Recently I was asked to reflect, for an interdisciplinary collection of essays, on how we generate new knowledge in our respective fields of study (“Surfacing after Being Swallowed: Generating New Knowledge on Jonah”). Having just completed my own commentary on Jonah for the Old Testament Library (Westminster John Knox, 2024), I found it interesting to consider what it means to write yet another commentary on Jonah, with at least seven commentaries and monographs having appeared since 2020. 1 Each of the Jonah commentaries published these past years (or soon to be published) provides a unique angle on interpreting Jonah, building on and supplementing the vast compendium of knowledge already generated in the two thousand-plus years since its publication.

This question of how we generate new knowledge was foremost in my mind as I was asked to offer a review of Susan Niditch’s Hermeneia commentary published at the start of 2023. Of course, the commentators’ respective hermeneutical frameworks and methodological presuppositions guide new knowledge production. However, can we say more about what shapes what we see in this ancient book, how we imagine the context from which it derives, and which examples from the rich array of interpretation history we decide to include in our respective commentaries? The

following considerations may help us reflect on the unique contribution Niditch’s Jonah commentary makes to the field, which applies to the rest of us Jonah commentators as well!

First, I realized again just how much the way we were trained feeds into what exegetical and hermeneutical tools we employ when taking up the daunting task of commentary writing. The author’s description in the front matter is up front about Niditch’s academic genealogy (Harvard-trained with teachers Frank Moore Cross, Paul D. Hanson, Albert Bates Lord, and Isadore Twersky), which is noted to have “deeply influenced her scholarly interests and approaches” (vi). Beyond explaining Niditch’s interest in exploring literary parallels in ancient and world literature that would uniquely shape her understanding of Jonah, it is helpful for all commentators to reflect on who and what has informed our craft.

Second, freshly emerging from writing a commentary on Jonah, I am all too aware that each of us writing on Jonah has a couple of preferred primary conversation partners. Thus, one could ask, which are the three or four books and prior commentaries that we regularly cite? For Niditch, these go-to works are commentaries on Jonah by Jack Sasson, Hans Wolff, and James Limburg, who are known for solid textual work and who steer her commentary in a particular direction rather than another, as in the case of the other Jonah commentaries who have chosen to engage with different scholars and approaches.

Third, the series for which one writes matters. Hermeneia inevitably is different from OTL or the Earth Bible Commentary: different questions, different expectations, different audiences, different results. Personaly, I was grateful to have Niditch’s Hermeneia commentary, published at a critical point in my own commentary writing, available to consult on a couple of crucial points beyond my scope of expertise. As expected from a Hermeneia volume, one finds in Niditch’s commentary detailed text-critical notes, dense footnotes, and extensive bibliographic citations; its compendium style offers a helpful resource for scholars and students who want to go deeper into the text.

This said, Niditch’s main contribution lies in her focus on comparative folklore as a way to structure the reception history of Jonah that offers a unique way to approach the expansive history of reception (or consequences) that also recently were gathered by the Jonah commentaries of Amy Erickson (2021) and Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (2021). Through these comparative folklore motifs that form a golden thread throughout her commentary, but which quite helpfully feature in a section toward the end of each chapter, the story of Jonah is connected to a larger body of world literature in which people throughout time and in places around the world are telling stories to understand. As Niditch describes the purpose of this approach as a means of accessing the “range of meanings and messages” associated with the book of Jonah: “Attention to these motifs in the context of comparative folklore allows the reader to recognize dimensions of the story that hold universal appeal and how those shared narrative features are framed in culturally and individually specific ways” (89).
For instance, I found valuable Niditch’s exposition on personal religion and how it features in the book of Jonah and elsewhere in world literature. The central role personal piety and religious expressions and practices played in the lives of the sailors and the Ninevites attests to how vital religion as a meaning-making exercise is in times of crisis. In the folklore motifs from around the world, one finds that people seek to control what threatens to undo their carefully constructed worlds. In the process, they attempt to find an explanation for misfortune or contemplate, as the sailors so valiantly have done in Jonah 1, whether human sacrifice might work to appease the god(s) and avert misery (51). Such an interpretation makes for a more compassionate reading of the mariners, representing humanity who are quite literally in the same boat, trying to mitigate the unexpected, debilitating storms of life—an argument I developed further in my own reading of Jonah.

I also was happy to see Niditch’s invitation to read Jonah with the prophet Jeremiah based on a shared engagement with God “in a personal and intimate way” (14). Niditch draws attention to the lament language shared by Jonah (Jonah 2) and Jeremiah in his confessions, which underscores a shared sense of discontent regarding the prophetic vocation that, for both these prophets, is considered a heavy burden. Jeremiah wishes that he had never been born (Jer 20:13–18); Jonah repeatedly wishes that he could die (Jonah 4:3, 8) (Niditch, 14, 106).

By reading Jonah together with Jeremiah and other traumatized prophets such as Job and Elijah, one is presented with a picture of Jonah that does not adhere to some of the typical interpretations that tend to frame Jonah as the antihero or that ridicule or blame the prophet for not understanding the greatness of God’s mercy that also extends to Israel’s enemies. This Jeremiah connection has the potential to be developed further, helping readers to recognize something of the woundedness of the prophets who are carrying the wounds of the people upon themselves, which comes into sharper focus if read through a trauma lens.

Finally, in the process of writing the short reflective essay on the question of generating new knowledge referenced above, I revisited a beloved novel by Salman Rushdie, Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1991) whose compelling image of a swirling sea of stories is helpful to consider with the interconnected motives highlighted by Niditch in her Jonah commentary. In Rushdie’s novel, “all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented” is imagined as an ocean with “a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity” (72). In one of the main plot lines of the story, the hero of the story, Haroun, sets out to save the sea of stories from the enemy Khattam-Shud (meaning “completely finished”), who

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despises stories and who is described by Michael Gilmour as “prefer[ing] silence to speech, conformity to creativity, and abhor[ing] works of imagination.”

One of the reasons for the pollution of the Sea of Stories, as the Water Genie tells Haroun, is that there is little demand for the ancient stories from the Old Zone anymore, causing the Source to be polluted with a “thick, dark poison [that] was everywhere now, obliterating the colours of the Streams of Story.” As the Genie laments:

We are the Guardians of the Ocean, and we didn’t guard it. Look at the Ocean, look at it! The oldest stories ever made, and look at them now. We let them rot, we abandoned them, long before this poisoning. We lost touch with our beginnings, with our roots, our Wellspring, our Source. Boring, we said, not in demand, surplus to requirements. And now, look, just look! No colour, no life, no nothing. Spoilt!’ (Rushdie, 146; see also Gilmour, 158)

Niditch’s Jonah commentary is most helpful in helping a new generation of readers to attend to these old stories—in the process, offering resistance to the ever-growing forces that want to deny the value of religion, theology, and the humanities.

For me, the many Jonah commentaries published since 2020 are a sign that the field of Jonah studies is alive and well. There is new energy in these creative reinterpretations of old sources, with Niditch in particular helping to cultivate an appreciation of the importance of stories that are told worldwide and from time immemorial to new audiences. Gilmour says it well: “The problem begins when the world’s readers neglect those stories; when we stop reading them, and only then, do the enemies of stories move in” (158).