

2021

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Randy (2021) "Encountering Jonah With Jewish Eyes and Finding Justice in the Belly of a Whale,"
Touro Law Review: Vol. 36: No. 4, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tourolaw.edu/lawreview/vol36/iss4/9>

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ENCOUNTERING JONAH WITH JEWISH EYES AND FINDING JUSTICE IN THE BELLY OF A WHALE

*Randy Lee**

I was once talking in a prison with a man, an inmate, who was awaiting his sentencing hearing. The man had already pled guilty to murder. As we talked back and forth, the man and I ultimately exhausted so much of the man's past and so much of the man's present that we were left only with the man's future to discuss.

The man told me, at that point, that he wanted to be sentenced to death. When I asked him why, the man said, "Because I don't want to hurt anyone ever again."

The man's answer made me wonder how Justice would respond to such a man.

When I posed this question to myself, I did not mean that justice with which we engage ourselves when we dress up in Justice's costumes, its robes, and wrap ourselves up in its symbols and language, Bibles and blind-folded goddesses, all so we can convincingly insist, profess that we seek what Justice seeks and act as Justice acts. Rather, I meant Perfect Justice, that justice that revealed Itself to Jeremiah at the potter's wheel.¹

At the potter's wheel, as Jeremiah watched, the clay would fail the potter time and time again, much as people are apt to fail their Creator. Yet, the potter never cursed the clay, never condemned it, never gave up on the clay. The potter never discarded the clay and took new, because the clay belonged to the potter, was his, and, therefore, the clay would always have value to the potter.

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¹ *Jeremiah* 18:1-4 (King James).

Instead of casting off the clay, after each failure of the clay, the potter would simply begin again to work the clay.² The potter would rework and rework and rework the clay until ultimately the clay would yield to the potter's touch³ and become the good, the art, that the potter had always believed the clay to be.

That justice revealed to Jeremiah at the potter's wheel was Perfect Justice, Perfect Justice as seen through the eyes of the prophet, as seen through Jewish eyes. Such justice cares for all.⁴ Such justice does not imprison us from joy but "free[s us] from wickedness."⁵ Such justice has forgiven on occasion even the unrepentant heart so that all could look upon it and from it "expect mercy."⁶ Indeed, such justice is wedded to mercy as a bride to a bridegroom.⁷

Hardly is Perfect Justice blind. Rather, such justice knows what is righteous and what is not, and it "rulest all things righteously."⁸ Such justice does advance "the deserved judgment of God,"⁹ does punish those who live "unrighteously,"¹⁰ but it does so with "great care and indulgence."¹¹ Such justice first "warn[s],"¹² then seeks to guide through "light rebukes,"¹³ and "dost correct little by little."¹⁴ Perfect Justice may require for us "the bread of adversity" and the "water of affliction,"¹⁵ but Perfect Justice never allows a wound to be inflicted that it cannot heal.¹⁶

² *Id.* at 18:4.

³ *See id.* at 18:8 ("If that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it."). The country turning from its evil is the clay yielding to the potter's touch.

⁴ *Wisdom* 12:13 (RSVCE).

⁵ *Id.* at 12:2.

⁶ *Id.* at 12:22.

⁷ *See* Randy Lee, *Who's Afraid of William Shakespeare?: Confronting Our Concepts of Justice and Mercy in The Merchant of Venice*, 32 U. DAYTON L. REV. 1, 19-24 (2006) (arguing that justice and mercy are complements linked together for the pursuit of salvation).

⁸ *Wisdom* 12:15 (RSVCE).

⁹ *Id.* at 12:26.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 12:23.

¹¹ *Id.* at 12:20.

¹² *Id.* at 12:2.

¹³ *Id.* at 12:26.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 12:2.

¹⁵ *Isaiah* 30:20 (RSVCE).

¹⁶ *See, e.g., Job* 42:10-17 (RSVCE) (where all to Job is restored more perfectly).

Perfect Justice teaches.¹⁷ It teaches to “be kind.”¹⁸ Such justice inspires “goodness,”¹⁹ invites “good hope”²⁰ even in “those deserving of death,” and “grant[s] them time and opportunity to give up their wickedness.”²¹

Perfect Justice is neither weak nor timid. It will show its strength when men dare to “doubt the completeness of [its] power.”²² Such justice “dost rebuke any insolence;”²³ yet, it yearns “to spare all,”²⁴ “dost judge with mildness,” and “dost govern” “with great forbearance.”²⁵

Perfect Justice abhors those who in its name would “pastur[e] themselves” rather than pasturing the sheep entrusted into their care.²⁶ Perfect Justice abhors those who would feed off the milk, wear the wool, and slaughter the fatlings, but never pasture the sheep.²⁷ Perfect justice does not see those before it as “food for [its] mouth[,]”²⁸ but sees Itself like a shepherd called to “save my sheep.”²⁹ Such justice does not “lord” Its might over the lowly,³⁰ but “strengthen[s] the weak, heal[s] the sick, bind[s] up the injured, bring[s] back the strayed, [and] seek[s] the lost.”³¹

When, however, I first encountered this Perfect Justice of the Jewish people in their sacred texts, I did not meet that justice with Jewish eyes. I first met that justice with Gentile eyes, and that was a most distressing experience. For me, encountering that justice and those scriptures with Gentile eyes was like watching shadows move across the wall of a cave without knowing that there is more to what is real than shadows.³² It was to believe that God is defined by His anger rather than to understand that God makes even anger divine.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 12:19. See also *Isaiah* 30:20 (RSVCE).

¹⁸ *Wisdom* 12:19 (RSVCE).

¹⁹ *Id.* at 12:22.

²⁰ *Id.* at 12:19.

²¹ *Id.* at 12:20.

²² *Id.* at 12:17.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.* at 12:16.

²⁵ *Id.* at 12:18.

²⁶ *Ezekiel* 34:2 (NABRE).

²⁷ *Id.* at 34:3 (RSVCE).

²⁸ *Id.* at 34:10 (NABRE).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.* at 34:4.

³¹ *Id.*

³² Plato, *Republic* 514a-20a.

By the end of the third chapter of *Genesis*, the first book of the *Pentateuch*, the Lord, to my eyes, had driven Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden and placed cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the gate lest the couple might ever try to return.³³ In chapter four, God condemned Cain to a life as “a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”³⁴ In chapters six through eight, God sent a flood upon the earth to “curse the ground because of man” and to “destroy every living creature.”³⁵ In chapter nineteen, “the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire,”³⁶ and turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt for having the audacity to look back at the destruction of her neighbors.³⁷ In chapter forty-one, God sent a severe famine “over all the earth.”³⁸

Finally, *Genesis* ended. The carnage, however, did not. In *Exodus*, the second book of the *Pentateuch*, “the Lord smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt,” even “the first-born of the cattle.”³⁹ In *Numbers*, the fourth book, “the Lord sent fiery serpents” amongst His own people,⁴⁰ the people the Lord had consecrated to Himself⁴¹ and with whom He had formed a covenant,⁴² and these serpents “bit the people, so that many of the people of Israel died.”⁴³ Later in *Numbers*, not satisfied with the killing of all the men of Midian,⁴⁴ the Lord required the slaughter of the male children of Midian and their mothers as well.⁴⁵

The violence extended beyond the *Pentateuch*. In *I Samuel*, the Lord ordered Saul to kill all the Amalekites and to “utterly destroy all that they have,”⁴⁶ “both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”⁴⁷ When Saul spared one among

³³ *Genesis* 3:24 (RSVCE).

³⁴ *Id.* at 4:14.

³⁵ *Id.* at 8:21.

³⁶ *Id.* at 19:24.

³⁷ *Id.* at 19:26.

³⁸ *Id.* at 41:57.

³⁹ *Exodus* 12:29 (RSVCE).

⁴⁰ *Numbers* 21:6 (RSVCE).

⁴¹ *Exodus* 19:14 (RSVCE).

⁴² *Id.* at 24:8.

⁴³ *Numbers* 21:6 (RSVCE).

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 31:7.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 31:17.

⁴⁶ *I Samuel* 15:3 (RSVCE).

⁴⁷ *Id.*

the Amalekite, the Lord stripped Saul of his kingship.⁴⁸ In *II Samuel*, “the Lord struck the child” that Bathsheba “bore to David, and it became sick”⁴⁹ and suffered, and “[o]n the seventh day the child died.”⁵⁰ In *II Kings*, at the Lord’s direction, the children of God in Israel were exiled and carried away to Assyria⁵¹ and, shortly thereafter, the children of God in Judah were besieged and starved,⁵² and their homes were burned.⁵³ Then, for good measure, the Lord had His children in Judah carried off to Babylon.⁵⁴

In *Job*, my Gentile eyes discovered that Job “was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil,”⁵⁵ and that even God recognized that Job was the Lord’s “servant.”⁵⁶ Yet, in that book, the Lord placed Job in the “power” of Satan,⁵⁷ and Job’s livestock were stolen,⁵⁸ his property was destroyed,⁵⁹ his children⁶⁰ and servants were killed,⁶¹ and Job, himself, was “afflicted . . . with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head,”⁶² and admonished for four chapters by God, Himself, because Job had sought answers in the midst of his afflictions.⁶³

To my Gentile eyes, the destruction and desolation, isolation and abandonment seemed to carry on and on, book after book. When the oppression would pause, it was only to communicate pages and pages and pages of rules⁶⁴ and projects⁶⁵ for the children of Israel, which the omnipresent eyes of their god would ceaselessly check down to the cubit.⁶⁶ To my Gentile eyes, the God of the Jewish people was an exacting god, and his justice was an exacting justice:

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 15:23.

⁴⁹ *II Samuel* 12:15 (RSVCE).

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 12:18.

⁵¹ *II. Kings* 17:6 (RSVCE).

⁵² *Id.* at 25:2-3.

⁵³ *Id.* at 25:9.

⁵⁴ *Id.* 25:11.

⁵⁵ *Job* 1:1 (RSVCE).

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 1:8.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 2:6.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 1:15.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 1:19.

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.* at 1:15.

⁶² *Id.* at 2:7.

⁶³ *Id.* at 38-41.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., *Leviticus* 1-7 (RSVCE).

⁶⁵ See, e.g., *Exodus* 26 (instructions for the making of the Tabernacle) (RSVCE).

⁶⁶ See, e.g., *id.* at 36 (describing the construction of the Tabernacle).

harsh, vengeful, cruel, and unforgiving. When the psalmist spoke of “fear of the Lord,”⁶⁷ I thought I understood, most definitely, of what the psalmist spoke.

I was on page 1715 of 1865, 92 percent of the way through the sacred scriptures of the Jewish people as presented in what Gentiles call the *Old Testament*, when my Gentile eyes encountered *Jonah*. There was, at that point, no reason to expect that anything was about to change, and initially nothing seemed to.

Jonah began exactly as my Gentile eyes expected: an angry and exacting god preparing to destroy yet another city.⁶⁸ This god tried to pull Jonah into his plan, but Jonah wanted no part of it.⁶⁹ Jonah tried to flee “the presence of” this god by paying the fare and boarding a ship for Tarshish, but this god pursued Jonah with a “great wind” and a “mighty tempest,” which threatened to destroy the ship on which Jonah was trying to escape and all on board the ship as well.⁷⁰

To save the ship and the people on it, Jonah told the crew to appease this god by throwing Jonah into the sea.⁷¹ As Jonah was tossed into the tempest, “the sea ceased from its raging,” and the ship was spared,⁷² but this god “appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah and hold him in its belly “for three days and three nights.”⁷³

Ultimately, the fish “vomited out Jonah upon the dry land,”⁷⁴ and, thus, Jonah finally proceeded to Nineveh as he had been commanded.⁷⁵ As the sun beat down,⁷⁶ Jonah began the three days journey across the “exceedingly great” and wicked city, crying, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”⁷⁷

The people of Nineveh, “from the greatest of them to the least of them,” heard Jonah’s voice and believed.⁷⁸ “[T]hey turned from their evil way,” and their city was spared.⁷⁹

⁶⁷ See, e.g., *Psalms* 110:11 (“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”) (RSVCE).

⁶⁸ *Jonah* 1:2 (RSVCE).

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 1-3.

⁷⁰ *Id.* at 1:3-4.

⁷¹ *Id.* at 1:12.

⁷² *Id.* at 1:15.

⁷³ *Id.* at 1:17.

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 2:10.

⁷⁵ *Id.* at 3:3.

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 4:8.

⁷⁷ *Id.* at 3:3-4.

⁷⁸ *Id.* at 3:5.

When Jonah recognized that his God had spared the city, he became “angry.”⁸⁰ Jonah prayed to the Lord, “[I]s not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil.”⁸¹

It was at that moment that I learned to see with Jewish eyes. Jonah was a Jew. Before Jonah had heard the voice of God call him to Nineveh, Jonah had known the history of his people from the banishment from Eden to the brink of the exiles in Assyria and Babylon.⁸² Yet, in spite of that history, or more accurately because of it, Jonah had known his God to be “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,” a God who “repentest of evil.”⁸³ Jonah had fled the service of God not because he expected Perfect Justice to destroy Nineveh. Jonah had fled the service of God precisely because he expected that ultimately Perfect Justice would spare Nineveh.

Although this twist in Jonah’s story had struck me like a rock, Jewish eyes had encountered the same text for over twenty-five centuries and consistently taken it all in stride. The Jewish people knew their God not as the angry and exacting god that I thought I had met in their scriptures. They knew Him as the God whose love “will not forget” them, whose love had “graven [their] name[s] on the palms of [His] hands.”⁸⁴

The Jewish people with their Jewish eyes, the children of God, the children who knew God best, the children who had walked in His garden,⁸⁵ circled His mountain,⁸⁶ heard His voice,⁸⁷ and pursued Him in both fire and cloud,⁸⁸ the children who had held the two stone tablets of the law as the Lord had passed before them,⁸⁹ and had

⁷⁹ *Id.* at 3:10.

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 4:1.

⁸¹ *Id.* at 4:2.

⁸² II *Kings* 14:25 (The Word of the Lord is spoken through Jonah during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel.).

⁸³ See *supra* text accompanying note 81.

⁸⁴ *Isaiah* 49:15-16 (RSVCE).

⁸⁵ *Genesis* 2 (RSVCE).

⁸⁶ *Exodus* 19 (RSVCE).

⁸⁷ See, e.g., I *Samuel* 3 (RSVCE).

⁸⁸ *Exodus* 13:21-22 (RSVCE).

⁸⁹ *Id.* 34:4-7.

seen the imprint of His finger on those tablets of the law,⁹⁰ the children who had built the Ark of the Covenant down to the cubit,⁹¹ and had heard the reading of God's law and wept at its beauty and at their own hardness of heart,⁹² those children had heard the voice of God, Himself, declare that He is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,"⁹³ and had known those words to be true.⁹⁴

Those children saw differently than I did. They understood differently than I did: they knew that when God had seen the nakedness and shame of Adam and Eve, He had clothed them;⁹⁵ they knew that when God had seen the mark, the stain, of Cain, God had protected Cain;⁹⁶ they knew that when God had seen sin and evil sink their talons so deeply into Job's children that Job found himself unable to shake his family free,⁹⁷ God had wrenched the sin from Job's home⁹⁸ but then restored to Job all and more;⁹⁹ they knew that after God had unleashed the awesome force of His omnipotence upon the Egyptians, Moses had "bowed down to the ground in worship,"¹⁰⁰ but he had also invited the Lord to come with the Jewish people and to receive them as His own;¹⁰¹ they knew that after God had flooded the earth, He had given His children a rainbow¹⁰² and that a rainbow is the sun's light refracted by the tears of God.

I pondered then what Jewish eyes saw as the story continued, and Jonah sat down above the city and looked down on it and gave Perfect Justice one more chance to destroy it.¹⁰³ I watched God "appoint[] a plant, and make it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort."¹⁰⁴ Jonah wel-

⁹⁰ *Id.* at 31:18.

⁹¹ *Id.* at 36.

⁹² *Nehemiah* 8:9-10 (RSVCE).

⁹³ *Exodus* 34:6 (RSVCE).

⁹⁴ *Proverbs* 30:5 (RSVCE).

⁹⁵ *Genesis* 3:21 (RSVCE).

⁹⁶ *Id.* at 4:13-15.

⁹⁷ *Job* 1:4-5 (RSVCE).

⁹⁸ *Id.* at 1:18-19.

⁹⁹ *Id.* at 42:13-15 (Job lost seven sons and three daughters, and the Lord restored to Job seven sons and three daughters.).

¹⁰⁰ *Exodus* 34:8 (RSVCE).

¹⁰¹ *Id.* at 34:9.

¹⁰² *Genesis* 9:13 (RSVCE).

¹⁰³ *Jonah* at 4:5.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.* at 4:6.

comed this act of Perfect Justice for his comfort while he awaited Perfect Justice to destroy his neighbor.¹⁰⁵ But when the plant died and the city did not, Jonah became once more disillusioned with Perfect Justice, and Jonah “asked that he might die,”¹⁰⁶ believing as he did that “[i]t is better for me to die than to live” in a world where Perfect Justice fails to meet his expectations.¹⁰⁷

When Perfect Justice responded to Jonah’s despair, just as Perfect Justice always hears the cries of the poor,¹⁰⁸ even the poor in spirit, Perfect Justice called forth to Jonah’s Jewish eyes the potter’s wheel:

“You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”¹⁰⁹

Ninevites we all are, and Perfect Justice labors over us night and day because we are His and because Perfect Justice always hopes He can still make us perfect and can still make us art.¹¹⁰ Perfect Justice, all-knowing as It is, still looks kindly upon us and appreciates that we “do not know [our] right hand from [our] left,”¹¹¹ we who would judge, and even condemn, Perfect Justice: Perfect Justice, whose gentle eyes see not only us, but even the “cattle” of wicked Nineveh.¹¹²

Jewish eyes knew that in the same moment that Perfect Justice sought to save Nineveh from wickedness, it also sought to save Jonah from his arrogance, cruelty, judgmentalism, harshness, hypocrisy, bigotry, and blindness. Perfect Justice saw a better self for Jonah and called him to it. When Jonah refused to listen, Perfect Jus-

¹⁰⁵ *Id.*

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at 4:8.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

¹⁰⁸ *Psalms* 12:5 (KJV).

¹⁰⁹ *Jonah* 4:10-11 (RSVCE).

¹¹⁰ See *supra* text accompanying notes 1-4.

¹¹¹ *Jonah* 4:11 (RSVCE).

¹¹² *Id.*

tice called again and again, louder and louder. Perfect Justice never gave up on Jonah.

When Jonah would have destroyed himself rather than hear the voice of Perfect Justice, Perfect Justice “brought [Jonah’s] life up from the pit.”¹¹³ When Jonah blamed Perfect Justice for his afflictions,¹¹⁴ Perfect Justice listened to Jonah’s cries and answered them.¹¹⁵ When Jonah condemned Perfect Justice, Perfect Justice tried once more to save him.¹¹⁶

The story of Jonah and the Ninevites shows that Perfect Justice is patient.

Perfect Justice believes in second chances.

Perfect Justice cannot be separated from those who are Its own, and all are Its own. Certain it is that Perfect Justice can separate us from our sins and failures, “tread [them] underfoot” and “cast [them] into the depths of the sea,”¹¹⁷ but Its children, those It would never tread under nor cast away. Those Perfect Justice will always hold in Its right hand.¹¹⁸

Perfect Justice is fruitful beyond what we can hope for. Perfect Justice took nothing and made everything.¹¹⁹ Dust we are, and we are made from dust,¹²⁰ but in the hands of Perfect Justice, we blossom “like a flower [in] the field.”¹²¹

Perfect Justice is willing to pay a price. God does good, but doing good always comes at a price, even for God, and God pays it and He pays it, and He pays it and He pays it, and He pays it, and He pays it; and then on the Seventh Day, He rests.¹²² He who is Omnipotence, He who is Almighty Law-Giver, is also He who rests on the seventh day, He who rests on the Sabbath.¹²³

Perfect Justice sees and hears and answers.¹²⁴

¹¹³ *Id.* at 2:6.

¹¹⁴ *Id.* at 2:3.

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at 2:2-3.

¹¹⁶ *Id.* at 4:9-11.

¹¹⁷ *Micah* 7:19 (RSVCE).

¹¹⁸ *Psalms* 139:10 (RSVCE).

¹¹⁹ *Genesis* 1 (RSVCE).

¹²⁰ *Psalms* 103:14 (RSVCE).

¹²¹ *Id.* at 103:15.

¹²² *Genesis* 2:2 (RSVCE).

¹²³ *Id.*

¹²⁴ *Isaiah* 30:19 (RSVCE).

Perfect Justice does not say merely, “These lives matter,” or “Those lives matter,” or “All lives matter” although that is all true in God’s eyes. Instead, God looks upon the child who stands before Him in brokenness and darkness and confusion and says not, “All lives matter,” but “Your life matters,” regardless of whether one is a Ninevite or even a reluctant prophet.

“Oh,” we say, “if only God could see as we see. If only God could feel our pain. If only God’s justice were as perfect as ours.” We so want God’s justice to be like ours when we should want our justice to be like His.¹²⁵

We acknowledge, I think with some regularity, that our justice is blind, that our justice requires some professional distancing.¹²⁶ Perfect Justice, however, is not blind and is never distant. In fact, there are those who insist that Lot’s wife turned to salt because, when she turned her eyes back to Sodom, she witnessed the anguish of God at the destruction of His people.¹²⁷

Perfect Justice may hide Its eyes from time to time, so we do not see It cry, but Perfect Justice is never blind. Perfect Justice is omniscient, all-seeing, all-knowing. Perfect Justice sees with the eyes of God. Perfect Justice sees with Jewish eyes.

We will be blind to the perfection of justice until we see with Jewish eyes, and we will not see with Jewish eyes until our hearts can be “broken by the things that break the heart of God,”¹²⁸ until we can look upon Nineveh and its “more than a hundred and twenty thou-

¹²⁵ Larry Richards, *Daily Mass*, Thursday, July 9, 2020, YouTube (July 9, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=KFzLyPqPWhw&feature=emb_logo (“We want God’s justice to be like ours when we should want ours to be like God’s.”).

¹²⁶ See John Wagner, *Thankless Task: Tough Young Clients Generate Tough Cases for a Public Defender—Philadelphia’s Richard Bank Tries to Get Them Help Rather than Jail Terms—Courts Mete Out ‘Heavy Hits’*, WALL ST. J., Sept. 25, 1990, at A1. Wagner describes the approach of Richard Bank, a Philadelphia County Public Defender in the Juvenile Special Defense unit, to his work. Mr. Bank insisted that his work required him to develop an “‘aesthetic distance’ that allows him to fight his young clients’ legal battles without becoming emotionally involved in their personal struggles.” *Id.* Still, this aesthetic distancing did not prevent Attorney Bank from offering clients “fatherly advice,” or trying to inspire them, even after the representation had ended, to find constructive outlets for the artistry he knew they had. *Id.*

¹²⁷ *Genesis* 19:26 (RSVCE).

¹²⁸ Carolyn Arends, *The Bittersweet Longing*, in WINDS OF HEAVEN STUFF OF EARTH: SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS INSPIRED BY THE LIFE AND LYRICS OF RICH MULLINS 173, 175 (2017).

sand persons” and its “much cattle”¹²⁹ and see not enemies, nor sinners, nor the worthless, nor the expendable, nor the unrecognizable, but children struggling in darkness, “who do not know their right hand from their left,”¹³⁰ children, whom we might yet save.

We will be blind to the perfection of justice until we can look upon Nineveh and feel the anguish of God, for when our hearts are broken by that which breaks the heart of God, then our eyes can be opened.

Justice Michael Eakin, formerly of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and formerly a county district attorney, was driving home one Christmas Eve in the days before cell phones. Being Christmas Eve, traffic was already bad, and when the weather turned bad as well, it became apparent to Justice Eakin that he would be late arriving home. Justice Eakin thought it best to call home to let them know where he was and how he was progressing, so he pulled into the parking lot of a shopping mall he was passing and went into the mall to use one of the mall’s pay phones.

Once in the mall, Justice Eakin located the mall’s wall of pay phones, strode up to a phone, deposited his quarter, and began to dial. As he did so, however, Justice Eakin noticed a woman, off to the side, seemingly watching him from a distance, and when one is a former county DA, one takes quite seriously the possibility that one is being watched.

As Justice Eakin spoke to his family, he continued to watch the woman watching him, and he also began to formulate a plan to extract himself should anything start to evolve. Sure enough, no sooner had Justice Eakin hung up the phone than the woman approached him.

The woman began, “When you were the county DA, you prosecuted my case.”

Then the woman continued, “During my trial, you said things about me that I didn’t want to hear, and because of you, I had to do things that I didn’t want to do.”

The conversation was not getting off to a good start.

But then the woman added, “But you also saved my life. And I just wanted to say, ‘Thank you,’” and then the woman was gone.

Brief as their encounter had been, in that moment, Justice Eakin was assured that at least once in his career, Perfect Justice had

¹²⁹ *Jonah* 4:11 (RSVCE).

¹³⁰ *Id.*

acted through his life. This was so because in the life of that woman, Justice Eakin had used justice to save, and that is what justice does when it is perfect. Justice cannot be perfect until He who would be judge is “both judge and bearer of salvation.”¹³¹

In regard to my inmate friend, one is still left to ask, how would Perfect Justice respond to the cry of an inmate who wanted death?

How would Perfect Justice respond to an inmate who believed he could only be a source of pain?

How would Perfect Justice respond to an inmate who believed he had nothing more to say?

Perfect Justice would assure this man that he had more to say, that he had wisdom to share.

Perfect Justice would never accept that pain was all that the man had left to give; rather, Perfect Justice would call him to do good.

Immersed as it is in hope, Perfect Justice never asks whether good can still be done. Instead, Perfect Justice asks only how It can still do good—because doing good is what Perfect Justice does, all It can do, all It longs to do—and even when It is confronted with the reality that no good can be done, still, sometimes, Perfect Justice extends second chances just so we will know that such justice is “slow to anger, [and] abounding in mercy”¹³² because that is a good in itself.

Ultimately, I do not believe Perfect Justice would demand of my inmate friend his death. I do not think Perfect Justice would let him off so easily. Jonah tried that. “Take me up and throw me into the sea,” Jonah said.¹³³ “Then the sea will quiet down for you”.¹³⁴ a human sacrifice to an angry god.

Perfect Justice, however, refused to accept Jonah’s death. Instead, It reached into “the Pit,”¹³⁵ into the darkness, into “the belly” of death itself,¹³⁶ and returned to Jonah his life,¹³⁷ and then Perfect

¹³¹ Posting of Bishop Robert Barron, wof@wordonfire.org, to brendaclee@verizon.net (July 27, 2020) (on file with author).

¹³² *Psalms* 103:8 (NABRE).

¹³³ *Jonah* 1:12 (RSVCE).

¹³⁴ *Id.*

¹³⁵ *Id.* at 2:6.

¹³⁶ *Id.* at 2:2.

¹³⁷ *Id.* at 2:6.

Justice claimed that life as Its own, to serve as an instrument of Justice, to save others.¹³⁸

Perfect Justice saves. That is what Justice does. At least, that is what justice does when it is perfect. The wheel turns. The Hands of the Potter coax the art from the clay. The clay falters; the Potter responds, again and again, around and around until, in the end, all has been made as it was intended to be: beautiful and “very good.”¹³⁹ And the first breaths of the *Pentateuch* insist that we have been made in the likeness of the Potter, and that we are called to do as Perfect Justice does.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ *Id.* at 3:1-2.

¹³⁹ *Genesis* 1:31 (King James).

¹⁴⁰ *Id.* at 1:27.