. 186), a perspective that illuminates Jonah’s struggle with divine command and personal responsibility.

Simultaneously, the *Book of Jonah* invites an ecocritical reading that examines the interplay between humanity and the natural world. Rueckert (1996) defines ecocriticism as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (p. 107). Buell (1995) further asserts that “environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it” (p. 2). An ecocritical approach entails examining literary works with special reference to the depiction of nature and the environment. In *Jonah*, natural elements—such as the storm, the sea, and the great fish—are not passive backdrops but active participants in the narrative, what biblical scholar Alter (2016) describes as “nature’s mysterious power over human destiny” (p. 147).

The integration of existential philosophy and ecocriticism gives rise to the concept of existential environmentalism, a novel interpretative framework that explores the relationship between human existence, ecological responsibility, and spiritual growth. Existential meaning arises not solely from human actions but also from the ways humans engage with the natural world. Nature is depicted not as a passive backdrop but as an active participant in the moral and spiritual journey of humanity, reflecting divine will and shaping human transformation. As Plumwood (2002) argues, “The ecological crisis we face is not just a crisis of physical survival but a crisis of meaning, understanding, and spirituality” (p. 219). This approach challenges humanity to reconsider its role in the natural world, advocating coexistence rather than exploitation.

By blending existentialism and ecocriticism, the *Book of Jonah* becomes a meaningful exploration of the interplay between divine command, human resistance, natural phenomena, and communal transformation. Its rich use of maritime imagery, animal symbolism, and natural elements deepens its ecological dimensions, shedding new light on the connection between human agency and the environment. While traditional interpretations have largely emphasised the theological and moral aspects of Jonah’s story, an existential-environmental perspective uncovers a more labyrinthine layer of meaning. Symbols in the *Book of Jonah* challenge readers to reconsider humanity’s role within the natural world, emphasising the importance of ecological awareness and responsibility as vital aspects of both spiritual and existential fulfillment.

This article aims to analyse the *Book of Jonah* through the framework of existential environmentalism, exploring the symbolic connections between existential philosophy and ecological ethics. By examining its symbolic elements, such as names, objects, and numerology, in depth, the study reveals how ancient wisdoms like repentance and renewal offer valuable insights into addressing modern environmental challenges. It highlights the interconnection between individual choice, spiritual growth, and ecological responsibility as essential foundations for a sustainable and meaningful human existence.

1.1. AN EXISTENTIAL ENVIRONMENTAL ODYSSEY OF JONAH THROUGH SYMBOLS

A pebble tossed into a tranquil pond—the ripples it creates widen endlessly, their circles intertwining with one another. In the vast and boundless waters of literature, the writer becomes the hand that tosses the pebble of symbolism, setting into motion waves of interpretation that ripple outward, each circle enriching the literary canvas it touches. It serves as a bridge—a luminous arch that connects the imagination of the writer with the understanding of the reader. Symbolism is a literary technique characterised by the use of symbols, which may take the form of objects, attitudes, or abstract ideas, to convey deeper meanings beyond their literal interpretations. It takes something ordinary and makes it more than what it is in reality. Scholars such as Alfred North Whitehead, Susanne Langer, Ferdinand de Saussure, Sigmund Freud, and Northrop Frye have made significant contributions to the theoretical understanding of symbols and their functions in literature. When existential environmentalism became a lens that views human-nature interactions as

an ongoing, dynamic process of self-creation and meaning-making, the best tool to examine human existence through the lens of ecological consciousness is symbols. Here, we are using symbolic elements like names, objects, and numerology in depth to analyse how individuals confront environmental challenges as a fundamental aspect of their being, emphasising personal responsibility, authentic engagement with nature, and the existential anxiety arising from ecological crises. The *Book of Jonah* uncovers numerous symbols that demonstrate existential environmentalism. As Garrard (2018) emphasises, “Biblical narratives serve as foundational texts for environmental ethics, offering a complex web of symbols that connect human responsibility with natural preservation” (p. 146).

1.1.1. JONAH, AMITTAI AND NINEVEH - A CALL TO ENVIRONMENTAL AWAKENING

William Shakespeare's Juliet famously asks, “What's in a name?”—a rhetorical question that uncovers the intrinsic relationship between a name and personal essence. Indeed, there is something in a name that is deeply intertwined with individual identity. In literature, personal and place names are among the most significant tools authors use to craft credible characters and build an authentic literary universe. Names often act as symbolic repositories of cultural, psychological, and narrative significance. In the *Book of Jonah*, names like Jonah, Amittai, and the place name Nineveh function as interpretive tools, offering insights into character motivations and narrative trajectories that point toward themes of existential environmentalism, further enriching the narrative's depth and meaning.

Jonah, son of Amittai, is the protagonist of the *Book of Jonah*. The prophet Jonah possesses significant symbolic meaning in the book. As Alter (2016) notes, “The careful selection of names in biblical narrative serves to underscore thematic concerns and prophetic functions” (p. 129), and his journey resonates with symbols that mirror both human existential struggles and humanity's relationship with nature, embodying what Morton (2007) describes as “the mesh of interconnected things that have no clear boundaries” (p. 183)—a concept that echoes contemporary deep ecology's emphasis on biospheric enmeshment and ecological interdependence. The name Jonah, derived from the Hebrew word *yonah* (which means “dove”), holds layered symbolic meanings such as “sacrifice,” “salvation,” “messenger,” “hopefulness,” and “purification”—themes that parallel modern environmental ethics' call for ecological consciousness and planetary stewardship. Thompson (2019) provides crucial insight: “The name Jonah functions on multiple symbolic levels—as dove, as messenger, and as peace-bringer. This tripartite symbolism reflects the prophet's role in mediating between divine will and earthly responsibility” (p. 83). These qualities, evident in Jonah's journey, align not only with personal existential struggles but also with humanity's collective responsibility and transformation in confronting the environmental crisis as ecological grief in the face of planetary degradation. As White (1967) observes, “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion”—a perspective that underscores the existential dimensions of our current ecological predicament and the need for profound spiritual-ecological awakening.

When God commanded Jonah to preach in Nineveh, he experienced existential anxiety. As Kierkegaard (1844) writes, “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis” (p. 124). This anxiety is evident in Jonah's struggle with divine calling and environmental responsibility, reflecting humanity's contemporary eco-anxiety in the face of the climate crisis. He tried to escape God's plan by fleeing on a ship. Here, Jonah exercises his “free will.” This action exemplifies what Sartre (1943) describes as “the fundamental project of human reality,” where “man makes himself by choosing his morality” (p. 49), mirroring modern humanity's choice to either embrace or deny ecological responsibility, proving the existential idea that humans are capable of making their own choices. However, Jonah's choice is opposed by God, illustrating what Buell (1995) terms “environmental crisis as a crisis of the imagination” (p. 32), representing a clash with a greater force or the will of the cosmos—a conflict mirroring humanity's tendency to defy ecological harmony and the biosphere's inherent balance. God sent a storm threatening the lives of sailors on the ship with Jonah, pointing to the interconnectedness of human actions and natural consequences—a powerful metaphor for the cascading effects of environmental degradation and climate change. This serves as an existential reminder that our choices profoundly impact the natural world, with planetary boundaries and ecological limits. As Ryken (2016) explains, “The sea in biblical narrative often represents chaos and divine judgment, serving as a powerful symbol of human limitations against natural forces” (p. 94). After being caught in the storm, Jonah's willingness to “sacrifice”—Heidegger's (1927) concept of “being-towards-death” (p. 289)—is reflected in Jonah's willingness to be thrown into the sea: “The being of Dasein means being-ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in-a-world” (p. 292), resonating with deep ecology's call for self-sacrifice in service of planetary well-being.

Swallowed by the whale, Jonah spends three days and three nights in its belly—a moment of reflection and transformation within the womb of nature itself, representing biospheric immersion. This phase represents an environmental existential crisis, what Morton (2007) terms “dark ecology”—the profound recognition of our entanglement with non-human life. In the belly of the whale, Jonah prays for “salvation,” recognising his dependence on forces greater than himself, resulting in ecological humility. In the belly of the whale, Jonah feels the care that nature provides him. Like a child, he becomes innocent and gives thanks for all the protection that nature gave him:

For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea, and the flood enveloped me; all your breakers and your billows passed over me. The waters swirled about me, threatening my life; the abyss enveloped me; seaweed clung about my head. Down I went to the roots of the mountains; the bars of the netherworld were closing behind me forever, but you brought my life up from the pit.

(Jonah 2:4, 6-7)

After being spit out on the shore, Jonah obeys God's command and becomes the “messenger” of salvation to the Ninevites, a kind of ecological awakening. His message leads to their repentance. As White (1967) argues, “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (p. 1205). This perspective of environmental consciousness is evident in the Ninevites' repentance, which represents what Leopold (1949) calls “the extension of ethics to the land community” (p. 204). The entire city sows seeds of “hopefulness” and fosters a collective ecological transformation to purify their lives. By purifying the city of Nineveh from all sins, Jonah becomes an agent of “purification,” and Nineveh tastes the sweetness of salvation—a form of ecosystemic healing, a gift from God.

Through salvation, sacrifice, and hopefulness, Jonah finds the essence of his life. As Kierkegaard (1844) notes, “The self is a relation that relates itself to itself... it is in the relationship that the self consists” (p. 124). When we view Jonah as an eco-prophet, he inspires societies to acknowledge their environmental sins and embrace sustainable practices through ecological repentance and biospheric responsibility. The purification of Nineveh from all sins mirrors ecological redemption—the healing of damaged ecosystems. Jonah's journey reflects the existential environmental idea that humanity must embrace its responsibility to the planet. His father's name, Amittai, meaning “my truth,” symbolises the ultimate truth of human existence: the need to coexist harmoniously with the natural world, an ecosophia.

Nineveh, the capital city of ancient Assyria, was built by Nimrod, the great-grandson of Noah. Situated on the east bank of the Tigris River, Nineveh symbolises humanity's complex relationship with nature and civilization—a metabolic rift between human societies and natural systems. The prophet Nahum called Nineveh “the city of blood” (Nahum 3:1) because it epitomised pride, power, and brutality, reflecting environmental imperialism—the unsustainable exploitation of natural and human resources. Ishtar, the chief goddess of Nineveh, embodies both the fertility and destruction inherent in nature, highlighting biospheric balance—the delicate equilibrium required to sustain ecosystems. Regarding Nineveh, Eliade (1959) observes: “The city represents the axis mundi, where heaven and earth meet, making it the ideal location for transformation and renewal” (p. 104), reflecting what environmental theorists call “urban ecology's potential.” Berry (1988) extends this: “The great challenge of our time is to create sustainable cities that honor both human culture and natural processes” (p. 198). When the brutal nature of the Ninevites remained unchanged, threatening both the environment and the societal fabric—manifesting ecological alienation—Ishtar sent her companion Dove (Jonah) to the city to preach the necessity of repentance—not only for spiritual salvation but also for ecological redemption, the renewal of the natural world, and the preservation of Earth's equilibrium.

The names in *The Book of Jonah* serve as powerful symbolic anchors that illuminate the deep connections between individual identity, divine purpose, and ecological responsibility. From Jonah (dove) to Amittai (my truth) to Nineveh (the city of blood), each name carries tiers of meaning that transcend mere designation to reveal subtle truths about humanity's relationship with the natural world. The careful selection and symbolic weight of these names demonstrate how names in biblical narrative serve not only as a means of identification but as a complex system of meaning that bridges individual existence, divine purpose, and environmental stewardship.

1.1.2. THE SEA, THE SHIP, SACKCLOTH AND ASHES, AND THE KIKAYON: A CALL FOR ECOLOGICAL RENEWAL

In literary works, an object may represent something beyond its literal meaning, adding depth and clarification to the themes explored. It serves as a vehicle for expressing complex ideas and emotions. In *The Book of Jonah*, everyday

objects become powerful vessels of meaning, carrying layers of significance that illuminate the complex interplay between human consciousness, divine purpose, and ecological relationships. These symbolic objects function as both mirrors reflecting human nature and windows revealing universal truths about our place within the greater web of existence.

The sea symbolises stillness, emptiness, or the nothingness of life, resembling an ecological void. It reflects the vast, indifferent forces of nature that challenge human dominance and compel self-reflection, resulting in biospheric humility. Existence is characterised by nothingness, and when the sailors throw Jonah into the sea, it symbolises humanity's confrontation with ecological finitude, the void, and the acknowledgment of nature's overwhelming power. By accepting this nothingness, Jonah produces essence for his existence, an act that mirrors the ecological authenticity of humanity's need to find purpose in a fragile and finite environment.

The ship is another significant symbol. Its mast, representing the cross, suggests biospheric redemption—a connection between human suffering, salvation, and the broader cycles of renewal within ecosystems. The ship in Jonah's story can be paralleled with the cross, both serving as mediums for ecological transformation. Jonah's passage from the ship to the belly of the whale parallels Christ's journey from the cross to the tomb, symbolising environmental metanoia—the journey through suffering and sacrifice toward redemption. This highlights the necessity of sacrifice and humility in addressing ecological crises, suggesting that hope and renewal arise from acknowledging and mending humanity's broken relationship with the natural world.

Sackcloth and ashes serve as symbols of ecological contrition—the most humble and sincere repentance, a reminder of humanity's finite nature and its responsibility toward the environment. The sackcloth, a coarse, dark material made from goat or camel hair, connects to biophilic embodiment, which is the rawness and simplicity of nature. Worn by mourners, it became a symbol of environmental grief. The ashes signify anthropogenic desolation, reflecting the environmental degradation caused by human actions. They also serve as a reminder of ecological mortality and the inevitable return of all life to the earth. This acknowledgment of death and ruin mirrors the need for ecological accountability.

The Ninevites, by their free will, choosing repentance in sackcloth and ashes is a collective ecological awakening. This act not only represents spiritual transformation but also signifies a biospheric consciousness—a deeper understanding of living harmoniously with the environment. The ash indicates that man is made of soil and must return to the soil: “for you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return” (Genesis 3:19, New Revised Standard Version), a way of ecological embodiment. The ritual of sitting in ashes or sprinkling them upon oneself symbolises an anthropogenic recognition of humanity's destructive tendencies and the commitment to restoring balance. It underscores environmental metanoia—that true repentance involves humility, a willingness to face consequences, and a renewed commitment to the stewardship of the earth. This interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world calls for ecological reconciliation.

Kikayon, the Hebrew name of the gourd plant mentioned in *The Book of Jonah*, is a wide-leafed plant of the cucumber or castor-bean variety. Gourds were a sacred symbol among the Hebrew people, representing ecological vitality, new life, and fertility. In the story of Jonah, the gourd plant serves as natural providence, offering shade and relief from the oppressive heat. This symbolises biospheric dependence—nature's capacity to nurture and sustain life for survival and well-being.

Jonah is pleased with the gourd plant's shelter, but when a worm chews through the vine and causes it to wither, it highlights ecological vulnerability—the fragility and impermanence of life, as well as the susceptibility of ecosystems to small disruptions. The gourd plant reflects the potential for new life that the people of Nineveh can enjoy after their repentance—an environmental renewal. By choosing to repent, they acknowledge ecological responsibility and embrace biospheric harmony. The gourd's brief life also serves as an environmental memento mori, reminding humanity of the delicate interconnectedness between people and nature. Its sudden death symbolises ecological consequence, while the worm's role illustrates systemic interdependence. Through repentance, the Ninevites not only give meaning to their lives but also demonstrate an ecological covenant—a commitment to safeguarding life-sustaining systems.

The symbolic objects in *The Book of Jonah*—the sea, ship, sackcloth and ashes, and the kikayon plant—examine humanity's relationship with nature, our spiritual journey, and our environmental responsibilities. From the vast emptiness of the sea to the brief life of the gourd plant, these symbols reveal the profound interconnectedness of all existence and the delicate balance between human agency and natural forces.

1.1.3. THREE AND FORTY: A NUMERICAL CODE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AWAKENING

Numerology states that “numbers are not mere quantities but living, qualitative entities” (Jung, 1964, p. 169) that reveal deeper spiritual and cosmic truths. Biblical Numerology is the study of number in the Bible. In *The Book of Jonah*, numbers carry multiple layers of meaning that connect individual spiritual journeys to universal ecological patterns. The numbers three and forty are key numbers in *The Book of Jonah*, representing cyclical consciousness. The number three, as Davis (1968) explains, “in biblical usage often signifies completion or divine perfection” (p. 47), symbolising ecological wholeness—completeness and perfection. The three days Jonah spent in the belly of the whale, which symbolically signifies Christ lying buried for three days before his resurrection, also aligns with biospheric interconnectedness, where every action impacts the ecological balance. It also symbolises Jesus raising three people from the dead: the only son of a widow from Nain (Luke 7:11-14), the daughter of the religious leader Jairus (Mark 5:35-42), and Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha (John 11:1-42), reflecting cycles of renewal. Another example is Jonah's need for three days to travel to the city of Nineveh, which corresponds to the three years of Christ's public ministry, resonating with temporal stewardship in sustainable practices.

The number forty symbolises ecological trial—a period of testing, trial, or probation, akin to planetary resilience under the strain of human exploitation. Jonah spent forty days wandering around Nineveh, warning of impending doom, paralleling the ecological prophecy of climate scientists today. The forty days Jonah spent after his rescue from the belly of the whale correspond to the forty days Jesus spent preaching after his resurrection from death, symbolising humanity's potential for renewal and coexistence with nature.

As von Franz (1972) adds, “numbers in religious texts serve as bridges between psychic and material reality” (p. 157), symbolising what environmental ethicists call “ecological authenticity.” Most existentialists hold that to become authentic, one must first exist consciously, make choices using free will, and define one's life—echoing the need for mindful decision-making and environmental consciousness in preserving the environment. The numerical patterns in Jonah's story remind us that, like the prophet himself, we exist within a precisely balanced natural order where every action contributes to the greater whole.

2. CONCLUSION

With its themes of human freedom, alienation, the search for meaning, and responsibility in nature, *The Book of Jonah* echoes the tenets of existential environmentalism. The text addresses the relevance of creating one's essence through intentional choices—not only in relation to divine will but also in the context of environmental awareness. As Moltmann (1985) suggests, “Creation itself is both the subject and object of God's eschatological transformation” (p. 276). Jonah's journey conveys that both individual action and a deep connection with the environment create existential meaning. The narrative thus invites us to reflect on how mankind fits into the natural world, stressing ecological consciousness and responsibility as essential to both existential and spiritual satisfaction.

In *The Book of Jonah*, symbols like names, objects, and numbers act as tools to exhibit contemporary ecological concerns. These symbolic elements shed light on humanity's relationship with natural systems and divine purpose. Names serve as potent markers of ecological identity: Jonah (dove) epitomises the messenger of ecological awakening, while Nineveh represents mankind's capacity for ecological transformation.

Throughout the story, the key elements act as bridges between spiritual and ecological consciousness. The sea signifies the emptiness that humanity must endure in its environmental predicament, while the ship symbolises humanity's transient technological defenses against nature's overwhelming power. The whale indicates nature's potential for both annihilation and renewal, while the kikayon plant emphasises the fragility of ecological systems. Both spiritual repentance and ecological contrition are signified by sackcloth and ashes, denoting humanity's obligation to acknowledge and address environmental transgressions. Furthermore, the numerological pattern of three and forty adds another level of meaning, implying ecological themes of both trial and accomplishment. In contrast to the forty days of warning, which symbolise a phase of ecological testing and transformation, Jonah's three days in the whale's belly depict the cycles of natural rejuvenation. These numbers reflect the book's emphasis on the cyclical nature of environmental responsibility and renewal.

The elements of names, objects, and numbers together ultimately provide a thorough foundation for comprehending existential environmentalism. The narrative suggests that the environmental crisis is fundamentally an existential crisis,

requiring both individual transformation and collective action. Through Jonah's journey, it becomes clear that genuine spiritual awakening necessitates environmental awareness and that freedom entails ecological responsibility. Addressing our current ecological crisis requires not just technological solutions but a fundamental shift in our perception of our relationship with nature and our obligation to preserve it. Thus, existential environmentalism makes *The Book of Jonah* remarkably relevant to contemporary environmental discourse.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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