

A READING OF

PATIENCE

by

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Abstract

Patience is a work which has been much neglected. This seems to have been caused partly by its manifest inferiority to Pearl and Sir Gawain, (which are also found in MS. Cotton Nero A.x), and partly by widespread scholarly prejudice against homiletic literature.

This study begins by comparing the poem to the homiletic tradition in which it has its roots. Though Patience is similar in purpose and subject to the medieval sermon, it becomes apparent that the poet refined the methods of the homilist, combining overt didactic intent with a high degree of subtlety and artistry.

An examination of the first sixty lines of the poem, which act as a prologue to the story of Jonah, reveals that here the poet assumes the persona of a preacher addressing his congregation, and carefully defines the moral lesson which his story will illustrate and the biblical authority upon which it is based. Particularly interesting is his widening of the range of meaning

suggested by the terms "pacience" and "pouerte".

A close comparison of the poet's version of the Jonah story with the Vulgate text of the Book of Jonah shows how he developed those parts which best suited his purpose, adding significant details throughout and long descriptive passages at times. It is suggested that he changes and adds to his source with the greatest of care and skill, in order to develop the psychological subtlety of his story and define with precision the ethical lessons that it contains.

Jonah has been treated by many Christian commentators as a type of Christ. The influence of this idea upon the poet and its significance in relation to the moral structure of Patience is considered with some care.

The poet presents Jonah as a man who, after first failing to live up to the standards of Christian conduct and being punished for this, repents and briefly becomes an exemplary "miles Christi", only to backslide and fall into sin once more. The poet does not accompany his account of this failure with facile moralizing. Rather, he suggests that Jonah is an average man, neither outstandingly good nor particularly bad, who, like all Christians, is asked to live up to a standard of conduct

which is beyond his capabilities. But the final impression of the poem is not so disheartening as this might suggest, for the poet has laid a special emphasis upon the mercy of God. The pardoning of the Ninevites and of Jonah while he is in the whale has demonstrated that God is quick to forgive those who repent their sins fully and sincerely. There is certainly no suggestion at the end of the poem that Jonah will be damned, but rather that he will soon repent again. Though life is seen in terms of a struggle to achieve righteousness in the face of misfortune and poverty, the poet leads us to believe that through the exercise of patience a man may learn to master his natural human weakness. He will in all probability sin, but so long as he can repent, not once but if necessary many times, he may hope to achieve salvation. The poem ends as it began, with the preacher-poet communicating to his flock a Way of Life whose demanding nature can be mitigated only by the limitless mercy of God.

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to offer a reading of Patience as a work of literary art. It has not usually been regarded as worthy of such attention, but has rather been treated as a minor, and inferior, poem (probably) by a great poet; as one of the interminable list of alliterative poems to be given a passing mention in literary histories; or as yet another tedious medieval religious work, to be coupled with Purity and lamented over. It has not been discussed with the same insight, imagination, sympathy and sound scholarship which have informed the best studies of Chaucer or Piers Plowman, or indeed of Pearl or Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. I feel that Patience deserves this kind of attention.

It is of course a common critical gambit to claim that the work on which one is writing has been neglected or misunderstood by the scholarly community, and at worst this may be an attempt to justify an unnecessary thesis. In the case of Patience, I may plead my innocence of any such ulterior motive, and feel

confident that the impartial evidence of bibliography will bear out my testimony. No book has been published on Patience alone, or on Patience and Purity together. Critical attention, outside of articles, a few theses, and introductory matter in editions, is limited to comments in literary histories and chapters in books on the alliterative revival or the Gawain-poet. A large proportion of the articles and editorial studies deal with textual points, dialect and source material; most of the chapters and theses consider Patience and Purity together, in relation either to a particular special subject, or, more often, to major literary movements. The poem has not been edited since 1924, and the only edition now available was first produced in 1864.¹ Few critics have attempted to analyze its unusual and very considerable virtues, to ask how it works and investigate what it may communicate to the sensitive reader.

My reference to the Gawain-poet begs an unavoidable question, that of authorship. Patience is found, along with Purity (which is also known as Cleanness), Pearl and Sir Gawain, in a unique British Museum MS, (Cotton Nero A.x.), and this fact has led most critics to assume that the four poems are all the work of one poet. There is much internal evidence to support this theory. The poems are written in the same dialect, and have

strong similarities in their dominant images, in their technical brilliance and structural intricacy, in their subject matter, in the subtlety of psychological insight common to them all, and in the view of life which they embody. Most important, although Sir Gawain and Pearl are clearly the masterpieces of the MS, all four poems are of an exceptionally high standard.² Some critics have attempted to discover the identity of the elusive poet, and various names have been suggested, among them Strode, Huchoun, and John of Erghome, but no definitive evidence has appeared.³ Another critical fashion, that of constructing fanciful biographies of the poet around a literal interpretation of selected themes and events in his poems has, thankfully, died.⁴ All we know for sure is that they were written somewhere in the North-West Midlands during the last half of the fourteenth century. A few scholars have doubted the idea of common authorship,⁵ (suggesting that the poems are the products of a school of poets), but a vast majority accept the theory, and the anonymous poet is commonly known as the Pearl- or Gawain-poet. It does, in the last analysis, seem reasonable to suppose that one poet of exceptional ability was responsible for all four poems. For the purposes of this thesis I will assume this to be the case, and will refer to the author as "the poet" or "the Gawain-poet".

Patience is a religious poem, homiletic in form and purpose. Despite its distinctive tone and exceptional quality, it has much in common with contemporary religious writing, and thus invites comparison with the sermons and other homiletic literature of the Middle Ages. My thesis therefore begins with a brief discussion of the main characteristics of this great tradition. I then argue that in Patience the Gawain-poet writes a verse sermon directly in the homiletic tradition of purely didactic verse and prose, but that with the intuitive craftsmanship of a fine poet he also produces a highly-wrought artefact, combining and harmonizing the evocative power of his verse with the substance of his moral vision with such consummate skill that both stand out yet neither precludes the other. Patience is a poem which pleases deeply while instructing gently.

Introduction: Footnotes

- 1 See Bibliography, Section 2.
- 2 For a list of the important articles on the theory of common authorship, see Bibliography, Section 8.
- 3 See Bibliography, Section 8.
- 4 See, for example, Sir I. Gollancz, "Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawayne," Cambridge History of English Literature (Cambridge, 1907), vol. 1; and B. ten Brink, History of English Literature, trans. Kennedy (New York, 1889), vol. 1, pp. 348 ff.
- 5 The most articulate presentation of the arguments against common authorship is found in J.W. Clark's four articles: see Bibliography, Section 8.

Chapter One: Patience and the Homiletic Tradition

I

Unlikely as it would seem for a great tradition of English letters to remain virtually undiscovered until well into the twentieth century, homiletic and devotional writing from the Conquest to the Renaissance was until fairly recently an altogether neglected subject. It is less than forty years since the existence of a continuous tradition of religious prose developing steadily through the Middle Ages was first postulated, by R.W. Chambers in his essay, The Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and his School.¹ He contends that it was this tradition which kept English prose alive during the dark years following the Conquest and the destruction of Anglo-Saxon culture, and thus prepared the way for the flowering of prose under the Tudors. A year after the appearance of Chambers's essay, G.R. Owst's pioneering work, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England² was published, with the appropriate sub-title,

"a neglected chapter in the history of English letters and of the English people". Developing the line of investigation which he had begun in his earlier, mainly historical study, Preaching in Medieval England³, Owst approaches this body of writing primarily as a literary critic, and reaches the same conclusions as Chambers at practically the same time. But he takes his argument one step further than Chambers, claiming not only the existence of a continuous tradition of religious writing, (both verse and prose), but also that this is a missing link in English literary history. He argues most convincingly that the failure of scholars to recognize the profundity of its influence has led to a myriad faux pas in the criticism of a wide variety of works.

By its very nature, Literature and Pulpit gives the impression of being a catalogue of religious writings interspersed with observations on their major features. But it is hardly fair to complain about such shortcomings in a work dealing with material which was previously almost entirely untouched, and which the author was aware would be almost totally unfamiliar to his readers. In any event, it remains the standard work on the religious literature of medieval England; for investigations in this field are still very much in the exploratory stages. It is now well established that this tradition influenced the shape of

literature to come in a most fundamental way, yet no major work on it has been published for more than thirty years. No study has yet appeared which satisfactorily defines the differences in form and purpose among the major types of religious literature, the sermon, treatise, manual and saint's life, or which offers a consideration of the significance of the exemplum and moralized tale, of symbolism and allegory, in each. Indeed, it will not be possible to accomplish such tasks as this with any degree of authority until a large body of material has been edited, and the history of hundreds of years of homiletic and devotional literature is written.

As a result of this state of affairs, the critical approach to this literature is fraught with peril. A brief account of the uncertainties involved in attempting to come to terms with the sermon, probably the variety of medieval religious literature of which the largest numbers survive, should illustrate some of the major problems. It has been established⁴ that huge numbers of sermons were preached during the Middle Ages and that many were also written down. But it is difficult to be sure of the exact relationship between the written sermon and what a congregation would actually have heard. Before they were formalized into the written word, sermons had often been

in oral circulation in one form or another for centuries, and thus the same story, almost at times the same sermon, will appear in the work of two or more different writers. Moreover, because the collections of written sermons were often intended as material for preachers to use as the basis of their live sermons, it is probable that they seldom reached the ears of a congregation without some modification or embellishment. The sermons available in print to the modern reader represent only a small proportion of those which survive in MS, and the number of these has doubtless been drastically reduced over a period of hundreds of years as a result of religious and political upheavals, fire, flood, and everyday wear.

Neither can we speak of "the sermon" with any degree of confidence, for it is not possible to be sure that this or any other such category is in itself meaningful. Though we may think of a manual for the instruction of parish priests, like the Speculum Sacerdotale, as something totally different and separate from a sermon-series, we will in fact find it full of vernacular sermons for the purpose of illustrating particular ethical points. Again, the saint's life is usually thought of as a form quite distinct from the sermon, and yet in Mirk's Festial we find that each sermon tells the story of a saint's life. If we

attempt to approach the sermon in the way in which we are accustomed to approach literature, expecting to find an individual writer's own conscious organization of significance through art, then we meet another problem. An examination of the correspondences between parallel sermons in Mirk's Festial and the Speculum Sacerdotale will demonstrate that this way of thinking about literature cannot be usefully applied to these writings. That the problem is still more complex is indicated, for instance, by an investigation of the manner in which both frequently make use of closely translated paraphrases of such sources as the Legenda Aurea of Jacob de Voragine⁵. We come to the realization that this literature consists of a wide range of writings, all of which draw on a common fund of biblical and patristic source material and upon their own predecessors in the genre, thus forming a communal literature, based upon the assumption that the end of teaching the Word is more important than the means by which this end is achieved.

By first focussing attention on this end, I hope to limit the type of material with which Patience is to be compared, and to define the main principle which makes this comparison valid. Thus it should prove possible to prepare the ground upon which the exact nature of the relationship between Patience and the

homiletic tradition may be established. The supposition that it is possible to divide the entire body of medieval religious literature into two categories, the devotional and the homiletic, is made on the understanding that this division would probably prove less than satisfactory in any but the most general application. But for the purposes of this study it will be helpful to leave aside that literature which may broadly be described as devotional, on the ground that this is written primarily for the private edification of the individual, and to concentrate on homily, the intent of which is to instruct many through the voice of one. Given this distinction, I will for the most part compare Patience to works which may vaguely be termed "sermons", for it is to these that it bears the closest resemblance. There can be doubt neither that Patience fulfils the essential function of the sermon, that of teaching the Word, nor that its narrator unequivocally assumes the role of the preacher. The sermon is the medium through which the medieval preacher instructed his flock in the Christian faith, and through which he might communicate to them the scale of values which the faith contains and the rule of life which it demands. In order that his audience might be the more willing to assimilate his teaching, the preacher needed to entertain as he instructed, to lighten the gloom of stern Christian moralizing with something more im-

mediately attractive. This source of human interest, through which the double necessity of instruction and entertainment might be fulfilled, is the moralized tale, which developed into an integral part of the sermon and appears, in a highly sophisticated form, in Patience. Through these stories of God and man, sinner and saint, beast and marvel, and the moral commentary with which he integrates them with the fabric of the sermon, the preacher could communicate the Word and the Way.

As the basic nature of the sermon was determined by its function, that of instructing people, so the character of these people exercised a profound influence on the way in which this instruction was carried out. It is usually assumed⁶ that sermons written in the vernacular were addressed to lay audiences, which would have been predominantly illiterate. The normal method of these sermons is therefore to use the moralized tale or exemplum to illustrate the ethical significance of a particular point, and then to exhort the congregation to examine their conscience in the light of this teaching, deriving from it straightforward practical advice on their personal conduct. Thus these stories are designed to relate directly to the terms in which the uneducated and unsophisticated apprehend the nature of their existence, illustrating the moral significance of

everyday experience through the telling of entertaining tales. Bearing in mind the function and character of the sermon, we will not be surprised to find the preacher using the figure of the saint as an exemplum in a manner similar to that in which the hero is employed in the epic. A saint is clearly a man like any member of the congregation, except that, whereas the hero has superhuman courage and powers of endurance, the saint possesses unshakeable faith and virtue, powers of teaching and healing, and determination in the face of an adversary which, though sometimes less palpable, is more deadly by far than that which the hero faces. Just as it could be argued that in socio-military terms the hero represents a model of conduct to a society based upon the assumptions of the comitatus, so, in religio-moral terms and in a different social context, the trials and triumphs of the saint are related with the specific purpose of encouraging the imitation of his fellow "milites Christi". The other major result of the influence of the audience on the sermon is illustrated by the preacher's desire to authenticate the facts of his stories and exempla. In order to help his listeners believe that a story is true, he will often give actual names to the characters and to the place in which the events occur, and even give geographical details of the countryside. More important than this, the preacher often pro-

vides brief and lively descriptions of characters from contemporary society to illustrate his moral points, and these fascinating vignettes give us invaluable insights into the actual conditions and temper of medieval society, much as the painting of Pieter Breughel the Elder conveys the atmosphere of Flemish peasant life in the sixteenth century. These descriptions also offer the preacher an opportunity to comment on the folly and excess of the characters he portrays with the terse, epigrammatic wit which is so typical of the sermon. By referring his moral judgements to descriptions of people and things which would be familiar to his congregation, the preacher might emphasize the relevance for them of everything he said.

The character of the audience should be related to the work of the Friars, who, in the early Middle Ages, did more than any other group to popularize the sermon⁷. The nature of their order made the Friars eminently fitted for the task of communicating with the common man. They lived^{and} worked among the peasants, sharing their poverty and suffering with them the buffets of a harsh aristocratic society, without the protection which the structure of the Church afforded the regular clergy. This factor profoundly affects the tone of the sermon, for the Mendicant understands and sympathizes with the peasant's sense of injustice and his predominant mood of pessimism at the

"slings and arrows of outrageous fortune", which may only be meaningfully escaped through a transference of ultimate significance from the material onto the spiritual plane. The sermons preached by the Mendicants in this context, with their dominant strain of bitter social criticism and fierce moral denunciation, and their constant advocacy of "contemptus mundi", constitute the bulk of the homiletic literature written down by the monks and recluses of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Thus the voice of the Friar was perpetuated through the medium of the sermon, and the pulpit maintained its tradition of fearless denunciation of injustice and grim prediction of the wages of sin.

The preacher was ever conscious that his purpose was to warn his flock to avoid the snares of sin and to exhort them to lead godly and virtuous lives. Thus he might hope to save those in danger of damnation and to strengthen the devotion of the faithful. The sermon was the perfect medium through which to accomplish this purpose, for of the three major types of material which it contains -- exposition of doctrine, illustrative tale or exemplum, and interpretation -- the last two offer the preacher ample opportunity to apply his message directly to his audience. One of his favourite techniques is

to contrast by juxtaposition the horrors of damnation and the joys of salvation. Thus he may imply a message of consolation to the virtuous peasant by assuring him that his oppressors on earth are doomed to everlasting torment while he has only to endure his worldly lot with patience in order to guarantee himself eternal bliss. Another of the preacher's most commonly used devices is the movement from a general statement to a particular one; thus when he speaks of sin he will often first define the character of a particular sin in general terms, and then relate this generalized concept to a particular type or class of person. The potential tedium of the repetitive method of enumerating a list of varieties of each individual sin is often avoided through the liveliness of the accompanying sketches of contemporary life, to which I have already alluded. But whatever the liveliness of these descriptions, the preacher's message is usually predominantly gloomy, and the world which he describes is normally filled with sin and corruption, not just among the rich and noble, of whom such things are to be expected, but also, alas, among the poor and lowly, to whom Christ addressed Himself in particular. Our strongest impression of the preacher is that of the bringer of warning and fear of damnation, of the man constantly exhorting his spiritual charges to repent their sins and mend their ways. At the same time we

often sense a hint of hopelessness, perhaps at the conviction that only a few will be saved. In the words of Owst⁸, his predominant tone is that of the Owl rather than that of the Nightingale.

As a result of their purpose and genesis, the sermons are a bizarre mixture of the simple and the erudite, the homely and the sublime. While lively and straightforward descriptions of people who would have been immediately recognizable to an illiterate audience are consistently used to illustrate moral points, these are often juxtaposed with nonchalant references to patristic sources or to one of the major encyclopedias. In fact, as I have already mentioned, it is not usual for anything of any real intellectual complexity to be attempted in the sermon. The references to erudite sources are used to authorize a particular interpretation or judgement and to impress an audience whose respect for ultimate authority in this hierarchical age must have been profound. But these disparate elements and variations in form are united in one medium through the focussing principle of the preacher communicating the values of the Christian synthesis through the Word of God and the Rule of Life.

If the sermons ever constitute what we call art, then it

is unconscious art of communal authorship, an accidental by-product of a form whose entire purpose was to teach. Indeed, art would probably have been distrusted by many preachers as a potential distraction from the most important duty of life. This may in part explain why the sermon almost entirely ignores the beauties of Gothic architecture, which seems strange when one considers that the Gothic church was the physical environment in which so many sermons would have been preached. The homiletic custom of denouncing physical beauty as something which might lead to sin may well have made the preacher wary of praising the beauties of a church. My own view is that there may be another contributory cause of this peculiar fact. It seems quite possible that church architecture would have been associated specifically with the regular clergy, and that the absence of references to its beauty in the sermons may therefore reflect the fact that most of these were originally the work of the Friars, who were usually on less than friendly terms with the secular clergy. No one who has read the Friar's Tale and the Summoner's Tale would doubt this last point. Indeed, it was probably customary for the Friar to preach outside of the precincts of the parish church. There is a picture in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, which shows a Friar preaching to a most attentive audience outside the door of a church⁹.

The juxtaposition of the church and the preacher and the suggestion of antipathy between them implies an ironic message, and the calm sincerity of expression on the face of the Friar makes it clear that the irony is not intended to be at his expense. The lame man who is in the process of leaving the church to join the congregation outside makes the point of the picture unmistakable. However, in spite of its failure or refusal to recognize the splendours of Gothic architecture and the spiritually uplifting experience which it might offer to man, the homiletic literature of the Middle Ages did produce art in a very real sense, for it is the seed to which a vast quantity of later literature owes its ultimate origin, and in its own age it not only continues the tradition of English prose but also inspires much devotional and homiletic poetry. A brief review of the major characteristics which Patience has in common with the sermon may suggest how much this tradition gave to poetry, and show how a poet of genius was able to mould his material to serve his own artistic ends without violating its essentially homiletic purpose.

II

Mr. Owst complains in his preface to Literature and Pulpit of the widespread critical prejudice against homiletic writing, and the frequency with which reputable scholars will either ignore sermon literature, or subject it to harsh and unreasonable comparison with secular writings. To some extent, his comments are applicable to the works of the Gawain-poet. Patience and Purity¹⁰, often referred to by critics of the poet as "the homilies", have both suffered as a result of the inevitable comparisons which have been made between them and the other two poems. No one would seriously dispute the manifest superiority of Pearl and Sir Gawain, any more than one would attempt to claim that Much Ado attains the heights of King Lear; but this is hardly to say that the lesser works should not be read and discussed with sympathy and attention. Pearl, although it is a religious poem, has escaped such censure because it is not an overtly homiletic one, and in any case its brilliance is so spectacular that even the dullest critic could not fail to recognize it as a great poem. The tendency for scholars to

deem Patience and Purity unworthy of detailed critical examination, or to brush them off with a passing sneer before going on to discuss the two greater poems, is indicative of a sad but familiar failure to read homiletic literature with perception and imagination. M. Emile Pons, an editor of Sir Gawain, is typical of this breed of unsympathetic critics. In the Introduction to his edition, he describes the two "homilies" as examples of

"littérature" biblique soutenue et laborieuse, monotone et inégale ... tout cela déprouve de la noble et claire ordonnance, de l'architecture si solide et soignée de Gauvain.¹¹

The ironic inverted commas around the word "littérature" are indicative of the writer's patronizing attitude.

One might expect that the experience of editing a poem would be likely to prejudice a scholar in favour of the work with which he has been so closely involved, but with Patience this has not been the case. The two twentieth-century editors of critical texts speak equally slightly of it. Bateson warns us that

It is necessary to harmonize our feelings with the atmosphere of the story or to approach it as a tale of wonder. Animated by such sympathy, those who delight in the naive charm of happy primitive faith will read with novel interest the story of Jonah related over five centuries ago by a Lancashire poet.¹²

Faced with this kind of condescension, it is difficult to decide who is being patronized most, the modern reader who is treated like a child, the medieval audience with its "happy primitive faith", or the "Lancashire poet" who was responsible for this curiosity. The other twentieth-century editor, Sir Israel Gollancz, feels obliged to apologize for the poem in a similar manner, explaining that the poet

... transformed and amplified in characteristic fashion the terse Biblical narrative, so that the story might vividly appeal to simple folk.¹³

This is misleading. A.C. Spearing has pointed out that there is no evidence whatever that the audience for which the poet wrote Patience differed from that for which he wrote Pearl and Sir Gawain.¹⁴ If we are to believe that these were "simple folk", then they seem to have thrived on a diet of disconcerting complexity. Scholars agree that the two greater poems were written for a highly sophisticated courtly audience. The essential difference between them and the "homilies" is one of genre. It is reasonable to assume that a poet writing a homiletic work for the edification of a courtly audience would have retained much of the simple tone of the traditional homily: a tone which is, after all, ultimately derived from the Bible. If we accept the fact that Patience is a homily, then we should refrain from the chorus of unsympathetic and unimaginative critics who com-

plain in effect that it does not coincide with some vague notion of what constitutes good poetry. If we read it in the context of the tradition from which it is derived, we may come to realize how completely it fulfils the requirements of the sermon and yet how utterly it transcends the artistic limitations from which homiletic literature normally suffers.

We are made aware at the beginning of Patience that the narrator is speaking to us as a preacher addresses his congregation, and that his subject is essentially that of a sermon. He begins with a statement of his theme and its value for mankind:

Patience is a nobel poynt, þa₃ hit displese ofte.
When heuy herttes ben hurt wyth heþyng oþer elles,
Suffraunce may aswagen hem & þe swelme leþe;
For houelles vche a qued & quenches malyce.
For quo-so suffer cowþe syt, sele wolde folþe;
& quo for þro may nozt þole, þe þikker he sufferes;
þen is better to abyde þe bur vmbe-stoundes,
þen ay þrow forth my þro, þa₃ me þynk ylle.¹⁵

Similarly, the traditional sermon often refers to the inevitability of suffering in this world, and advocates the resolute acceptance of pain and misfortune. In his sermon, "De Solempnitate Sancti Martini", Mirk holds up St. Martin as an example of this kind of quiet fortitude:

He was of soo gret pacyens and suffrence þat hys clerkes smoton hym; but he toke hit pacyently, and was neuer þe wroþer aftyr wyth hom.¹⁶

The Gawain-poet goes on to paraphrase the Beatitudes from the

Sermon on the Mount, equating his theme of patience with the eighth, "Beati qui persecutionem patiuntur propter iustitiam" (Matt. v. 10). He uses the familiar biblical text to authorize his interpretation of patience and the esteem in which he holds it, much as the sermon-writers will often support an argument by interjecting such comments as "And þerfore seyþ þe prophete in þe Sawtur Boke"¹⁷, or, for that matter, "For God seiþ þus: 'Beati qui lugent, quoniam ipsi consolabuntur'"¹⁸. It is immediately apparent in his use of the preacher-narrator that the Gawain-poet observes the form of the sermon; and like the homilist he uses the Bible as a source of authority as well as an inspiration.

At the end of his sixty-line prologue on patience, poverty, and the need for man to accept suffering with fortitude, the poet switches from the general to the specific. He suddenly asks,

Did not Jonas in Jude suche jape sum-whyle:
To sette hym to sewrte, vnsounde he hym feches?
(57-8)

Jonah is introduced as an example to illustrate the truth of the foregoing general assertions: to show how man often fails to face adversity with resolution because of his lack of patience. The narrator offers to tell the story of Jonah to his audience,

Wyl 3e tary a lyttel tyne, & tent me a whyle,
I schal wysse yow þer-wyth, as holy wryt telles,
(59-60)

reminding us again in the final half-line of the scriptural authority on which his account depends. He reappears at the end of the poem to restate the moral of his story:

Forþy, when pouerte me enpreceȝ & payneȝ innoȝe,
Ful softly with suffraunce saȝttel me hihoueȝ;
For þe penaunce & payne to preue hit in syȝt,
Ȝat patience is a nobel poynt, þaȝ hit displese ofte.
Amen. (528-32)

During the bulk of the poem, our attention is focussed on the narrative, but, periodically, the narrator interrupts the story to offer a comment in his own right. Thus, when Jonah boards the ship in his attempt to escape from God, the narrator exclaims:

Lo! þe wytles wrechche, for he wolde noȝt suffer,
Now hatȝ he put hym in plyt of peril wel more.
(113-14)

Witty and ironic, but with a hard edge of bitter denunciation, this is in the tradition of typical pulpit criticism. We are constantly aware that the story is being told us through the persona of a preacher-narrator, and that its purpose is to illustrate a specific moral point.

I have observed that one of the main purposes of the saint's life, and of the sermon in celebration of the saint's feast, which recounts tales of his life and work, is to encourage the audience to imitate the virtue of a godly person. In the sermon "De Festo

Sancti Nicholai", Mirk describes the virtues possessed by St. Nicholas as a child:

Also when he was yn cradull, he fast Wennysday and Fryday; þe wheche dayes he nold sowke but ones yn þe day, and soo hold hym apayde ... þus all his lyfe-dayes, he lyued so mekly, and so symply, and soo wythout maleys, þat all þe pepull hym louet and praysyd for his meke leuyng.¹⁹

Clearly this account is intended to encourage imitation. In contrast, the story of Jonah is primarily a negative exemplum, that is, its main function is to praise patience and exhort the audience to practise it by illustrating Jonah's lack of patience and describing God's punishment of him. Nevertheless we must not forget that in the middle of the poem there is an account of Jonah bringing the Word of God to the Ninevites: at this point he is clearly worthy of praise. Usually, when a sermon describes the fate of a wicked person, it will also include an account of a good character, to offer a living proof of an alternative structure of values. This is very apparent in Purity, which is about impurity and yet contains glowing portraits of Noah, Abraham, and Daniel. In Patience, the presentation of the Christian value structure is more complex and more subtle, for we see Jonah behaving first wickedly, then virtuously, then wickedly once more. Good and evil in the world are presented in terms of the potentiality for good and evil contained within

one man, and although Jonah is primarily an example of impatience, he is also, for a time, an obedient servant of God. Thus, although the central message of the poem is that the audience should avoid the impatience of which Jonah is guilty, he is also, albeit briefly, a model for their imitation.

One of the most memorable parts of Patience is that in which the fleeing Jonah is overtaken by a storm at sea, cast overboard by sailors, and swallowed by the whale. This is essentially an account of divine retribution, in which the punishment of the guilty Jonah is carried out in a mysterious, terrifying, and intensely dramatic sequence of events, utterly beyond the powers or comprehension of man. Tales of retributive marvels occur very frequently in the sermons, and it is possible that many of them were gleaned from biblical and folk sources at least partly because they contained the essential ingredients of horror, drama, and (usually) the speedy demise of the wicked. Mirk provides a good example, describing how St. Michael intervenes on behalf of a Christian army beset by Pagans, sending a lethal mist to ravage the ranks of the unbelievers:

Then, on the morow when the batayle schuld mete,
þe hull of Garganus was hullyd wyth a dark myst.
And out of þat myst com fleyng so thycke arowse
of fyre and boltes of thondyr, and wondet þe pay-
nems, þat þay floen all þat myghten, and mony of
hom wern slayne.²⁰

The homilist's account of the retributive marvel serves as a warning to his flock. They are encouraged to take heed and mend their ways, for if they fail to do so they will have reason to fear a God who can strike down the wicked so swiftly and in such mysterious ways. The three main illustrative tales in Purity, the stories of the Flood, the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Writing on the Wall, are all descriptions of God's punishment of the wicked, in this case, the impure. After relating the story of the Flood, the Gawain-poet warns his audience:

Forþy war þe now, wyȝe þat worschyp desyres
In his comlych corte þat Kyng is of blysse,
In þe fylþe of þe flesch þat þou be founden never,
Tyl any water in þe worlde to wasche þe fayly.²¹

There is no such explicit warning in Patience, but the audience could hardly fail to comprehend the warning implicit in the story of Jonah.

Stories of supernatural occurrences and the hideous fates of the sinful would be likely to have had a tremendous effect on a superstitious audience, and the homilist probably considered them more likely than any other variety of tale to persuade people to lead godly lives. References to hell, its gaping mouth and hideous fiends, are common in the sermons. With their characteristic love for learned discussions on the actual

physical nature of anything of relevance to their religion, the homilists eagerly consider the location of hell and the appearance and conduct of its inmates. The compiler of the Gesta Romanorum comments on its geographical location:

helle is in the middis of the Erthe scil. in the centre of the erþe, as seithe the Philesophir; and þerfore a man moste be ware of synne.²²

Other writers offer far more immediate and less restrained descriptions of the actual conditions of hell:

3iff þat a dampned man desire to se delectabull þinges, þer shall oribull devels be seyn, whos faces ben Brent and blake in semblance: "Facies eorum sicut combuste", Ysaie 13; vnde, Nahum 2, "Facies eorum sicut nigredo olle" ...²³

It is interesting to observe the way in which the writer pauses to refer to biblical authorities to confirm even this horrible description. We may see that the homilist's account of the continuing conflict between good and evil is presented through illustrative stories of actual confrontation between people and creatures fully realized in physical terms and unequivocally fighting either for God or the Devil.

Instead of bringing physically-realized representatives of good and evil into the naturalistic world of Patience, the Gawain-poet makes his audience aware of the conflicting powers of good and evil through his searching portrayal of Jonah, who

conducts himself in such a way that anyone familiar with the value-structure of Christianity will be aware that he is constantly torn between his duty to God and his natural human unworthiness. Thus, when Jonah determines to flee from his duty to God, the motivation of his disobedience is presented in human terms:

When þat steuen wat3 stynt þat stoned his mynde,
Al he wrathed in his wyt, & wyþerly he þo3t:
"If I bowe to his bode & bryng hem þis tale,
& I be nummen in Nuniue, my nyes begynes:
He telles me þose traytours arn typpede schrewes;
I com wyth þose tyþynges, þay ta me bylyue,
Pyne3 me in a prysoun, put me in stokkes,
Wryþe me in a warlok, wrast out myn y3en." (73-80)

The average homilist would probably have explained that the Devil, or else some specific failing in Jonah, prompted him to disobey. Instead, the Gawain-poet presents us with the complex dramatic process of a man, motivated by fear for his own safety, justifying to himself a desire to shirk a duty which the better part of his character would never question.

If we examine the way in which the poet handles the episode in which Jonah is swallowed by the whale, we will find more evidence of his refining the traditional methods of the sermon. When describing a retributive marvel, the homilist is content to inform his audience of what happens, emphasizing the marvellous element, the horror, and the speed with which the

sinful are despatched. When Mirk describes the "xv dayes of gret drede" which will precede the "secunde comyng", what he says in indeed "ferdfull, and horrybull", but its function is purely utilitarian: it instructs and it terrifies. His prediction of the events of the sixth day is typical:

The vj. day all byldyngys and castelles schull fall adowne to þe grownde, and an horrybull fyre schall aryse at þe sonne goyng downe, and þen a3eyne at þe vprysyng of hym.²⁴

In Patience we find this technique modified by the conscious artistry of the Gawain-poet, and without losing its homiletic intent, turned into a vehicle for some brilliant and startlingly original poetry. When Jonah is thrown to the whale, the poet, instead of merely informing us of his fate, actually describes his descent into the stomach:

He glydes in by þe giles þur3 glaym ande glette,
Relande in by a rop, a rode þat hym þo3t,
Ay hele ouer hed, hourlande aboute,
Til he blunt in a blok as brod as a halle;
& þer he festnes þe fete & fathme3 aboute,
& stod vp in his stomak, þat stank as þe deuel,
þer in saym & in saur þat sauored as helle,
þer wat3 bylded his bour, þat wyl no bale suffer.
(269-76)

The account is more terrifying than Mirk's fire and destruction, because it is so much more personal and immediate. The poet draws his audience to identify with Jonah as he tumbles down into the stinking depths of his personal hell, and thus to under-

stand the terror of facing the wrath of God. The quality of the poetry intensifies the homiletic efficacy of the passage.

As well as the greater subtlety of his moral vision, and the extraordinary quality of his poetry, the Gawain-poet also brings to the sermon genre a more humane and merciful attitude to mankind than is normally shown by the medieval homilist. This can be seen in Purity, in the description of the people about to be drowned in the Flood:

Frenez fellen in fere and faþmed togeder,
To dry3 her delful deystyne and dy3en alle samen;
Luf lokez to luf and his leve takez,
For to ende alle atonez and for ever twynne.²⁵

The prevailing tone of pathos suggests that the poet feels a kind of sympathy for sinners facing their terrible, (but in terms of Christian morality, thoroughly deserved) fate, to which the average homilist would never have subscribed. The same is true of Patience. Although the narrator sometimes offers critical comments on Jonah's latest act of folly, the poem as a whole is informed by an unflinching sympathy for Jonah's human weakness, and a reluctance to judge him harshly.

The ultimate source of this merciful attitude to man in Patience is the poet's conception of God. Although the poem relates a story of God's punishment of an unworthy servant, the

poet creates the impression of a God rich in that quality that His servant so sadly lacks, patience. True, He is sometimes the stern God of the Old Testament. His first command to Jonah is nothing if not brusque, and he "ferslych bidde3" (337) the whale to return Jonah to dry land. But our main impression of God comes from the last half of the poem, after Jonah has been released from the belly. Here, He pardons the Ninevites because they repent, and then, in the face of considerable provocation, gently tries to make peace with the angry and abusive Jonah. Perhaps the best statement of God's attitude to mankind comes in the passage in which He tries to explain to Jonah His reasons for wishing to spare the Ninevites:

"þenne wyte not me for þe werk, þat I hit wolde help,
& rwe on þo redles þat remen. for synne;
Fyrst I made hem myself of materes myn one,
& syþen I loked hem ful longe & hem on lode hade;
& if I my trauayl schulde tyne of termes so longe,
& type doun 3onder toun when it turned were,
þe sor of such a swete place burde synk to my hert,
So many malicious mon as mourne3 þer-inne". (501-8)

Clearly the poet wishes his audience to understand that God is above all merciful, that He is indeed a God who reflects the spirit of the Beatitudes.

This strong element of sympathy for the human condition brings with it a more complex moral vision than is found in the sermons. The homilists' severe and comprehensive morality, by

reference to which all things might be swiftly and finally praised or condemned, should be closely related to their emblematic consciousness. It is easy for them to damn a wicked character to everlasting torture, because he is regarded not as a man, but as a symbol of a particular kind of evil. But by the same token, such a man never exists as an imaginative creation: he is merely a name attached to a set of extreme human characteristics. Jonah too is a representative figure, symbolizing a particular kind of human failing, created precisely for the purpose of illustrating this variety of wickedness and of exhorting the members of the audience to avoid it themselves. But he is also a fully-realized imaginative creation. The poet explains Jonah's actions, motivation and reasoning not in terms of an abstract morality, but in terms of human psychology, and so an assessment of Jonah demands a more subtle method than the absolute judgements of the preacher. Indeed, the poet refrains from passing any final judgement on him. Instead, he presents Jonah as a human being who is above all weak and unreliable; who, though fully conscious of his duty to God and well capable of carrying it out, constantly fails to do so through his lack of patience and humility. The implications of Jonah's actions go far beyond the abstract virtue of patience, however complex a concept the poet may make this²⁶, to embrace

an entire philosophy of life. The Gawain-poet moves away from the restrictive categories which typify the teaching of the medieval sermon, creating something far more subtle and complex, far more pleasing aesthetically, and far more generous in its judgements of human conduct, but something whose essential purpose is still to offer moral instruction.

As a final example of the way in which the Gawain-poet refines the methods of the sermon, I will briefly consider his use of symbol and allegory. The homilist's use of allegory is normally very deliberate and heavy-handed. The writer of Jacob's Well, for example, relates the moral judgements of all his sermons to the central allegorical motif of the well. At the beginning of the first sermon, he says:

... sires, I purpose here-after gostly to
makyn a gret werk, þat is, of a schelde pytt
to makyn a depe welle.

Then he explains the significance of the pit which is to be made a well:

þis pytt is þi body, þat is clepyd be doctourys
þe pytt of lust. þis pytt is so schelde of kynde
þat it hath no kyndely spryng to receyve þe
watyr of grace.²⁷

After this, the homilist builds an extremely elaborate allegorical structure, which includes the five "entrees, þat arn þi v. bodyly wyttes", which are open to the streams of "þe gret curse",

and the "deep wose" of þe vij. dedly synnes", which must be cast out with the "skeet of contricyoun", the "skauell of confessioun" and the "schouele of satisfaccyoun". The moral teaching of a very long sermon cycle is carried out against this central allegorical motif. The compiler of the Gesta Romanorum is similarly mechanical in his use of allegory. Each homily consists of a story followed by an exposition or "Moralitee" in which the allegorical significance of the preceding story is carefully and meticulously explained. Each "Moralitee" begins with such words as "Seris, þis Emperour is þe Fadir of hevene".²⁸ In Patience we find something quite different. Multiple, shifting levels of significance surround the story of the encounter between the human and the divine. The world of Patience is naturalistic, but parts of the story of Jonah invite allegorical interpretation, and the poem is rich in complex and sometimes contradictory symbolism. This is a far cry from the overt allegory of the sermons.

In conclusion, perhaps the most useful way of looking at Patience is to see it as a poem which bridges the gap between the sermon and what is normally considered to be literary art. The homilist is not concerned to create something beautiful in its own right, but rather to teach his flock the Word and the Way;

and if he does this through the medium of the illustrative tale, it is only because it is the most effective means to a particular end. The homiletic tradition is a communal form of expression, a pool of teaching material to which the preacher could turn for instruction and inspiration, and to which, theoretically, he could add if he wished. The very nature of the medium, with its communal authorship, haphazard use of language, and overtly utilitarian purpose, prevents it from being what we call art. This is not to say that some of the sermon stories do not, by accident as it were, have genuine literary merit; but they are never conscious attempts to create a piece of writing beautiful and meaningful in its own right, regardless of moral intent. The Gawain-poet takes this genre and moulds into a poetic form, and so perhaps the best way of describing the nature and purpose of Patience is to say that it fulfils the homiletic function of a sermon while offering the aesthetic values of a fine poem. It is a work in which language, rhythm and symbol are united through the skill and originality of a great poet in so unique and powerful a manner that he is able to release it from the limitations of the genre from which it is derived. In spite of its close relationship to the homiletic tradition, Patience stands in its own right as a highly-wrought work of literary art.

Chapter One: Footnotes

- 1 First published as part of the Introduction to Harpsfield's Life of More, ed. E.V. Hitchcock (London, 1932).
- 2 Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Cambridge, 1933).
- 3 Preaching in Medieval England (Cambridge, 1926).
- 4 See, for example, D.W. Robertson, Jr., "The Frequency of Preaching in Thirteenth-Century England," Spec., XXIV (1949), 376-388.
- 5 For an account of this see E.H. Weatherly's Introduction to his edition of the Speculum Sacerdotale (London, 1936).
- 6 See, for example, W.O. Ross, in the Introduction to his edition of Middle English Sermons (London, 1940), p. lv.
- 7 For a full account of the work of the Friars, see Literature and Pulpit, chap. 1.
- 8 Literature and Pulpit, p.22
- 9 There is a reproduction of this in Owst's Preaching in Medieval England, frontispiece, and in Maurice Hussey's Chaucer's World (Cambridge, 1967), p. 71.
- 10 Although my thesis is about Patience, I will refer to Purity frequently in this general chapter, and occasionally hereafter. The two poems have usually been considered together in the past, with some justification. Although they are very different in many ways, they have striking and significant similarities, in particular their homiletic form and intent, and the view of life which they share. I will refer to Purity only to illuminate points about Patience.

- 11 Sire Gauvain et le Chevalier Vert, ed. E. Pons (Paris, 1946), p. 57.
- 12 Patience, ed. Hartley Bateson, 2nd ed. (Manchester, 1918), p. vii.
- 13 Patience, ed. Sir I. Gollancz, 2nd ed. (London, 1924), p. 8.
- 14 A.C. Spearing, "Patience and the Gawain-poet," Anglia, LXXXIV (1966), 317.
- 15 Patience, ed. Hartley Bateson, 2nd ed. (Manchester, 1918). Though Gollancz's 2nd edition is the most recent text of the poem, it is generally considered less reliable than this edition, which will therefore be used for all references and quotations.
- 16 Mirk's Festial, ed. T. Erbe (London, 1905), p. 273.
- 17 Middle English Sermons, p. 60
- 18 Speculum Sacerdotale, p. 161.
- 19 Mirk's Festial, p. 12.
- 20 Mirk's Festial, p. 259.
- 21 Purity, ed. R.J. Menner (New Haven, 1920), lines 545-8.
- 22 The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum, ed. S.J.H. Herrtage (London, 1879), p. 177.
- 23 Middle English Sermons, pp. 240-241.
- 24 Mirk's Festial, p. 3.
- 25 Purity, lines 399-402.
- 26 See my discussion of the full implications of the Gawain-poet's use of term "patience", in Chapter 2.
- 27 Both quotations are from Jacob's Well, ed. A. Brandeis (London, 1900), p.1
- 28 Gesta Romanorum, p. 13.

Chapter Two: The Prologue

Patience begins with an introductory passage of sixty lines, which I will call the prologue. In this, the Gawain-poet presents the theme of his poem, defines the meaning of "patience", and suggests its relevance in the life of every Christian, before introducing the story of Jonah as a negative exemplum. As I have observed in the previous chapter, we are aware from the very first that we, as the audience listening to this poem, are put in the position of a congregation hearing a sermon, and that the poet addresses us through the persona of the preacher. This persona is so fully realized, and his relationship with the poem so intimate and complete, that we tend automatically to identify him with the poet. Indeed it seems unnecessary to attempt to distinguish between them, for in the terms of the poem, the preacher-narrator is the poet. By the time the story of Jonah begins (in the sixty-first line), it has become apparent that the purpose of the prologue was to set before us not just the theme of the poem, but also a structure of values against which we are invited to assess the ethical significance of the story

of Jonah, and (in keeping with the poem's didactic intent), to apply what we learn to our own lives. Throughout the poem we are aware of the presence of the preacher-narrator, and the prologue serves to introduce him to us. Patience is, in the words of J.J. Anderson¹, "a friendly sermon", and this sense of friendliness is derived first of all from the rapport which we feel with the narrator. At the end of the poem, after the story of Jonah is finished, the preacher offers a brief epilogue, addressing us once more in the manner of the prologue, reminding us of the ethical significance of the tale he has just told. Thus the exemplum is framed by two didactic passages, one of considerable length, the other very brief, in which the poet explains to his listeners the full significance of the story of Jonah.

The first eight lines of the prologue summarize the theme and exemplify the tone of the poem as a whole. In the very first line, with its proverbial quality, we hear that

Patience is a nobel poynt, þa₃ hit displese ofte,
which immediately suggests that the preacher is advocating a set of values quite alien to human self-interest. Indeed, we are told that suffering must be met with patient fortitude,

For quo-so suffer cowþe syt, sele wolde folþe;
& quo for þro may no3t þole, þe þikker he sufferes.
(5-6)

These lines may remind us of the words spoken by the Pearl-
maiden to the "Jeweller":

"Who nedeþ schal þole, be not so þro.
For þo3 þou daunce as any do,
Braundysch and bray þy braþe3 breme,
When þou no fyrre may, to ne fro,
þou moste abyde þat he schal deme".²

Here, the maiden, who has become a blessed soul in heaven, tells her father that he must bear the inevitable suffering of his earthly lot with patience, for, as it is a fate ordained by God, it is unavoidable. The narrator of Patience ends his opening comments with similar words of advice:

þen is better to abyde þe bur vmbe-stoundes,
þen ay þrow forth my þro, þa3 me þynk ylle, (7-8)

but, surprisingly, applies the final injunction not to his congregation but to himself. This shift into the first person affects the tone of the rest of the prologue, and indeed the whole poem, for it identifies the preacher with his flock, as a man who, like them, must struggle against his own human weakness, and try to accept the hardships which are inevitable in this life.

It is unfortunate that the first line of Patience contains a contested reading. There is no question that the MS has:

Pacience is apoynt þa3 hit displese ofte.

Bateson amends this to

Patience is a nobel poynt, þa3 hit displese ofte.

I can offer no explanation for his reading "Patience" when the MS so clearly has "Pacience", and both Morris and Gollancz give the correct reading. More important, Bateson interpolates the word "nobel" into the line, pointing out in defence of his emendation that the last line reads,

þat pacience is a nobel poynt, þa3 hit displese ofte,
and that in Pearl and Sir Gawain the poet repeats the first line at the end of the poem. In fact, the first and last lines, (in Sir Gawain, the first and last long lines), are not exactly the same in either Pearl or Sir Gawain, but bear approximately the same relationship to each other as do the unemended first and last lines of Patience. This point does, of course, nullify Bateson's argument. The other two editors both give "Pacience is a poynt"; Gollancz glosses "poynt" as "essential thing, point, matter", while Morris omits this usage of the word from his glossary. Gollancz's explanation is rather unsatisfactory, for, as Bateson justly observes³, no other example of such a meaning for this word has been recorded. Emerson suggests that the MS "apoynt" should be retained, and that it means "enjoined, prescribed". This seems a better interpretation than that of

Gollancz, but does involve what Bateson calls "an awkward verbal coincidence between the first and the last line", for in the last line "poynt" clearly means "matter". Bateson defends his emendation by reference to this, arguing that

It seems reasonable to presume the same meaning in the first line, and then a particularizing epithet like "nobel" is required.

But the problem is more complicated than this, for if we are to accept Bateson's emendation, we must assume that the scribe has omitted a word, and it is strange that he should have made such a mistake in the first line of a poem. At the same time, although it includes a very radical emendation, most readers would agree that from an aesthetic point of view Bateson's reading is the most attractive. In the last analysis, we may derive some comfort from the fact that, whichever reading we select, the first line will still serve to bring to our minds the idea of man aspiring to an ideal in the full knowledge of the suffering involved in the pursuit of perfection.

In the ninth line of the prologue, the preacher introduces the Beatitudes from the St. Matthew version of the Sermon on the Mount, (Matt. v. 3-10). After expounding the Beatitudes, and the rewards promised for each group of blessed people, he says that

These arn þe happes alle a3t þat vus bihy3t weren,
If we þyse ladyes wolde lof in lyknyng of þewes,
(29-30)

and proceeds to name eight "Dames", each one representing a virtue celebrated in one Beatitude. Then he explains that

... syn I am put to a poynt þat Pouerte hatte,
I schal me poruay Pacyence, & play me with boþe,
(35-6)

which again suggests that the preacher is applying his teaching to his own experience, saying in effect that since he involuntarily suffers poverty, he has met this with patience, and has learned to take pleasure in both. He goes on to say that

... þere as Pouert enpresses, þa3 mon pyne þynk,
Much, maugre his mun, he mot nede suffer. (43-4)

The moral is that man should meet this unavoidable misfortune with fortitude. The preacher-narrator carefully expounds and interprets the biblical text in order to provide an authority to support his insistence that suffering is inevitable and must be accepted with patience.

The next twelve lines of the prologue, (45-56) develop this argument, by suggesting that man should not merely accept suffering, but positively rejoice in it, because it is ordained by God that he should suffer. The opening line of this part of the discussion clinches the preacher's previous point:

Thus Pouerte & Pacyence are nedes play-feres, (45)
giving, perhaps, a hint of grim irony in the juxtaposition of
so daunting a statement about life with the idea of playfellows.
The preacher goes on to say that "suffer me byhoues" (46),

þenne is me lyztloker hit lyke & her lotes prayse,
þenne wyþer wyth & be wroth & þe wers haue, (47-8)

and that whatever God may demand of a servant,

Oþer to ryde oþer to renne, to rome in his ernde,
What grayþed me þe grychchyng bot grame more seche?
(52-3)

E. Ekwall suggests⁴ an interesting emendation to the last line
but one, reading not "rome" ("=roam"), but (the city of) Rome,
comparing this usage to the Swedish "romresa", which means "a
long journey", or literally, a journey to Rome. This is an
attractive idea, because it would make this hypothetical
command very similar in retrospect to God's first command to
Jonah, in which He orders His servant to go to Nineveh. The
final point,

& þenne þrat moste I þole, & vnþonk to mede,
þet had bowed to his bode, bongre my hyure, (55-6)

emphasizes man's duty to God. Again we hear the preacher using
the device of applying his teaching to himself as well as to
the members of his congregation, reminding them that his duties
to God are the same as theirs. He argues in these lines that
man should accept pain and discomfort with pleasure, knowing

as he does that his virtue will win him the reward of everlasting life.

Jonah is not mentioned until the last four lines of the prologue. Then, without any warning, the preacher breaks off his discussion of the necessity for all men to exercise patience, and says:

Did not Jonas in Jude suche jape sum-whyle:
To sette him to sewrte, vnsounde he hym feches?
(57-8)

Abrupt as this introduction is, we are left in no doubt as to its purpose. The Jonah of the Old Testament attempted to avoid God's will, failed to be patient, and caused himself terrible trouble by shirking his duty, and so an account of his story will illustrate the ethical points which the preacher has been making in reference to the lives of his congregation and himself. In retrospect we see that much of what has already been said in general terms may be applied specifically to Jonah. It would, for example, have been most fitting for the rebellious Jonah to ask himself,

3if me be dyzt a destyne due to haue,
What dowes me þe dedayn, oþer dispit make? (49-50)

The final words of the prologue remind us that we are members of a congregation hearing a sermon:

Wyl 3e tary a lyttel tyne, & tent me a wyle,
I schal wysse yow þer-wyth, as holy wryt telles.
(59-60)

The preacher emphasizes that he will tell his story with the authority of "holy wryt"; that he is, as it were, a mouthpiece for the Word of God. At the end of the prologue, we await the story of Jonah, aware of what its main significance will be, of the scale of values by which we are to assess Jonah's actions, and of how and why we as Christians should apply the moral of the story to our own lives.

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that the prologue is a carefully structured introduction to the story of Jonah. Mr. Moorman⁵ goes one step further, to suggest that the poem as a whole displays the strict organization of a medieval sermon, which, he tells us, could contain six possible divisions, "theme", "protheme", "dilation", "exemplum", "peroration", and "closing formula". He suggests that Patience contains five of these. The first line is regarded as the "theme", although this term is normally applied to a biblical text of considerable length. The "protheme", which Moorman describes as the preacher's general introduction to his main subject, is provided by lines 2 to 8, and the "dilation", (lines 9-60) offers an elaboration of the theme, in this case by examining a well-known scriptural

text. The story of Jonah, (lines 61-523), of course constitutes the "exemplum", and the brief epilogue, (lines 524-530), provides the "peroration". There is no "closing formula", but instead a repetition of the "theme". In his efforts to make his argument clear and concise, Moorman somewhat over-simplifies it, for most medieval sermons did not have the kind of structure which he finds in Patience. According to W.O. Ross⁶, writers of late medieval treatises on sermon construction recognize two principal types of sermon, which may be called "ancient" and "modern", and only the latter form, which originated in the universities, has the sophisticated structure of which Moorman speaks as the rule. The reader may also observe that Ross's account of the structure of a "modern" sermon, and the names and purposes of each of the six parts, differs sharply from Moorman's. Clearly, his generalizations should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, although I feel that it is over-stated and supported in part by misleading information, Moorman's discussion is useful. It serves to remind us that Patience is a sermon, and that the argument of the prologue is organized with meticulous care and conscious artistry.

Moorman's article also raises the question of the character of the preacher. He describes the lines in which the

preacher turns from the moral discussion of his own life to the first reference to Jonah's conduct as "a brilliantly accomplished transition"⁷, going on to say that

... the trials of the harrassed preacher, going somewhat reluctantly and certainly unthanked about God's business, lead quite naturally to the parable of the unwilling prophet of the Old Testament.

There is doubt neither that the poet executes this transition with the greatest of skill, nor that our awareness of the preacher's own sufferings prepares us for hearing about Jonah's; but Moorman's description of the preacher is a little fanciful. He proceeds to argue that the thematic relevance of this device does not explain "the intensity" with which the shift is made, and that the Jonah story does not need any such introduction. From this he deduces that we are justified in interpreting the words of the preacher as an autobiographical statement by the poet, insisting that it is "impossible ... not to find here an echo of both the tone and theme of Pearl". The assumption is, presumably, that the reader will accept without demur that Pearl contains clearly autobiographical material, and that by analogy it will therefore be probable that similar elements can be found in Patience. In fairness to Moorman, we must admit that he warns against "the excesses of biographical interpretations attached in the past to these poems", and emphasizes that he

does not wish to "advance such a theory in any except the most tentative of terms". Nevertheless, I feel that his interpretation of the "intensity" of the shift is tenuous to say the least. He fails to convince me that this "intensity" can be claimed without defence or definition to support an autobiographical interpretation. The similarity between the tone of the beginnings of Patience and Pearl is exaggerated, for there is really no doubt that the opening of Pearl is consistently and unambiguously personal in a way in which that of Patience is not. ⁸

It is more interesting and illuminating to consider the way in which the personal comments of the preacher affect the tone and emphasis of the poem as a whole. In the prologue, he deliberately makes his congregation aware of the relevance that the doctrine he teaches has had in his own life. Thus, he encourages men to meet suffering patiently, even joyfully, supporting his argument by telling how he himself has done this: proving, as it were, the efficacy of his theories in practice. The story that he tells is one in which a man, indeed a prophet, fails to do this. So the preacher stands out in our minds as a man of peculiar virtue, a man who has learned to accept the trials of life through his belief in the mercy of God and his faith in salvation. He too is a man, and therefore

subject to the same temptations as those to which Jonah falls prey, and against which we are warned. But we form the impression that he speaks from a position of understanding, of quiet confidence based on deep conviction, and that his words are those of the rare man who has found the peace of a stable and unshakeable faith.

The preacher introduces the Beatitudes by describing how he heard them read at Mass:

I herde on a halyday at a hyge masse,
How Mathew melede, þat his Mayster his meyny
con teche. (9-10)

This emphasizes the fact that our teacher has himself been the recipient of teaching, as we, the audience, are now. Indeed, the instruction which he once received and now repeats for our benefit is originally from the account by one of the Evangelists of a sermon by Christ, the teacher of all. As the preacher paraphrases for his audience the words spoken by Christ during the Sermon on the Mount, and set down in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, we receive a deep impression of the continuity of the Word, and the great tradition to which the preacher belongs. The device of setting the famous biblical passage within the context of a mass also serves to provide the narrative with a "frame" similar to that used in the dream convention. It may

be more than coincidence that in Pearl the frame is used to emphasize the human relevance of the ensuing spiritual revelation, thus providing a second level of significance.

The preacher informs us that he heard the Beatitudes read at Mass, and so we should perhaps investigate when this event would have taken place. The St. Matthew text would have been the Gospel for Mass on the celebratory feast of All Saints' Day, which precedes the penitential feast of All Souls' Day, and it is interesting to recall that Sir Gawain dined on the former before setting out for the Green Chapel on the latter.⁹ This means that the text of the Beatitudes has a thematic association with the Book of Jonah, for it

... was read during Passion Week, an occasion when a special injunction to Repentance and Confession was delivered¹⁰,

and Passion Week culminates in the celebratory feast of the Resurrection. In Patience the reader is encouraged to examine his conduct and his values in the light of the criteria laid down in the prologue and illustrated in the exemplum. And I think, though this is not the place to argue the point, that a similar process may be traced in Sir Gawain, albeit in a more ambiguous and complex form. In both poems, the joyful affirmation of Christian values is tempered by the sobering realization

of the inevitability of human weakness and sinfulness, and so it can be said in general terms that their moral tone combines the celebratory and the penitential. Thus the special significance attached to the Beatitudes and the Book of Jonah as passages used for the purpose of teaching within the context of the liturgical year is reflected in the tone and content of the moral instruction contained in Patience.

In his version of the Beatitudes, the poet follows the Vulgate text closely¹¹, translating the Latin into idiomatic English, and somewhat elaborating the concepts. His treatment of the second group is typical: the Vulgate "Beati mites: quoniam ipsi possidebunt terram", (Matt. v. 4), becomes:

þay ar happen also þat haunte mekenesse,
For þay schal welde þis worlde & alle her
wylle haue. (15-16)

The only significant alteration comes in his version of the eighth, which is a point of major significance that I will consider later. First we should briefly turn our attention to a suggestion by O.F. Emerson¹² about the use of the Beatitudes in Patience. He argues that the poet's application of the biblical text may be derived from Tertullian's treatise De Patientia. The theory is supported by his argument for the existence of a close relationship between the storm passage in

Patience and the Late Latin poem, De Jonah et Nineve, (also known as Carmen de Jona Propheta) which is attributed to Tertullian.¹³ But Emerson fails to notice that, whereas the Gawain-poet introduces all eight Beatitudes in the same order and in a similar form to that found in the original St. Matthew text, Tertullian names only six, (omitting "Beati misericordes" and "Beati mundo corde"), and considerably alters the form of some others. It is of course still possible that the poet derived the idea for his use of this passage from Tertullian's treatise, but there is no question that his model was the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

After presenting the Beatitudes, the preacher goes on to name eight "Dames", whom, he says, we should "lof in lyknyng of þewes" (30). These personify the virtues celebrated in the Beatitudes, and are typical of the medieval habit, ultimately derived from classical literature, of personifying abstract conceptions. C.S. Lewis, in his excellent account of this tradition, refers to it as:

... the favourite theme of the Middle Ages -- the battle of the virtues and the vices, the Psychomachia, the "bellum intestinum", the Holy War.¹⁴

In Patience, the personifications of virtues do no fight with their evil counterparts (as they do, for example, in the

Psychomachia of Prudentius and in the Castle of Perseverance), but they are still personifications of abstract concepts, made for exemplary purposes, and as such are clearly descendants of this tradition. Each Beatitude is represented by the appropriate lady. Dames "Pouert", "Penaunce", "Mercy", "Clan-nesse", and "Pes" are presented in the same order as the Beatitudes for which they stand: thus the first lady, "Dame Pouert", represents the first group of "Beati", those "þat han in hert pouerte" (13). The only alteration that the poet makes from the order of the Beatitudes is in the positions of "Dame Pitee" and "Dame Mekenesse":

Dame Pouert, Dame Pitee, Dame Penaunce þe þrydde,
Dame Mekenesse, Dame Mercy & Miry Clannesse. (31-2)

It is clear from an examination of the lines that their positions are interchanged to conform with the alliterative pattern.

I have already observed that in his version of the eighth Beatitude the poet significantly alters the Vulgate text. The personified figure which represents this group is "Dame Pacyence", and this fact may suggest that the emendation has some thematic importance for the poem as a whole. The Vulgate text reads:

Beati qui persecutionem patiuntur propter iustitiam:
quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum. (Matt. v. 10)

The poet renders this,

Þay ar happen also þat con her hert stere,
For hores is þe heuen-ryche, as I er sayde. (27-8)

I have indicated that his version of the other seven Beatitudes stays close to the sense of the Vulgate. Thus the poet's alteration of the specific "qui persecutionem patiuntur propter iustitiam" to the ambiguous "þat con her hert stere" should indicate that he may be attempting to extend or modify the meaning inherent in the biblical text. Moorman paraphrases the meaning of "patience" in the poem as "fortitude, patience under adversity".¹⁵ This in effect follows the N.E.D. definition:

The suffering or enduring (of pain, trouble or evil) with calmness and composure; the quality or capacity of so suffering or enduring.¹⁶

This meaning seems acceptable at first, and indeed it has not been challenged, but it does nothing to explain the poet's alteration of the Vulgate text of the Beatitudes in one case out of eight.

If we turn to the summary of the theme and the restatement of the moral at the end of the poem, we will find that God or the preacher (it is uncertain which¹⁷), says to Jonah:

Be no3t so gryndel, Godman, bot go forth þy wayes:
Be preue & be pacient in payne & in joye. (524-5)

Now, Moorman, and indeed every critic I have read on Patience, often refers to the subject of the poem as patience

"in payne", but makes no mention of patience "in joye". I believe that the Gawain-poet deliberately extends the meaning of the word so that it may apply to patience in good fortune as well as in bad, that this is apparent in the prologue, and that it is pointed out directly in the words at the end of the poem. We can find some support for this interpretation in Chaucer. No one would question that the Clerk's Tale is about patience, and again it would seem from a cursory glance that Moorman's definition of "fortitude, patience under adversity" would adequately describe Griselde's outstanding virtue. Indeed, Chaucer's moral to the tale is that men should be as

... constant in adversitee
As was Grisilde.¹⁸

But Griselde is tried not only by the hardships she is made to endure, but also by the ease of life at court: her patience is tested in prosperity as well in adversity. The Gawain-poet's use of the unparticularized "pat con her hert stere" (27) may also support my interpretation of the meaning of patience. The editors gloss "stere" as "guide, steer" (Bateson); "rule" (Gollancz and Morris). Thus the idea inherent in the word is that of having full control over one's heart or passions, a meaning which Chaucer clearly intends when he says that Troilus fell a victim of love,

Ayeyns his wille that shuld his herte stere.¹⁹

In his glossary, Robinson defines "steren" as "steer; control". I feel that Patience offers us sufficient evidence to say that the poet deliberately modifies the form of the eighth Beatitude to widen the concept of "patience" from one of fortitude in ill fortune to one which involves the full control of the passions in prosperity and adversity alike. It is within the context of this wider meaning that Jonah, and by implication the audience, is told:

Be preue & be pacient in payne & in joye. (525)

The preacher spends twelve lines, or one fifth, of the prologue discussing the close relationship that exists between patience and poverty. He then proceeds to relate a well-known story which, though it is very clearly about patience, apparently has nothing to do with poverty. At the same time, one feels that the prologue is much too tightly organized and finely balanced to contain irrelevances, and therefore this concern with poverty is difficult to understand. Before we can hope to explain this apparent contradiction, we must try to establish exactly what the poet means by the term "poverty". The first time it is mentioned is at the beginning of the preacher's recital of the Beatitudes, where he says:

They arn happen þat han in hert pouerte, (13)
which is a close translation of "Beati pauperes spiritu"
(Matt. v. 3). This virtue is described by Peake as consisting
in "piety and humility"²⁰, and thus we can say quite simply
that one expects a man who possesses the virtue of patience, of
controlling his passions in hardship and in ease, to be filled
with what may perhaps be called "spiritual" poverty. Bateson
notes²¹ that medieval commentators interpreted the first Beati-
tude as a celebration of voluntary poverty, and relates this
ideal to the monastic vows of obedience, poverty and celibacy.
If a distinction is needed between "spiritual" poverty and
voluntary material poverty, we can perhaps say that the desire
to enter the second state is a result of achieving the first.

Thus far, the meaning of "poverty" is clear, but a com-
plication appears a little later in the prologue, when the
preacher says:

For þer as Pouert hir proferes ho nyl be put vtter,
Bot lenge where-so-euer hir lyst, lyke oþer greme;
& þere as Pouert enpresses, þaz mon pyne þynk,
Much, maugre his mun, he mot nede suffer (41-4)

Clearly he is not referring here to "spiritual" poverty or to
voluntary material poverty, but to material poverty borne of
necessity. But at the same time, the poet carefully relates this
to his earlier discussion of those "þat han in hert pouerte" (13),

for he reminds us here that poverty and patience may be considered together,

For in þe tyxte þere þyse two arn in teme layde. (37)

The "tyxte" undoubtedly refers to the Beatitudes. In the Vulgate, the first Beatitude reads "Beati pauperes spiritu", and the poet makes no attempt to modify the meaning of this in his translation. We are therefore left to conclude that the poet is speaking of two kinds of poverty at once, and suggesting that both may be denoted by one word, much as he uses patience to mean control of the passions both in adversity and in prosperity. Indeed, both kinds of poverty may be associated with patience: when suffering material deprivation, man must bear his hardships patiently, while the spiritual quality of "pouerte", like that of patience, lies in the practice of humility and restraint. Jonah clearly lacks spiritual poverty, but the critics have felt that he certainly does not suffer from material poverty.²² This is to apply a very literal interpretation of material poverty, for one of the major episodes of the story describes how God takes the gourd, a prized possession, away from Jonah, and how the prophet mourns the loss of this source of physical comfort and is unable to accept the blow with patience. I feel that the prologue should prepare us to see that this illustrates Jonah's lack of patience when he is struck by physical poverty. We may

say in brief that in the prologue the poet widens and deepens our concept of the nature and the ramifications of the virtues of patience and poverty, and that both are of the utmost relevance in the story of Jonah.

There is nothing novel about the association of poverty and patience. In the ninth Psalm we are told that "... patientia pauperum non peribit in finem".²³ Bateson lists examples from St. Augustine, St. Francis, and Early English proverbs²⁴, while Anderson describes this link as "a commonplace of medieval homiletic writing", and draws attention to examples in Piers Plowman and Chaucer, adding that Patience may itself be "responsible for some of the popularity of the coupling".²⁵ The poet explains the association of poverty and patience by pointing out that they are the only two Beatitudes which share the same reward:

For in þe tyxte þere þyse two arn in teme layde,
Hit arn fettled in on forme, þe forme & þe laste.
(37-8)

The last half-line contains the provocative statement that the link is made more fitting by the fact that patience and poverty are the first and the last Beatitudes, suggesting all the Christian associations surrounding the idea of Alpha and Omega, first and last. The Gawain-poet elsewhere shows interest in the

relationship between the first and the last. In Sir Gawain he makes the ambiguous observation that

*þe forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden*²⁶.

In spite of this, the final lines of his poems always bring us back to the subject of the opening lines, admittedly with the qualification of whatever has gone between. Thus in Pearl the particularly fine and striking circular form emphasizes the close relationship between the first and the last, while the development in the Dreamer from excessive grief and wordliness at the beginning to the quiet resignation of full knowledge and acceptance of God's will at the end stresses the great change encompassed in the circular movement. In Patience, the epilogue echoes the moral lesson of the prologue, while the development brought about during the course of the exemplum should be in the listener.

The Gawain-poet's use of the story of Jonah to illustrate patience is neither surprising nor unique. Bateson observes that "The Koran mentions Jonah as a type of impatience"²⁷, and, after diligent search, (for Bateson gives no reference), the reader may find the following:

Wherefore, patiently wait the judgement of thy LORD:
and be not like him who was swallowed by the fish,
when he cried unto God, being inwardly vexed.²⁸

In the same note, Bateson refers to Tertullian's De Fuga In Persecutione, in which Jonah is presented as "a type of how a servant of God ought not to feel and act", and St. Chrysostom's Homily V. to the People of Antioch, in which Jonah is treated "as a type of impatience".²⁹ It is not surprising that moralists and homilists of widely differing ages and cultures have used the story to illustrate impatience. If there is one impression which we retain from our first reading of the Old Testament story of Jonah, it is one of the futility of rebellion against an all-powerful God controlling an inexorable destiny.

The purpose of the prologue is to prepare us for hearing and understanding the story of Jonah. Through the persona of the preacher, the poet explains Christian standards of conduct to us, so that we may be fully equipped with the moral criteria with which to comprehend the significance of the story of Jonah. He bases his teaching on a well-known text, the Beatitudes from St. Matthew's Gospel, thus bringing to our minds the Sermon on the Mount, and the concept of Christ as preacher. From the eight Beatitudes, he selects the last group, the patient, and relates it to the first, the poor. In the process of the prologue, he suggests a widening of the concepts of patience and poverty to the point where they can stand for the inclusive Christian

virtue of being in full control of one's passions at all times. The preacher's references to his own experience may serve to corroborate the theoretical lesson he is teaching, and indeed to relate him closely to the moral lives of his congregation. By the end of the prologue we know why the preacher is going to tell the story of Jonah, and how we ought to judge Jonah's actions. We know on what authority we may apply these criteria, and the glorious reward that awaits those who succeed in living according to these stringent standards. Given that the purpose of Patience is homiletic, the prologue is, both thematically and structurally, a vital part of the poem.

Chapter Two: Footnotes

- 1 J.J. Anderson, "The Prologue of Patience," Mod. Phil., LXIII (1966), 286.
- 2 Pearl, ed. E.V. Gordon (Oxford, 1953), lines 344-8.
- 3 This and the following quotations are from Patience, ed. Hartley Bateson, 2nd ed. (Manchester, 1918), p. 19, where the reader may find a fuller account of this problem.
- 4 E. Ekwall, rev. of Patience, ed. Sir I. Gollancz (London, 1913), Englische Studien, XLIX (1915), 144-146.
- 5 Charles Moorman, "Patience," The "Pearl"-Poet (New York, 1968), pp. 125-6. In the following lines I summarize Moorman's argument.
- 6 Middle English Sermons, ed. W.O. Ross (London, 1940), pp. xliii-li.
- 7 This and the following quotations are from Moorman, p.74
- 8 Anderson makes (and somewhat overstates) this point in his article, p. 285.
- 9 See H.L. Savage, The "Gawain"-Poet: Studies in his Personality and Background (Chapel Hill, 1956), p. 27; and J.A. Burrow, A Reading of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" (London, 1965), p. 54.
- 10 Bateson, pp. 23-4.
- 11 The Authorized Version is slightly different: in the Vulgate, "Beati mites" is second and "Beati qui lugent" third; in the A.V., "They that mourn" is second and "The meek" third.

- 12 O.F. Emerson, "A Parallel Between the Middle English Poem Patience and an Early Latin Poem Attributed to Tertullian," PMLA, X (1895), 246.
- 13 I give a brief account of the relationship between the Carmen de Jona Propheta and Patience in Chapter 3.
- 14 C.S. Lewis, "Allegory," The Allegory of Love (Oxford, 1936). The quotation is from p. 55.
- 15 Charles Moorman, "The Role of the Narrator in Patience," Mod. Phil., LXI (1963), 90.
- 16 N.E.D., "Patience," I.1.
- 17 There is no indication in the MS as to where God's speech ends and the preacher-poet resumes. Bateson terminates God's speech at the end of line 523, Morris at the end of line 524, and Gollancz at the end of line 527.
- 18 The Clerk's Tale, lines 1146-7. The Complete Works of Chaucer, ed. Fred N. Robinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1933).
- 19 Troilus and Criseyde, i. 228.
- 20 Peake's Commentary on the Bible, edd. M. Black and H.H. Rowley (London, 1962), p. 775, par. 678.
- 21 Bateson, p. 20.
- 22 For example, Moorman and Anderson both say this in their articles.
- 23 Psalm ix. 19. (Vulgate Reference).
- 24 Bateson, p. iv.
- 25 Anderson, p. 286.
- 26 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, edd. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd. ed., rev. Norman Davis (Oxford, 1968), line 499.
- 27 Bateson, p. xlvi.

- 28 A Comprehensive Commentary on the Quran, Comprising Sale's Translation and Preliminary Discourses, ed. E.M. Wherry (London, 1886), vol. IV, p. 173.
- 29 Bateson, p. xlvi.

Chapter Three: Patience and the Book of Jonah

Patience has always been regarded as a translation of the Old Testament Book of Jonah. In the sub-title to his edition, Gollancz describes the poem as "an alliterative version of Jonah".¹ Bateson claims that:

The disposition of motives ... which yields the finish and coherence results mainly from the Jonah story of the Scriptures.²

Some critics have recognized that the poet elaborates upon the biblical story³, but no one has yet described precisely how the poet develops the biblical account, why he wishes to do this, and what effect his alterations have upon his version of the story of Jonah. In the following discussion I attempt to do this, trusting that in the process the injustice of Bateson's comments will be demonstrated.

The first sixty lines of Patience indicate that the Gawain-poet sets out with the explicit purpose of using the story of Jonah to illustrate a specific moral lesson. He modifies the biblical text of the Beatitudes to emphasize a particular kind

of patience, and, to a lesser degree, a particular kind of poverty. He then proceeds to modify the Old Testament story of Jonah with a similar end in view. An analysis of some of the more important ways in which he develops and alters the story as it appears in the Vulgate will indicate the subtlety and precision with which he moulds his source material to suit his purpose. It becomes clear that the alterations and elaborations all serve to develop a coherent portrait of Jonah as a man who, through universal human faults, fails to live up to the ideal of patience.

Conveniently enough, the opening of the story of Jonah in Patience serves very well to exemplify the way in which the poet handles the biblical text throughout the poem. The Vulgate account begins:

Et factum est verbum Domini ad Ionam, filium
Amathi, dicens:
Surge, et vade in Niniven civitatem grandem,
et praedica in ea: quia scendit malitia eius
coram me. (i. 1-2)

This abrupt opening is typical of the manner of much of the Old Testament, with its rigidly economical narrative style, speedy presentation of facts, and lack of detail. There is no word of introduction or explanation. We are not told where this event takes place, how the Word of God reaches Jonah, what his re-

action to this is, or indeed anything about him, except that he is "filium Amathi". God's order is also presented in the briefest possible form: Jonah is commanded to go to Nineveh and speak to the inhabitants because their wickedness has come to His notice. If we turn to the opening of Patience, we find the following:

Hit bitydde sum-tyme in þe termes of Jude,
Jonas joyned wat3 þer-inne Jentyle prophete;
Goddess glam to hym glod þat hym vngrad made,
With a roghlych rurd rownded in his ere:
"Rys radly," He says, "& rayke forth euen,
Nym þe way to Nynyue, wyth-outen oþer speche,
& in þat cete my sazes soghe alle aboute,
þat, in þat place at þe poynt, I put in þi hert.
For Iwysse, hit arn so wykke þat in þat won dowelle3,
& her malys is so much, I may not abyde,
Bot venge me on her vilanye & venym bilyue;
Now swe3e me þider swyftly & say me þis arende."
(61-72)

Clearly, this is more than a translation of the Bible. The poet expands the two brief verses into twelve lines and radically alters the feeling and emphasis of the account. He begins, in best story-telling fashion, by informing us of where these events take place. Unlike the writer of the Book of Jonah, the Gawain-poet has no interest in the structure of the ancient tribes of the Old Testament, and so, rather than tell us whose son Jonah is, he tells us who Jonah himself is, and specifically that he is a "prophete". In the Bible, the voice of God is introduced as a simple fact, with no qualifying explanation or description.

The poet, on the other hand, describes it in such a way that we associate the "roghlych rurd" with the forces of nature, particularly with the wind, an association which has much relevance in retrospect, and which makes us aware of the immense power of God. He also tells us how Jonah reacts to God's command, that it "hym vnglad made", which also foreshadows the subsequent development of the story. Lastly, he develops the command into a statement of eight lines, in which God not only orders Jonah to go and speak to the Ninevites, but also explains in some detail why He wishes him to do this. In the process, the God of Patience becomes somewhat "humanized" in comparison with the distant and inscrutable God of the Old Testament. Thus we may say that the Gawain-poet expands and elaborates upon the Old Testament narrative, adding details and highly evocative description, hinting at the feelings of Jonah and offering full and convincing motivation for God's command.

The first specific alteration which the Gawain-poet makes to the Bible story appears in his account of Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh. The Vulgate narrative gives no reason for his flight, but states it as a simple matter of fact:

Et surrexit Ionas, ut fugeret in Tharsis a
facie Domini. (i. 3)

In complete contrast, the poet presents us with the dramatic process of Jonah making the decision not to go to Nineveh:

"If I bowe to his bode & bryng hem þis tale,
& I be nummen in Nuniue, my nyes begynes:
He telles me þose traytours arn typpede schrewes;
I com wyth þose tyþynges, þay ta me bylyue,
Pyne3 me in a prysoun, put me in stokkes,
Wryþe me in a warlok, wrast out myn y3en.
þis is a meruayl message a man for to preche,
Amonge enmyes so mony & mansed fendes;
Bot if my gaynlych God such gref to me wolde,
For desert of sum sake þat I slayn were,
At alle peryles," quop þe prophete, "I aproche hit
no nerre". (75-85)

The biblical account gives us no hint of what Jonah's motives may be, while the poet presents a soliloquy in which the Jonah of Patience unequivocally displays the considerations which prompt his flight. These lines communicate the horror which Jonah feels as he imagines the ordeals he may have to suffer and, together with the description of his petulant anger as he leaves for Tarshish "ay janglande for tene" (90), show how completely he is failing to live up to the standards of conduct described in the prologue. This change stresses Jonah's lack of patience, and makes it all the more unworthy by emphasizing the baseness of the considerations which persuade him to flee to Joppa.

Later in the biblical account, Jonah condemns God for pardoning the Ninevites, claiming that it was his fear that God would do this which led him to shirk his duty in the first

place:

Obsecro, Domine, numquid non hoc est verbum meum,
cum adhuc essem in terra mea? propter hoc
praeoccupavi ut fugerem in Tharsis. (iv. 2)

The Jonah of Patience claims that his flight was motivated by the same consideration, when he asks God:

"Wat3 not þis ilk my worde þat worþen is nouþe,
þat I keste in my cuntre when þou þy carp sende3,
þat I schulde tee to þys toun þi talent to preche?"
(414-16)

The answer is, of course, "no". But what is interesting is that the Gawain-poet has chosen to retain a (presumably) true statement by the Old Testament Jonah, and put it into the mouth of the Jonah of Patience as a falsehood. It could be argued that this is inept and unconvincing because it introduces motives of which we have not previously heard in Patience. On the other hand, this very fact may be designed to emphasize Jonah's instability and his disregard for the truth in his dealings with God. Whether or not the individual reader feels that this particular device is successful, he will agree that it shows that the poet uses the biblical text with considerable freedom. There is of course no doubt as to its homiletic efficacy: in any case we are witnessing the conduct of a man less patient even than the Jonah of the Scriptures.

In the next one hundred and fifty lines of Patience, which

describe Jonah sailing for Tarshish, the storm, the casting of lots, and Jonah's admission of guilt and expulsion from the ship, the poet continues to employ the technique of elaboration which we observed at work in the first twelve lines of the Jonah story. He steadily expands and develops the Vulgate narrative, but does not significantly change any part of it. The writer of the Book of Jonah makes no attempt to bring to life his account of the storm, but simply asserts that:

Dominus autem misit ventum magnum in mare: et
facta est tempestas magna in mari, et navis
periclitabatur conteri. (i. 4)

In complete contrast, the Gawain-poet's description of the storm at sea and its effect on the ship and sailors is frighteningly immediate. A few lines will serve to exemplify the strength of this passage:

When þe breth & þe brok & þe bote metten,
Hit wat3 a joyles gyn þat Jonas wat3 inne,
For hit reled on round vpon þe ro3e yþes.
Þe bur ber to hit baft, þat brast alle her gere,
Þen hurled on a hepe þe helme & þe sterne;
Furst tomurte mony rop & þe mast after. (145-50)

The rhythm of the verse makes us painfully aware of the ceaseless pounding of the sea, and the poet's technique of describing the destruction of one part of the boat after another creates the impression of the irresistible forces of chaos destroying man-made order, while, we are aware, they are serving an order in-

finitely great and wise.

At this point, we must briefly turn our attention to another work, believed by some critics to be a source for the storm passage. It was first suggested by O.F. Emerson⁴ in 1895 that the pseudo-Tertullian poem, Carmen de Jona Propheta⁵ is a source for this part of Patience. Bateson discussed the argument in some detail and added more supporting evidence in his edition.⁶ The entire theory was virulently attacked and rejected out of hand by S.B. Liljegren⁷, but after fifty years of critical silence was recently reinstated, with some reservations and modifications, in a sensible and balanced article by Ordelle G. Hill⁸, which I would recommend to any reader with a particular interest in this subject. Interesting though it is as a scholarly investigation, for the purposes of our discussion this topic can only prove that another poet's elaboration of the storm scene from the Book of Jonah bears a considerable resemblance to that in Patience. As this is a section of the biblical text which the Gawain-poet is content to expand and elaborate, without significant alteration, the question of whether or not he is making use of material from the Carmen de Jona Propheta is not of major importance. A comparison of the lines from the Latin poem which would correspond to lines 146-150 of our last quotation from

Patience may serve to suggest the nature of their relationship:

Diversus furor in profugum fredebat Jonam.
Una ratis certamen erat coeloque fretoque,
Tunditur hinc illinc, tremit omnis silva sub ictu
Fluctifrago, subter concussa est spira carinae.
Palpitat antenna stridens, labor horret ab alto,
Ipsa etiam infringi dubitans inflectitur arbor.⁹

It will be seen that there is a fairly close correspondence between the two passages both in terms of the events described and of the order in which they occur, but no very striking verbal similarities.

The next section of Patience describes Jonah's ordeal inside the whale. This is the best example in the poem of the Gawain-poet's imaginative powers and independence from his source-material, for the entire startlingly original, sixty-line episode is developed from one verse in the Book of Jonah:

Et praeparavit Dominus piscem grandem ut
deglutiret Ionam: et erat Ionas in ventre
piscis tribus diebus, et tribus noctibus. (ii. 1)

The biblical narrator makes no attempt to describe Jonah's plight within the fish. In contrast, the Gawain-poet gives a full and sympathetic portrayal of Jonah's suffering, and thus provides ample motivation in human terms for the prayer from the belly.¹⁰ The poet describes Jonah fruitlessly searching for a place to rest,

& þenne he lurkkes & laytes where wat3 le best,
In vche a nok of his nauel, bot nowhere he fynde3
No rest ne recouerer, bot ramel ande myre
In wych gut so euer he got3, (277-80)

and adds, with gentle irony,

... bot euer is God swete. (280)

In his trouble, Jonah turns to God and prays for mercy; then, at once,

With þat he hitte to a hyrne & helde hym þer-inne,
þer no defoule of no fylþe wat3 fest hym abute. (289-90)

The poet observes Jonah's change of heart from defiance to obedience, and draws the moral conclusion that self-knowledge and the ability to accept the will of God are gained through suffering:

Now he knawe3 hym in care þat coupe not in sele.
(296)

Thus we are reminded by the poet that the most original and extensive of his elaborations of the biblical story is strictly relevant to the moral purpose of the poem as a whole.

In his version of the prayer from the belly, the poet stays closer to the Old Testament text than in any other part of the poem. The eight verses of the Vulgate are turned into thirty-two lines of Middle English. Although much of the prayer is translated more or less directly from the Bible, the poet is so successful in amplifying what he wishes to emphasize and in turning the Latin

into idomatic English that the passage is completely integrated into the fabric of the poem, without the slightest trace of awkwardness. A comparison of corresponding lines may serve to illuminate his technique. The Vulgate

Et proiecisti me in profundum in corde maris, et
flumen circumdedit me: omnes gurgites tui, et
fluctus tui super me transierunt. (ii. 4)

becomes in Patience,

þou dipte3 me of þe depe se, in-to þe dymme hert;
þe grete flem of þy flod folded me vmbe;
Alle þe gote3 of þy guferes, & groundele3 powle3,
& þy stryuande streme3 of stryndes so mony,
In on daschande dam dryue3 me ouer. (308-12)

The first two lines represent fairly close translations of the first two phrases of the Latin verses. Even so, it is interesting to observe how completely the poet alters the texture of the Latin, to bring out the characteristic rhythm of the alliterative long line, for example in the phrase "þe gret flem of þy flod". The final phrase of the Latin verse is expanded into three splendid lines of Middle English, the rhythm of which echoes the movement of the sea, reminding us of the storm which Jonah has just endured, and of the depths through which the whale is now carrying him. It is clear that the poet develops the Latin both to realize its potential in poetic terms, and to show Jonah reliving his ordeal in his description of it. We are reminded of the idea, so common in the Bible, of the sea as an image of suffering, and

particularly of the well-known opening of the one hundred and twenty-ninth psalm:

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine.

The account of Jonah's release from the whale provides the Gawain-poet with another opportunity to elaborate upon the brief statement of fact in the Vulgate:

Et dixit Dominus pisci: et evomuit Ionam in
aridam. (ii. 11)

With his characteristic delight in imaginative realism, and perhaps a touch of ironic humour, he describes Jonah emerging onto the beach with his clothes covered in filth:

Þenne he swepe to þe sonde in sluchchede cloþes, --
Hit may wel be þat mester were his mantyle to
wasche. (341-2)

Here, once more, the poet's graphic genius is the servant of his didactic intent. We, his audience, know from hundreds of other homilies that foul clothes are always symbolic of the pure life defiled by sin. Now we can work out their significance here: Jonah has atoned for his sins during his ordeal inside the whale, and now he is released must wash away the symbol of that sin. We may recall a similar passage in Piers Plowman:

Thus Haukyn the actyf man • hadde ysoiled his cote,
Til Conscience acouped hym there-of • in a curteise
manere,
Whi he ne hadde wasshen it • or wyped it with a brushe.¹¹

At the beginning of the next Passus, the "cote" is washed, beaten, taken apart, re-dyed, and sewn back together again by Dowel, Dobet and Dobest. A little later¹², Haukyn is given moral instruction by "Pacyence". It is very interesting that this passage from Piers Plowman should give us a second example of patience being made the basis of a plea for us, the listeners, to lead a better life.

The newly-released Jonah is given no time to recover from his ordeal, for God immediately orders him to Nineveh. This time he carries out his mission dutifully, and preaches to the Ninevites, who repent and are in due course pardoned by God. Again, we find that the poet has considerably elaborated upon the Vulgate account, expanding ten verses into seventy-six lines, in order to develop both human interest and poetic qualities, but making no alterations of any great thematic significance.

The next important alterations made by the Gawain-poet to the biblical narrative come in the final part of the poem, which describes Jonah's anger and the incident of the Gourd. Since the poet informs us at the beginning of the poem that he will relate the story of Jonah as a negative exemplum of patience, we might expect that he would emphasize, as indeed he does, the final episode of the story, in which the Jonah of the

Old Testament behaves with demonstrable "impatience". This makes all the more surprising Mr. Berlin's claim that

The last part of the poem, from line 349 to the Epilogue, contains no extended elaboration. The poet paraphrases the Vulgate account with only a few added touches. He seems to have spent himself presenting Jonah's motivations, the storm, and the whale incident.¹³

In fact, the last ninety lines of Patience are expanded from six verses in the Old Testament, and in the course of this the poet develops and elaborates the biblical account in some very significant ways. First, in his development of the account of Jonah wandering away from the city and building his "booth", we see the poet's minute attention to the kind of detailed description which will add to the human interest and didactic efficacy of his story. The Vulgate is brief and explicit:

... et fecit sibimet umbraculum ibi, et
sedebat subter illud in umbra ... (iv. 5)

The poet turns this into a detailed description of Jonah preparing his "bour":

þer he busked hym a bour, þe best þat he myȝt,
Of hay & of euer-ferne & erbeȝ a fewe,
For hit watȝ playn in þat place, for plyande greueȝ
For to schylde fro the schene, oþer any schade keste.
(437-40)

In doing so, he emphasizes the violent heat of the sun and the lack of shade, which serves to add considerable poignancy to Jonah's subsequent loss of the Gourd.

The most important expansion of the biblical text in the last part of the poem comes in the account of the incident of the Gourd. The poet visualizes the Gourd as covering Jonah's "bour", thus making a house, and he describes this in some detail:

When þe dawande day Dryȝtyn con sende,
þenne wakened þe wyȝ vnder wod-bynde,
Loked alofte on þe lef þat lylled grene;
Such a lefsel of lof neuer lede hade;
For hit watȝ brod at þe boȝem, boȝted on lofte,
Happed vpon ayȝer half, a hous as hit were,
A nos on þe north syde & nowhere non elleȝ,
Bot al schet in a shaze þat schaded ful cole.
(445-52)

Jonah's reaction to this gift is to turn from excessive dejection to excessive joy:

þenne watȝ þe gome so glad of his gay logge,
Lys loltrande þer-inne lokande to tounȝ;
So blyȝe of his wod-bynde he balteres þer vnder,
þat of no diete þat day þe-deuel-haf! he roȝt.
(457-60)

We hardly need to be told that this, too, is "impatience". First, Jonah found it impossible to accept misfortune and disappointment with fortitude, and became angry and rebellious; now he finds himself the recipient of a piece of unexpected and inexplicable good fortune, and turns to complacent idleness. We may recall the definition of patience given in the prologue, where it was made clear that this quality consists in a man's ability to "stere" his "hert" in good fortune as well as in bad, and see

how very appropriate it is to Jonah's conduct at this point. His heart is very clearly not under proper control. He turns from God in anger because he considers his reputation as a true prophet is of more importance than the lives of all the inhabitants of a penitent city, and soon afterwards a trifle dissolves his despair and brings him back to good humour. Even his good humour is idly self-indulgent, and his idleness is, of course, the more reprehensible because he is a prophet, and therefore intended by God for the active life.

The following morning Jonah's elation turns into violent sorrow when he awakes to discover that the Gourd has withered. The Jonah of the Old Testament reacts to this blow by merely saying:

Melius est mihi mori, quam vivere. (iv. 8)

In Patience, the poet expands this statement in order to capture the tone of petulant and self-righteous anger in Jonah's voice as he complains to God:

"A! þou maker of man, what maystery þe þynkeþ
þus þy freke to forfare for-bi alle oþer?
With alle meschef þat þou may, neuer þou me spareþ:
I keuered me a cumfort þat now is caȝt fro me,
My wod-bynde so wlonk þat wered my heued;
Bot now I se þou art sette my solace to reue.
Why ne dytteþ þou me to diȝe? I dure to longe."
(482-8)

Now he has lost the Gourd, Jonah's pleasure disappears and is replaced by this immoderate and hysterical grief. Jonah is, in a sense, suffering material poverty, in that he has been deprived of his source of physical comfort, the plant which protected him from the heat of the sun. His behaviour is of course an example of impatience in misfortune, but should also be seen in the context of his previous misconduct, as another example of impatience in the broad sense of failure to "stere" his "hert". God answers Jonah's virulent and hysterical outcry with wisdom and tolerance:

"Why art þou so waymot, wyge, for so lyttle?" (492)

But he refuses to recognize that his behaviour is unreasonable, replying:

"Hit is not lyttel," ... "bot lykker to rygt;
I wolde I were of þis worlde wrapped in molde₃."
(493-4)

It is a sad reflection on him that these are the last words he speaks in the poem.

The story of Jonah ends in Patience, as in the Old Testament, with God explaining why He spared the Ninevites. God points out that if Jonah could grow so angry that he desired death because of the loss of a woodbine which he did nothing to nurture, then he should hardly blame Him for wishing to spare the repentant

Ninevites, whom He created, and many of whom were innocent. In this passage, the Gawain-poet follows the norm he has set up in the rest of the poem, expanding and elaborating the Vulgate Latin into fine, idiomatic Middle English verse, strengthening both the emphasis on human feelings and motivation, and the aesthetic quality of his story. Elsewhere in Patience, we have observed him developing the biblical narrative selectively, altering some details and adding others, to emphasize precisely those parts of the story of Jonah which are most important for his purpose. He never lets us forget what that purpose is. The story of Jonah ends with God Himself preaching the moral of patience to the rebellious prophet and, as we are aware, by implication to us as well.

Chapter Three: Footnotes

- 1 Patience, ed. Sir I. Gollancz (London, 1913).
- 2 Bateson, p. xiv.
- 3 Particularly A.C. Spearing, "Patience and the Gawain-poet," Anglia, LXXXIV (1966), 305-329, who makes some very interesting observations. Normand Berlin's article, "Patience: A study in Poetic Elaboration," Stud. Neo., XXXIII (1961), 80-85, also deals with this subject, but is for the most part disappointing.
- 4 O.F. Emerson, "A Parallel Between the Middle English Poem Patience and an Early Latin Poem Attributed to Tertullian," PMLA, X (1895), 242-248.
- 5 Patrologia Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844), vol. II, col. 1107-14.
- 6 Bateson, pp. xli-xlv.
- 7 S.B. Liljegren, "Has the Poet of Patience read De Jona?" Englische Studien, XLVIII (1914), 337-341.
- 8 Ordelle G. Hill, "The Late-Latin De Jona as a Source for Patience," JEGP, LXVI (1967), 21-25.
- 9 Lines 36-41.
- 10 This point is also made by N. Berlin, p. 83.
- 11 Piers Plowman, ed. W.W. Skeat (London, 1886), B. XIII. 458-460.

12 B. XIV, 28-332.

13 Berlin, p. 84.

Chapter Four: Jonah and Christ

In the previous Chapter I described the way in which the Gawain-poet altered, moulded and elaborated his source material in order to develop the character of Jonah and examine in depth his feelings and motivation. As a result, the shadowy figure of the Old Testament grows into a full and consistent character, weak and sinful, but a fair representative of universal human faults. The poet's treatment of Jonah is both surprising and daring, for in Christian teaching, though his disobedience is sometimes commented upon, he is more usually regarded as a type of Christ.¹ The attachment of this significance to Jonah is derived mainly from two passages in the New Testament, one in St. Matthew's Gospel, the other in St. Luke's. As the two are very similar, it will suffice to quote only one of them.²

But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:
For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgement with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and behold, a greater than Jonas is here. (Matt. xii. 39-41)

The evangelist makes two essential points of comparison between Jonah and Christ. Both were prophets who brought the Word of God to an "evil generation", and both spent three days and three nights in a hell of one kind or another, Jonah in the fish's belly, and Christ "in the heart of the earth". A further point of comparison may be found if we turn to patristic sources. Petrus Chrysologus interprets Jonah's descent to Joppa as being symbolic of the Incarnation:

Descendit, inquit, Jonas in Joppen, ut fugeret
in Tharsis ... Descendit Dominus de₃ coelo ad
terram, descendit deitas ad humana.

An examination of the major ways in which the poet manipulates these well-known interpretations may give some further insight into his purpose in Patience.

In this context, our first impresssion of the poet's description of the descent to Joppa will be that his Jonah is certainly a most un-Christ-like figure. He emphasizes the human weakness and selfishness which prompt Jonah to shirk his duty of bringing the Word of God to the Ninevites, and thus places him in a position of striking contrast to Christ, who patiently accepted His duty of bringing the Word of God to mankind. It

becomes clear that the poet had this specific contrast in mind when Jonah, attempting to justify to himself his desire to flee from his duty to God, imagines what terrible things might befall him in Nineveh, and ends by saying:

"Oure syre syttes," ... "on sege so hyȝe
In his glowande glorye, & gloumbes ful lyttel,
þa3 I be nummen in Nuniuē & naked dispoyled,
On rode rwly to-rent, with rybaudes mony." (93-6)

The fascinating thing about this is that the last two lines unmistakably describe the stripping and crucifixion of Christ. They are particularly striking because they make so clear the contrast between Jonah and Christ: here we have Jonah angrily and churlishly refusing to undertake a task because it would involve the possibility of his suffering the same fate which Christ later suffered with dignity and patience. Mr. Spearing says of this description:

Certainly it serves to belittle Jonah still further, by introducing the standards of which he is so miserably falling short. In the Bible he is a type of Christ; in the poem, an anti-type.⁴

There is no question that at this point, Jonah is presented as antitype rather than type.

But I feel that the matter is more complex than this, for in the central part of Patience, (and of the Old Testament story),

Jonah behaves in an exemplary fashion, bringing the Word of God to the Ninevites and prompting their repentance. In the following pages, I will attempt to argue that the poet sustains a series of simultaneous parallels and contrasts between Jonah and Christ, and that these may serve to deepen and intensify his range of suggestion, and add to Patience that hint of ambiguity so characteristic of its author. Jonah is neither type nor anti-type, but both in turn.

During his account of the voyage, the Gawain-poet keeps the comparison between Jonah and Christ in our minds by introducing a number of hints and suggestions which remind us of events in the life of Christ. The angry statement made by "þe spakest" sailor to Jonah is altered from that of the "gubernator" in the Vulgate account, so that it includes the words:

Lo! al synkes in his synne, & for his sake marres!
(172)

This is probably an intentional echo of the famous words which the High Priest Caiaphas spoke about Christ:

Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.
And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation. (John xi. 50-51)

The echo draws our attention to the similarity in situation

between Jonah and Christ at a point at which their attitudes to their respective situations are in complete contrast to each other. Christ is to sacrifice His life for an unworthy generation, while Jonah, fearing that such a sacrifice might be asked of him, risks the lives of the sailors and the souls of the Ninevites -- who later prove their worth by repenting their sins -- in his attempt to avoid doing his duty as a prophet. Again, when the sailors pass judgement on Jonah and condemn him to be thrown overboard, they

... prayen to þe prynce þat prophetes seruen,
þat he gef hem þe grace to greuen hym neuer,
þat þay in balelez blod þer blenden her handez,
þa3 þat hæpel wer his þat þay here quelled. (225-8)

This account is translated fairly closely from the Vulgate, but includes one significant addition, the idea of wishing not to dip one's hands in the blood of an innocent man, which may remind us of the words of another judge at the end of another trial:

When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing,
but that rather a tumult was made, he took
water, and washed his hands before the multitude,
saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just
person: se ye to it.
Then answered all the people, and said, His blood
be on us, and on our children. (Matt. xxvii.24-5)

Once more, there is a very strong similarity between the situations in which Jonah and Christ find themselves, for both are brought to trial and condemned by a reluctant and doubtful judge. But whereas

we see Christ as the innocent victim of man's injustice, we (and for that matter, Jonah himself) are well aware that Jonah is rightly treated.

As I observed in Chapter 1, the Book of Jonah was read during Passion Week, with the result that the interpretation of Jonah's three days in the belly as a symbol for Christ's three days in hell was well known. Thus the fish itself becomes an emblem for hell. This idea is supported by a famous passage from the Book of Isaiah:

Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. (v. 14)

Isidor of Seville observes, in the twelfth Book of his Etymologies, that

There are huge sorts of whales with bodies the size of mountains, like the whale that received Jonah, whose belly was of such magnitude that it held something like a hell, the prophet saying: "He heard me from the belly of hell".⁵

The Middle English Bestiary is even more explicit, stating bluntly that the whale stands for the devil. Indeed, the jaws of a whale were used to represent Hell-Mouth in performances of the mystery plays, and appear with the same significance in the "doom" paintings on church walls.⁶ The Gawain-poet makes good use of this traditional association, visualizing the whale's

belly as a living hell:

& þer he festnes þe fete & fathmeȝ aboute,
& stod vp in his stomak, þat stank as þe deuel.
þer in saym & in saur þat sauoured as helle,
þer watȝ bylded his bour, þat wyl no bale suffer.
(273-6)

And Jonah's prayer is

Out of þe hole ... of hellen wombe. (306)

Just as Christ's three days in hell is a time of preparation for the Resurrection, so Jonah's three days in the hell of the belly are in preparation for his ejection from the whale. The fact that he is still alive to be vomited up from the fish presupposes a miraculous survival in the belly. The Gawain-poet makes it clear that without Divine aid Jonah could never have survived:

For nade þe hyȝe heuen-kyng, þurȝ his honde-myȝt,
Warded þis wrech man in Warlowes gutteȝ,
What lede moȝt lyue bi lawe of any kynde,
þat any lyf myȝt be lent so longe hym with-inne?
(257-60)

It is interesting to observe that Tertullian in his treatise De Resurrectione Carnis Liber cites this survival as a proof of God's ability to effect resurrection:

... but I suppose that Jonah is a sufficient proof that God has this power as well, when he is disembarked from the sea-monster's belly uncorrupt in respect of both substances, flesh and soul, and certainly the whale's entrails

would have been more competent to digest
the flesh in three days than would a coffin,
a sepulchre, and the long age of some peace-
ful and embalmed burial.⁷

In any case, the process of being vomited up by the whale in
some sense symbolizes the process of resurrection and prefigures
the Resurrection of Christ. The Gawain-poet describes Jonah's
departure from the whale in terms which suggest that we may see
this event as a birth of some sort:

& þer he brakeȝ vp þe buyrne ... (340)

Jonah's spiritual rebirth has already taken place within the
whale, at the time he turned to God, asked to be forgiven, and
undertook to do his duty as a prophet if he were released. His
resurrection is not the apotheosis which Christ undergoes, but
rather a return to the physical world.

The place to which the whale returns Jonah is one where
he has work to do:

þe bonkes þat he blosched to & bode hym bisyde,
Wern of þe regiounes ryȝt þat he renayed hade. (343-4)

At once he resumes the duties of the prophet, and receives
orders from God to go to Nineveh:

"Ris, aproche þen to preche, lo, þe place here!
Lo! my lore is in þe loken, lance hit þerinne."
(349-50)

The last line reminds us of Jonah's similarity to Christ, as one

in whom the Word of God is "loken", and whose duty it is to bring that Word to the sinful.

The poet describes Jonah's journey to Nineveh in some detail:

Þenne þe renk radly ros as he myȝt,
& to Niniue þat naȝt he neȝed ful euen.
Hit watȝ a cete ful syde & selly of brede,
On to þrengre þer-þurȝe watȝ þre dayeȝ dede.
Þat on jounray ful joynt Jonas hym ȝede,
Er euer he warpped any worde to wyȝe þat he mette.
(351-6)

It is interesting to compare this to the Old Testament account:

So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey. And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. (iii. 3-4)

Strangely enough, attention has not previously been drawn to the rather obvious point that whereas the biblical Jonah speaks to the Ninevites after the first day's journey, the Jonah of Patience is silent for three days. In view of the Gawain-poet's habit of patterning events and balancing them one against another, he probably means us to see Jonah's three days of silence as a parallel to his three days' ordeal in the belly of the whale. But this detail may also remind us of one of the best known facts about the life of Christ. Christ was silent for thirty years. Jonah is silent for three days. Possibly it is not

being excessively fanciful to suggest that the contrast between thirty years and three days may be seen as a measure of the immense superiority of Christ and His mission over Jonah and his. Though both are prophets, Jonah is no more than a pale shadow of Christ.

Jonah is undoubtedly at his noblest and most Christ-like in that part of Patience in which he brings the Word of God to the Ninevites, and thus prompts their repentance. In complete contrast, the final episode of the story shows him once more rebelling against God, this time because God has pardoned the Ninevites. Once again, he becomes most unlike Christ, more so perhaps than at any other time in the poem. Our final impression of Jonah is one of a man incorrigibly weak-willed and unstable, and thus, sad to say, typical of mankind. Given this, it may seem strange that the poet wished to bring to our attention points of comparison between Jonah and Christ. But both have one significant thing in common, for both were prophets who brought about the repentance of many sinners. Christian teaching, derived from the words of the Bible and the Church Fathers, traditionally speaks of Jonah as a forerunner and type of Christ, interpreting a number of events in the story of Jonah as symbolizing or foreshadowing events in the life of Christ. The Gawain-poet makes

use of these associations and interpretations to complicate and intensify the responses which Patience may elicit from a thoughtful and imaginative reader. Christ is implied as the measure of the perfect man, the standard against which Jonah must be assessed and inevitably found lacking. At the same time, the poet is more subtle than merely to take the normal interpretation of Jonah as a type of Christ, and use his version of the events of the Old Testament story to suggest that Jonah's conduct makes him more like an antitype. Instead, he portrays Jonah as a typically imperfect human being, charged with a mission similar, on a smaller scale, to that which Christ later carried out, and indeed able briefly to emulate Christ in his dedication and courage, though utterly incapable of doing so consistently. Thus, the poet's use of simultaneous likenesses and contrasts between Jonah and Christ emphasizes both the greatness of Christ and the feebleness in comparison of even the most worthy of men. It suggests that the life of the dedicated Christian will be a constant struggle to emulate a supreme model and that, although he may occasionally and briefly succeed in this, he will much of the time be unsuccessful. When we consider the model, we must recognize with the Evangelists that "a greater than Jonas is here".

Chapter Four: Footnotes

- 1 Both Charles Moorman, "Patience," The "Pearl"-Poet (New York, 1968), p. 68 and A.C. Spearing, "Patience and the Gawain-poet," Anglia, LXXXIV (1966), 314, observe that Christian commentators normally regard Jonah as a type of Christ.
- 2 The other passage may be found in St. Luke xi.29-32. This passage is quoted from the Authorized Version. The quotations (in previous Chapters) from the Sermon on the Mount and the Book of Jonah are given in the Vulgate Latin because I feel that they influenced the poet linguistically as well as thematically. The present quotation from St. Matthew, and any other passages quoted from biblical or patristic sources which are relevant to Patience only in terms of theme and concept, not of language and image, are made in the English version. The only exception is in the case of the passage from Petrus Chrysologus, where I have no translation available, and rather than oblige the reader to trust a translation of my own making have chosen to retain the Latin original.
- 3 Petrus Chrysologus, Sermo XXXVII, "De Jonae Prophetae signo," Patrologia Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844), vol. LII, col. 304.
- 4 Spearing, p. 314.
- 5 E. Brehaut, An Encyclopedist of the Dark Ages: Isidore of Seville (New York, 1912), p. 229.
- 6 M. Hussey, Chaucer's World (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 119-20.
- 7 De Resurrectione Carnis Liber: Tertullian's Treatise on the Resurrection, ed. E. Evans (London, 1960), pp. 86-7.

Chapter Five: A Reading

I

My purpose in this chapter is to offer an interpretive reading of Patience. This will inevitably involve much subjective criticism, and will also be based to a considerable degree on arguments developed in previous chapters. By concentrating on what seems to me to be the most important aspect of the poem, its moral commentary on the human condition, I will attempt to reach some tentative conclusions about the view of life which the poet embodies in his work and the message which the poem may communicate to a sensitive reader.

Patience was written in the context of an oral tradition, and therefore designed for an audience to hear rather than read.¹ We may reasonably expect to find that this fact has influenced the poet in terms both of style and of structure. Thus, for example, when he wishes to draw our attention to a similarity between two situations we can anticipate his use of striking

verbal echoes, which would remind his listener of his previous statement through the repetition of a particular sound-pattern. We may also assume that the order in which he presents his moral points and the details of his story is carefully designed to make the strongest possible impression on his audience. Most poems written in an oral tradition possess a strong narrative thread, and in Patience the overall significance of the poem may be seen to grow and develop as the story and its attendant commentary proceed. As a result we will find that the character of Jonah is revealed to us not through a consistent and concentrated portrait, but rather through an account of his conduct, thoughts and feelings, widely varied and sometimes contradictory as they are, in a series of situations. Through his use of this method the poet develops in the mind of his listener a thorough and quite subtle understanding of Jonah. For these reasons I feel that an interpretation of Patience should take into consideration not only what we are told and what is suggested through symbol and hint, but also the ordering of events and the overall structure of the poem. I will start at the beginning of the poem and attempt to offer an interpretive account of its developing pattern through to the end. For Patience is a work which grows as one event retrospectively endows another with extra layers of meaning and suggestion, and the total moral and human significance

expands and shifts until by the end it is both rich and subtle.

I have examined the prologue in considerable detail in Chapter 2, and will therefore limit myself to a fairly short account of it here. As I previously observed, the poet places us in the position of a congregation listening to a sermon, and addresses us through the persona of a preacher. His first words are a blunt statement of theme:

Patience is a nobel poynt, þa3 hit displesse ofte. (1)

He then goes on to explain why this is so, pointing out that it

... is better to abyde þe bur vmbe-stoundes,
þen ay þrow forth my þro, þa3 me þynk ylle. (7-8)

At this point the preacher applies to his own life the argument which he is presenting to his listeners, a device which he uses consistently throughout the rest of the prologue. The result of this is that he becomes to some extent identified with the members of his congregation as a man who, like them, must find the strength to face the suffering of life with patient fortitude. He is in that ambiguous moral position shared by all preachers, for while he expounds to other men the values of Christian humility and willingness to suffer, and warns them of the dangers of refusing to accept this suffering with patience, he does so in the full knowledge that he too is an imperfect human being and therefore inevitably unable fully to live up to the high

standards he sets before his flock. Thus his use of the first person may perhaps strike us not only as the rhetorical device it undoubtedly is, but also, in view of the moral temper of the poem, as a gesture of humility, a recognition that he shares an imperfection common to all mankind.

The preacher's recital of the Beatitudes provides a scriptural base for his view of life. It is particularly fitting that this should be derived from a sermon in which Christ spoke about the reward of virtue. By quoting, or rather paraphrasing Christ's words, the preacher places himself in a great tradition of moral instruction, a tradition which consists in the continuity of the Word of God, and thus transcends the human limitations of the individual preacher and endows his words with the weight of unquestionable authority. The Beatitudes should be primarily regarded not as a text celebrating eight separate virtues, but rather as one in praise of virtue as a whole, of which the eight kinds are conceptualized as component parts. Neither is this point weakened by the introduction of the separate figures of the eight Dames, for the poet's comment after he has presented them,

He were happen þat hade one -- alle were þe better,
(34)

indicates that they serve a purely exemplary purpose. The preacher

points out that although it is good to possess one Dame, (and thus the virtue praised in one Beatitude), it would indeed be better to have all eight.

At this point we sense a hint of gentle irony entering the discussion, for we are fully aware that no man ever does or will possess all eight. If he did, he would have achieved perfection on earth, and one of the major themes of this poem, and indeed of virtually all Christian writing, is the essential imperfection of man, mortal and postlapsarian as he is. The Beatitudes define a concept of perfection which Christians are encouraged to pursue. But, as Christ was the only being who ever possessed perfection on earth, the pursuit of this ideal may be seen in terms of setting Him up as a model for all conduct. Because any such quest is doomed at least to partial failure on earth, it must inevitably involve the kind of pain and suffering which the preacher emphasizes in the prologue. But in spite of this, man is encouraged to strive to achieve virtue, for if he succeeds even partially then the greatest of all rewards will be his, and in comparison with the promise of heavenly bliss the most terrible of earthly woes pale into insignificance.

The preacher-narrator undertakes to speak to us about two

of the virtues praised in the Beatitudes. Patience, the last, will be his main concern, but he will also touch on poverty, the first. Both terms are used by the poet in such a way that their range of meaning grows far wider than that which we associate with their conventional usage, and it becomes clear that they define qualities of the widest application.² "Patience" comes to mean not only the ability to suffer physical and spiritual hardships without complaint, but also the ability to behave with moderation in times of ease and plenty. Likewise, "poverty" means both the physical poverty of deprivation and the spiritual quality of humility and willingness to suffer. The poet endows these terms with the widest possible range of significance, so that they exemplify and are part of that complete and supreme virtue which is perfect as it is unobtainable on earth.

At this point the preacher once more applies the ethical argument to his personal experience. He has told us that we must not only accept suffering but even rejoice in it, and now this moral lesson is illustrated with great immediacy in his account of his own determination to live up to this requirement. He has established the moral theme of the story he will tell, its application to the life of every Christian man, and the authority upon which he bases his moral judgements. The prologue has served

its purpose, and with the minimum of preamble or ceremony, the story of Jonah is introduced.

II

The Gawain-poet sets the scene for his narrative in two brief lines:

Hit bitydde sum-tyme in þe termes of Jude,
Jonas joyned wat3 þer-inne Jentyle prophete. (61-2)

Economical though this opening is, it provides us with all the facts we need to know before the story proper begins. The most important single piece of information is that Jonah is appointed a "prophete", which means that God gives him a job of the greatest importance, and one which we know requires the most demanding standards of conduct and dedication. In the very next line we hear that God speaks to Jonah, and the first discordant note is immediately struck. The poet tells us that when "Goddess glam to hym glod" (63) it neither brought Jonah happiness nor filled him with dread, but "hym vnglad made". We have to wait until God's speech is over before we discover precisely why Jonah should be

"vnglad", but we listen to God's words in the knowledge that they are a source of displeasure to His prophet. God's first words to Jonah are brusque and imperious:

"Rys radly," He says, "& rayke forth euen,
Nym þe way to Nynyue, wyth-ouen oþer speche,
& in þat cete my sazes soghe alle aboute,
þat, in þat place at þe poynt, I put in þi hert",
(65-8)

though we may feel that the tone grows somewhat gentler in the last two lines. In any event, God goes on to explain to Jonah why He wishes him to speak to the Ninevites:

"... hit arn so wykke þat in þat won dowelleȝ,
& her malys is so much, I may not abyde,
Bot venge me on her vilanye & venym bilyue." (69-71)

He ends with a repetition of His previous order, this time in distinctly milder terms:

"Now sweȝe me þider swyftly & say me þis arende." (72)

In effect, God is commanding Jonah to undertake the kind of work for which a prophet is intended, that is to preach the Word to the wicked and the ignorant.

We should keep this point in mind as we listen to Jonah's virulent reaction. First the poet tells us that the "steuen" of God "stowned his mynde" (73) and that "he wrathed in his wyt" and "wyþerly he þoȝt" (74). Then we are given, in direct speech, exactly what Jonah did think:

"If I bowe to his bode & bryng hem þis tale,
& I be nummen in Nuniue, my nyes begynes,
He telles me þose traytoures arn typpede schrewes;
I com wyth þose tyþynges, þay ta me bylyue,
Pyne₃ me in a prysoun, put me in stokkes,
Wryþe me in a warlok, wrast out myn y₃en.
Þis is a meruayl message a man for to preche,
Amonge enmyes so mony & mansed fendes;
Bot if my gaynlych God such gref to me wolde,
For desert of sum sake þat I slayn were,
At alle peryles," quop þe prophete, "I aproche hit
no nerre;
I wyl me sum oþer waye þat he ne wayte after;
I schal tee into Tarce & tary þere a whyle,
&, ly₃tly, when I am lest he letes me alone". (75-88)

The poet presents Jonah's thoughts to us as they form in his mind, so that we do not merely hear what he thinks, but are rather shown precisely how he thinks. This has the effect of robbing him of the dignity preserved so effectively by the episodic narrative and consistent understatement of the biblical account. Nothing is hidden from us, with the result that the unworthiness of Jonah's motives and the palpably fallacious reasoning in which he indulges in order to delude himself as to his real motivation rob him of the stature with which the title of "prophete" briefly endowed him. But though we have no doubt that, according to the standards set up in the prologue, Jonah's behaviour is morally reprehensible, the immediacy of the poet's account so captures our imagination that we feel sympathetically inclined towards him, and possibly even identify with him. We can in-

tellectually reject the dishonesty and unworthiness of what he says, but we understand his desire to avoid probable pain and possible death. Nevertheless, the last four lines, in which the reluctant prophet determines to flee "into Tarce", make it clear that Jonah's desire to escape from his duty to carry out God's command causes him to follow the dictates of his passions and not those of his reason. Even a listener unfamiliar with the story of the Book of Jonah will hardly expect him to escape an all-powerful God so easily.

At this point, after God's speech of command and Jonah's defiant reply, we should perhaps stop and take stock of what emphasis the poet is putting on the Old Testament story. I have pointed out that our sympathies are fully engaged by the prophet's natural desire to avoid the suffering with which his mission would threaten him. This is not to say that our "homiletic" poet is briefly playing the Devil's advocate. It is right and proper that we should sympathize with Jonah's predicament and perhaps identify with him, for the prologue has warned us that in this life all men will be tested in situations not altogether dissimilar to his, and that it will prove as difficult for us as it does for him to keep to the path of righteousness. At the same time, we are aware that the prophet is behaving wrongly, which

means that in the moral world of the poem we instinctively recognize criteria above and beyond the range of mere human inclination. If we apply the facts of Jonah's case to our own lives and those of all Christian men, their significance becomes clearer. God orders him to undertake a particular task, hard and demanding, but of major importance. Fearful for his personal safety, Jonah flees from his duty. Had he sufficient faith in God he would be able to accept the task without hesitation, confident in the knowledge that even were he to suffer death, this lesser evil would bring him to a greater, the greatest, good. We are perhaps reminded of Pearl, in which the Dreamer is brought by the central allegory of the Parable of the Vineyard to the understanding that those who die young are to be envied, for to the faithful death is a release from suffering into bliss.

The poet's account of Jonah's actions and words in the following few lines strengthens our impression that his conduct is anything but praiseworthy. He hurries off to take a boat to Tarshish, "ay janglande for tene" (90). The alliteration has the effect of concentrating attention on the association between "Jonas" and "janglande", a present participle which catches the very tone of the prophet's mutinous complaints. We may also notice the poet's use of verbal echo in these lines. When God

commands Jonah to go to Nineveh, He says: "Rys radly ... & rayke forth euen" (65); now we hear that Jonah "... ryses radly, & raykes bylyue" (89). The repetition of "rys radly" and "rayke" suggests that the poet wishes to draw our attention to some kind of interesting similarity or contrast between the two points. In fact, there is both. The action which Jonah now begins and the swiftness with which he moves -- "bylyue" is here virtually synonymous with "euen" -- show that he is complying with the terms of God's order, while doing the exact opposite of what God commanded. Two lines later we hear of Jonah

þat he nolde þole, for no-þyng, non of þose pynes,
(91)

which remind us of the poet's use of the word "þole" at the beginning of the poem:

... quo for þro may noȝt þole, þe þikker he sufferes.
(6)

The words bode ill for Jonah's future.

Before he sets sail for Tarshish, Jonah makes one more brief speech, which reinforces his previous comments:

"Oure syre syttes," ... "on sege so hyȝe
In his glowande glorye, & gloumbes ful lyttel,
þaȝ I be nummen in Nuniuē & naked dispoyled,
On rode rwly to-rent, with rybaudes mony." (93-6)

For a number of reasons, we find this more objectionable than his

earlier statement. We could then have argued that he was speaking in the heat of the moment and that his fear for his own safety led him instinctively and unthinkingly to reject God's command. But now, after time for reflection, we find Jonah not more reasonable, but less so. He has rationalized his desire to avoid going to Nineveh by persuading himself that God has no concern for his welfare. In his first speech, he imagined the terrible punishments that he might suffer were he to go to Nineveh, but these are now related as if they were the unavoidable consequences of this action. The last two lines are shocking because they bring the Crucifixion to our minds. At this juncture, for Jonah to think of himself as a potential martyr, and describe himself in such a way that we think of the greatest martyr of all, strikes us as almost blasphemous.

The prophet goes to Joppa and makes arrangements for his passage to Tarshish. There follows the fine description of the sailors preparing their ship for the voyage, a passage which demonstrates the poet's outstanding talent for naturalistic description. Jonah's desire to set sail as soon as possible -- he asks the sailors to get him to Tarshish "as tyd as þay my3t" (100) -- is reflected in the speed with which they prepare each part of their vessel:

Then he tron on þo tres & þay her tramme ruchen,
Cachen vp þe crossayl, cables þay fasten,
Wi3t at þe wyndas we3en her ankres ... (101-3)

The taut, choppy half-lines catch the atmosphere of vigorous activity, and intensify our awareness of Jonah's anxiety to be off. In the end we hear that the "swete schip" sails "fro þe hauen" (108) and breathe an involuntary sigh of relief for Jonah.

This mood of optimism is short-lived. The poet next tells us of Jonah's pleasure in his escape:

Wat3 neuer so joyful a Jue as Jonas wat3 þenne,
þat þe daunger of Dry3tyn so derfly ascaped, (109-10)

and even here we may catch a warning note. No longer "janglande", Jonah is now "joyful" because of his flight (which is ironically described in terms of a heroic feat), but his confidence is based on the assumption that God has "no ma3t in þat mere no man for to greue" (112). Then the poet changes his manner, launching into a fierce denunciation of Jonah:

Lo! þe wytles wrechche, for he wolde no3t suffer,
Now hat3 he put hym in plyt of peril wel more, (113-14)

which should remind us of the general comments in the prologue about the man who tries to avoid suffering. This attack is similar in manner to the oratory of denunciation which is found so often in the medieval sermon. With pointed irony, the poet

goes on to say that God can see a good deal farther than Jonah thinks:

3ise, he blusched ful brode, þat burde hym, by
sure! (117)

Again following the practice of the pulpit, the poet supports his specific attack with the authority of the Scriptures, this time in the form of a translation of two verses from the ninety-third psalm:

"O Fole₃ in folk, fele₃ oþer whyle,
& vnderstonde_s vmbe-stounde, þa₃ 3e be stape fole:
Hope 3e þat he heres not þat eres alle made?
Hit may not be þat he is blynde þat bigged vche y₃e."
(121-4)

This statement implies that Jonah qualifies for the uncomplimentary title of "fool". The poet now shifts his attention back to the prophet, telling us that God's vengeance will soon catch up with him:

... I trow, ful tyd ouer-tan þat he were,
So þat schomely to schort he schote of his ame.
For þe welder of wyt þat wot alle þynges,
Þat ay wakes & waytes, at wylle hat₃ he sly₃tes.
(127-30)

Though its terms are vague, the threat is in fact carefully articulated. Jonah has misjudged his position, for he has forgotten that God is omnipotent, and that such a God may act whenever and however He will.

He now acts, with terrifying speed and power. "Ewrus &

Aquiloun", the East Wind and the North Wind, are ordered to blow, and their obedience is immediate, so eager are they to do God's work. In the account of the storm that follows, the poet moves from a broad description of the glowering clouds and the huge waves to an account of the effect of the rough sea on the fishes, which dare not "for ro₃ arest at þe bothem" (144), and then, narrowing his focus, to the boat and Jonah:

Hit wat₃ a joyles gyn þat Jonas wat₃ inne. (146)

Again the alliteration draws our attention to the change in Jonah's state of mind, this time from "joyful" (109) to "joyles". The first time the poet mentioned the boat, he described how the sailors were preparing first one part, then another; now he tells how the storm undoes their work, destroying the boat piece by piece until "suppe bihoued/þe coge of þe colde water" (151-2). Perhaps our most powerful impression of the storm's strength comes from the account of the sailors' reaction to it. The poet captures the terror which motivates their frenzied activities, as they throw overboard their most valuable possessions, and finally, near despair, call upon their various gods to help them in their hour of need.

In the midst of all this confusion, "þe spakest" sailor has an idea:

"I leue here be sum losynger, sum lawles wrech,
þat hat₃ greued his god & got₃ here amonge vus!
Lo! al synkes in his synne, & for his sake marres!
I lovue þat we lay lotes on ledes vchone,
& who-so lympeþ þe losse, lay hym þer oute;
& quen þe gulty is gon, what may gome trawe,
Bot he þat rules þe rak may rwe on þose oper?" (170-6)

The reasoning is simple, but in fact his opinions are very near the truth. A crude trial is arranged, and men come out of the corners of the boat to learn what their fate is to be, while a "lodes-mon" starts searching for anyone who may still be hiding. It comes as no surprise to us to hear that the only man he does not find immediately is "Jonas þe Jwe þat jowked in derne" (182). Once more, the word which alliterates with "Jonas" is striking. We hardly expect to be told that he is sleeping through all the noise and confusion of the storm, and may well wonder if the poet intends us to find some symbolic significance in the fact. It must at least suggest that Jonah, though hiding from the storm, is sufficiently at ease with his conscience to be able to sleep. We have seen him attempt to hide from the sight of God, and now he seems to be hiding both from the storm, which is a sign of God's wrath and an agent of His will, and from his fellow-men. His sleep is described in the ugly terms "sloberande he routes" (186), and his awakening is anything but dignified:

þe freke hym frunt with his fot, & bede hym ferk vp:
þer Raguel in his rakentes hym rere of his dremes!
(187-8)

Gollancz notes that Raguel is the name of the Angel of Chastisement in the apocryphal Book of Enoch³, and this would seem to have a certain relevance, for the "lodes-mon" does indeed bring Jonah to punishment. Because the result is so predictable, the poet makes very little of the actual casting of lots, dismissing it in two lines:

Sone haf þay her sortes sette & serelych deled,
& ay þe lote, vpon laste, lymped on Jonas. (193-4)

The sailors now turn on Jonah and castigate him bitterly for making them suffer on account of his sins, asking him a series of questions about his origins, his crimes, and his present purpose. Then they ask him whether or not he has a god, and advise him to pray before he is thrown from the boat. Jonah's reply comes as a surprise:

"I am an Ebru," quop he, "of Israyl borne;
þat wy3e I worchyp, Iwysse, þat wro3t alle þynges,
Alle þe worlde with þe welkyn, þe wynde & þe sternes,
& alle þat wone3 þer with-inne, at a worde one.
Alle þis meschef for me is made at þis tyme:
For I haf greued my God & gulty am founden;
For-þy bere3 me to þe borde, & bapes me þer-oute,
Er gete 3e no happe, I hope for soþe." (205-12)

These words are honest and courageous, and give evidence of a humility and self-knowledge which have previously been lacking in Jonah. He tells the sailors about his God in the most glowing of terms, and in view of the fact that the sailors have prayed

in the storm to various heathen deities, we may almost sense a trace of the prophet in him at this moment. Appropriately enough, he speaks of God's absolute control over the forces of nature. He accepts full blame for the storm and encourages the sailors to throw him from their vessel. During this speech Jonah appears as a reformed character, speaking with a restraint and humility which are wholly admirable.

There is yet a brief delay before he is ejected from the boat, for when the sailors realize that he is fleeing "fro þe face of frelych Dry3tyn" (214), they are stricken with panic and, rushing to their oars, try to row the boat to safety. Clearly this violent physical activity is an attempt to escape from a moral predicament, and as such would by its very futility become ridiculous were the poet to allow this to happen. But he describes the scene in such a way that our sympathies are fully engaged by the sailors' situation and so, as we are told that "al wat3 nedles note" (220), the predominant feeling is one of pathos. They realize at last that they have no choice in this matter, and after praying that they may not be punishing an innocent man, they throw Jonah from the boat. The result is dramatic:

He wat3 no tytter out-tulde þat tempest ne sessed;
þe se sa3tled þer-with, as sone as ho mo3t. (231-2)

The poet, who has been narrating from the sailors' point of view since the end of Jonah's confession, still refrains from speaking directly about the prophet, but instead recounts how the sailors reach land and give thanks to God. We may recall that at the height of the storm they prayed to a variety of heathen gods, whereas now they all pray to the one true God. But although it would be perfectly reasonable to expect a homiletic writer to suggest that their recent experience had brought about their conversion, the poem offers no evidence to support any such contention. Having dealt with the sailors the poet returns to Jonah:

þa₃ þay be jolef for joye, Jonas 3et dredes;
þa₃ he nolde suffer no sore, his seele is on anter;
For what-so worped of þat wy3e, fro he in water dipped,
Hit were a wonder to wene, 3if holy wryt nere. (241-4)

He contrasts the happiness of the sailors with the terror of the prophet, once more using the alliterating "j" to emphasize the most important words. During this lull in the narrative he summarizes Jonah's position and then reminds us of the biblical authority on which his story is based. This pause increases our feeling of suspense as we wait to hear what will happen to Jonah.

The poet now resumes his narrative, going back somewhat to the point at which Jonah is about to be thrown from the boat, and then relating the full details of this most important event:

A wylde walterande whal, as wyrd þen schaped,
þat wat3 beten fro þe abyme, bi þat bot flotte,
& wat3 war of þat wy3e þat þe water so3te,
& swyftely swenged hym to swepe, & his swol3 opened;
þe folk 3et haldande his fete, þe fysch hym tyd hentes;
With-uten towche of any tothe he tult in his þrote.
(247-52)

He earlier described how the fishes were beaten from the bottom of the sea during the storm; here the point is echoed, for this whale "wat3 beten fro þe abyme".⁴ This may serve to impress upon us that God controls all things, for it is His winds which raise the storm which drives up the whale to swallow His prophet. The whale now returns to the bottom of the sea with "þe mon in his mawe malskred in drede" (255). Rather than immediately embarking upon his account of the prophet's experiences inside the whale, the poet again pauses to point out the precise moral implications of Jonah's position. While his reason for doing this is clearly didactic, he may also be delaying at this crucial point, as he did before at the moment when the whale seized Jonah, in order to make his audience more anxious to hear what happens next. He points out that Jonah could never have survived inside the whale "bi lawe of any kynde" (259),

Bot he wat3 sokored by þat Syre þat syttes so hi3e.
(261)

As he fled towards Joppa, Jonah claimed that "Oure syre" who "syttes on sege so hy3e" (93) cared nothing for welfare. The

verbal echo carries with it an implicit criticism of Jonah's folly, which has brought him to his present unenviable position.

The poet again reminds us that Jonah was thrown from the boat and seized by the whale, this time through reporting the prophet's own recollections of these events. The final stage of the remembered process is the entry into the throat of the whale,

As mote in at a munster dor, so mukel wern his
chawle₃! (268)

His daring use of outrageously exaggerated perspective in this line has the effect of reducing Jonah's size out of all proportion, and of pointing out how utterly futile it is to fight against the forces of nature, ruled as they are by God. The poet makes use of the traditional association of the whale's jaws with hell-mouth, but also draws an extraordinary comparison between them and a "munster dor". We are aware that Jonah is descending into what may well be for him a personal hell, but at this point the paradoxical suggestion that the whale's belly may be seen as a "munster" (minster or cathedral), a place of worship and the house of God, is puzzling and ambiguous. The next few lines present no such complications, and they are surprising only in their brilliant originality. We are told exactly what happens to Jonah as he goes down into the stomach of the whale, how

He glydes in by þe giles þurȝ glaym ande glette,
Relande in by a rop, a rode þat hym þoȝt,
Ay hele ouer hed, hourlande aboute, (269-71)

the movement of the lines acting out his falling and stumbling,
until

... he blunt in a blok as brod as a halle, (272)

which brings him to an abrupt halt. His smallness is impressed upon us by the poet's continued use of the exaggerated perspective. Thus the whale's "rop", or intestine, seems like a road, and his stomach is said to be the size of a hall. Jonah's surroundings are far from pleasant: in successive lines the poet tells us that the stomach "stank as þe deuel" (274) and "sauoured as helle" (275), and so, in spite of his comparison of the mouth with a minster door, he clearly means us to think of the stomach as a kind of hell. He now tells how Jonah searches in vain among all the "ramel ande myre" (279) for a place to rest, slipping in just one gently but precisely ironic line,

þer watȝ bylded his bour, þat wyl no bale suffer,
(276)

to remind us why and how the prophet came to be here.

Jonah does not in fact find a place to "build" his "bower" until he has prayed to God for help. Like his confession on the boat, his prayer possesses that quality of complete honesty and

humility which Christian teaching tells us we must always maintain in our relationship with God, and which the poet's listeners cannot but find admirable:

"Now prynce, of þy prophete pité þou haue!
þa₃ I be fol & fykel, & falce of my hert,
Dewoyde now þy vengauce, þur₃ vertu of rauthe;
Tha₃ I be gulty of gyle, as gaule of prophetes".
(282-5)

The mercy for which Jonah asks is not long in coming, for he immediately finds a place to rest, where "no defoule of no fylþe wat₃ fest hym abute" (290), and nothing troubles him "saf for merk one" (291). The poet tells us that Jonah stays in this "bower"

As in þe bulk of þe bote þer he byfore slepед,
(292)

which invites us to compare the two places. In the first he sleeps through the storm which is the sign of God's anger with him -- thus showing that he has no sense of having done wrong -- only to be dragged from it to judgement. This causes him to be ejected from the boat, and indirectly, to be swallowed by the whale. But whereas the first "bour" is a place in which Jonah hides from judgement, the second is one which he wins by passing judgement of himself. In the first he sleeps without any sense of guilt; in the second he lies awake thinking of his sins.

Jonah stays in this discomfort for "þre dayes & þre nyȝt"

(294), thinking of God,

His my3t & his merci, his mesure þenne. (295)

These are precisely the qualities which God has shown in the story so far, and they once more bring our attention to the scale of values by reference to which Jonah's conduct has been so sadly unworthy and against which all men will be judged. From his new-found humility the poet draws the conclusion that he is learning "in care" what he failed to know "in sele" (296), an observation which takes us back to the prologue where we were told that suffering should be accepted gladly and that he who tries to escape it will only make worse trouble for himself. All this time, the whale is swimming through rough, wild regions which perhaps symbolize the spiritual turmoil through which the prophet is now struggling. The whale is, interestingly enough, feeling sick because of the presence of Jonah in his belly, possibly with the suggestion that Jonah's newly-achieved humility is physically repulsive to a beast which does, after all, symbolize hell. Apropos of this, we should observe that the prophet is here referred to as "þat mote", a term which reminds us of the earlier image of the "mote in at a munster dor" (268). At this point, we may begin to see the significance of the earlier suggestion that the whale's belly might also be regarded as a holy place, for it has now become clear that during his stay in

the belly Jonah has achieved true humility and willingness to accept the ways of God.

Jonah now prays to God that he may be forgiven and released. This is in fact his second prayer from the belly, but it is far longer, more formal and more significant than the first. He begins,

"Lorde, to þe haf I cleped, in care₃ ful stronge;
Out of þe hole þou me herde, of hellen wombe;
I calde, & þou knew myn vncler steuen". (305-7)

Once more we hear the humble and devout manner of the repentant Jonah. He knows that his voice is only an "vncler steuen" calling feebly to God from the depths of the sea, but hopes that God in His limitless power may choose to hear his prayer and answer it. He describes how he has gone deep into the sea:

"þou dipte₃ me of þe depe se, in-to þe dymme hert".
(308)

The suggestion of baptism is unmistakable, and perfectly justified, for in the heart of the sea, "dymme" and inscrutable though it is, he has rediscovered his faith and is now about to offer himself in God's services. Jonah expresses the hope that he will be released to serve God again, and then returns to his sense of imprisonment beneath the sea:

"þe abyne byndes þe body þat I byde inne;
þe pure poplande hourle playes on my heued;
To laste mere of vche a mount, man, am I fallen;
þe barre3 of vche a bonk ful bigly me haldes,
þat I may lachche no lont, & þou my lyf weldes".
(318-22)

Quiet and dignified though they are, these lines convey to us the intensity of Jonah's suffering. When he asks God for mercy, his sense of his own unworthiness is such that he says:

"þou schal releue me, renk, whil þy ry3t slepe3,
þur3 my3t of þy mercy þat mukel is to tryste". (323-4)

Finally he undertakes to obey God's command in the future, and with the words "haf here my trauth!" (336) his prayer is ended. No sooner has Jonah finished speaking than God orders the whale to release him.

In retrospect it is clear that the story so far has described how Jonah has sinned, repented and achieved forgiveness. It is in fact possible to give a detailed reading of the poem as one of specifically penitential character, but as such a reading is already available⁵, I will merely observe those points which seem to be unequivocally penitential. Jonah does in fact confess his guilt not once, but on three separate occasions. The first is after the drawing of the lots, at which point he seems suddenly to become aware of his sins and, turning from his previous skulking self-delusion, confesses openly and humbly, stating that

he is ready to be sacrificed in order that the sailors may be saved. His first brief prayer to God after he is swallowed by the whale takes the form of an admission of guilt, and for this self-knowledge God rewards him with the "bour". Jonah clearly reaches the state of contrition during his three days and nights alone in the "bour", and confesses his sins fully in his prayer from the belly. At the end of this prayer, he promises to obey God in the future, which amounts to an undertaking of restitution. Jonah sins because of human weaknesses, recognizes and is sorry for these sins, confesses his guilt, and promises to do better in the future. But his confession and absolution are no more final than those of any other man. Somewhat more than half way through his story, the poet has set up a pattern of a man sinning, realizing his sin through suffering, repenting, confessing, finding forgiveness, and setting out again to try and mend his ways. Knowing the weakness of all men and the demanding standards by which they will be judged, we may well fear for Jonah's ability to succeed in his quest.

Obeying God's command, the whale now swims to the shore and releases Jonah. The prophet's return to the world is rendered rather undignified by the poet's emphasis of his "sluchchede clopes" (341), which, as I have already noted⁶ are a common

motif in homiletic literature. If we recall that at the end of his prayer from the belly, Jonah promises to undertake God's work when he is released, we will not be surprised to hear that he has been returned to "þe regiounes ryȝt þat he renayed hade" (344). The world is one in which he has work to do, and it is not long before God reminds him of this fact. We are told that "a wynde of Goddeȝ worde" (345) reaches Jonah, and that the voice "bruxleȝ" him. The terms remind us of the stern God controlling the forces of nature, and the brusqueness of His question,

"Nylt þou neuer to Nuniue bi no-kynnes wayeȝ?" (346) corroborates our impression. Clearly God has no intention of allowing Jonah to forget his duties. But this time the prophet offers no resistance; his reply is as humble and obliging as possible:

"3isse lorde ... lene my þy grace
For to go at þi gre; me gayneȝ non oþer". (347-8)

Now God speaks again to Jonah, far more gently this time, briefly giving him final instructions for his mission:

"Ris, aproche þen to prech, lo, þe place here!
Lo! my lore is in þe loken, lance hit þerinne".
(349-50)

The prophet wastes no time, but sets off for Nineveh at once. We are told that he "radly ros" (351), words which the poet has

used previously both, in God's original order to Jonah to "Rys radly" (65) and go to Nineveh, and when he defies this command and "ryses radly" (89) to flee to Joppa. The verbal echo, partly no doubt the result of alliteration and formulaic phrases, may also be intended to draw our attention to the similarities and contrasts between the original order to depart and the defiant departure in the opposite direction on the one hand, and the final departure for the destination designated in the original command on the other.

Jonah now travels to Nineveh, and stays there three days in silence. I earlier speculated that the poet adds this point to suggest a particular simultaneous parallel and contrast between Jonah and Christ⁷, but whether or not the reader finds this notion acceptable, he will agree that Jonah is presented here primarily as the prophet and preacher, which is one of the major points of similarity upon which the commentators base their comparison between him and Christ.⁸ When Jonah preaches to the Ninevites, he does so with resounding success. His words are summarized for us in direct speech:

"3et schal forty daye3 fully fare to an ende,
& þenne schal Niniue be nomen & to no3t worþe;
Truly þis ilk toun schal tylte to grounde;
Vp-so-doun schal 3e dumpe depe to þe abynde,
To be swol3ed swyftly wyth þe swart erþe,
& alle þat lyuyes here-inne lose þe swete". (359-64)

Once more we witness the poet's outstanding ability to realize dramatic situations and make them live in his words. I mentioned in my first chapter that threats of retributive marvels are fairly common in Middle English homiletic literature, and that the homilist traditionally spoke of hell as being in the middle of the earth. Here we can almost picture Jonah as a medieval preacher. He speaks to the Ninevites with extraordinary power, warning them of their approaching doom with fire and intensity, and bringing to life the horror of being swallowed into the depths of the earth, a horror similar to that which he experienced when he was swallowed by the whale.

His success is outstanding. The poet speaks of Jonah's words as living things which "sprang in þat space & spradde alle aboute" (365), carrying with them the power of an authority far beyond the range of merely human words. Filled with the fear of God, the people repent their sins, put on "heter hayre3" (373), drop dust on their heads, and pray to God for mercy. The repentance of the King of the Ninevites is described at some length:

His ryche robe he to-rof of his rigge naked,
& of a hepe of askes he hitte in þe mydde3;
He aske3 heterly a hayre & hasped hym vmbe,
Sewed a sekke þer abof, and syked ful colde;
þer he dased in þat duste, with droppande teres,
Wepande ful wonderly alle his wrange dedes. (379-84)

I quote this passage in full because it seems to me that it admirably illustrates the poet's outstanding ability to describe human activities which are faintly ridiculous in such a way that while we recognize this element of absurdity we still feel pity and respect for the people described. He achieves this both through his fine control of tone, and by showing the ridiculous side of human activity in the context of profoundly serious situations. We do not feel moved to laugh at the King, because his actions could only be laughable were they described in isolation from their moral context and from the actual situation which gives rise to them. The same observations could be applied to the accounts of the panic of the sailors, and of Jonah tumbling about inside the whale. If we smile at all it is uneasily, for we recognize that within the moral context of the poem these events are disturbingly near our own situation.

The repentant King now issues the order that all his people and their animals are to fast, and that these starving beings are to cry to God in the hope that "in his mylde amesyng he mercy may fynde" (400). The King's appeal to God's mercy is successful because the repentance of the people of Nineveh is complete and genuine.

Jonah's reaction to God's pardoning of the Ninevites is immediate and violent:

Much sorze þenne sattled vpon segge Jonas;
He wex as wroth as þe wynde towarde our Lorde.
(409-10)

We immediately realize that the prophet is casting aside the righteousness which has distinguished his conduct ever since his confession on the boat, and that he is once more rebelling against God. It is an interesting reversal that Jonah's anger is here compared to the wind, for elsewhere in this poem the wind has accompanied God's commands, and, most memorably, the two winds "Ewrus" and "Aquiloun" have been used by God in His wrath as agents of vengeance. Though Bateson points out⁹ that "as wroth as þe wynde" is a common formulaic phrase of comparison, the use of the winds elsewhere in the poem does suggest that the poet may be employing it here for a deliberate effect. It may well be intended to point up the reversal of roles which occurs here when Jonah suddenly turns in anger upon God and chastizes Him for His conduct:

"I beseche þe Syre, now þou self jugge;
Wat3 not þis ilk my worde þat worþen is nouþe,
þat I keste in my cuntre when þou þy carp sende3,
þat I schulde tee to þys toun þi talent to preche?
Wel knew I þi cortaysye, þi quoynt soffraunce,
þy bounte of debonerte & þy bene grace,
þy longe abydyng wyth lur, þy late vengauce;
& ay þy mercy is mete, be mysse neuer so huge.

attributes of Divine Grace. With devastating irony (but no explicit comment), the poet here shows Jonah bitterly attacking God for His exercise of those very qualities for which all men are taught to praise Him. It should be unnecessary to point out that, had God not possessed these attributes, Jonah would still be languishing in the belly. His final request for immediate death is an unconvincing and over-dramatized gesture prompted by self-pity. We may well bear in mind that this is the same man who while he was inside the whale pleaded with God to spare his life: clearly it is unlikely that he would wish to part with it so soon, and over so trifling a matter. The motivation for his request is revealed, or rather mentioned as if in passing, in the last half line of his speech, where he says that he would rather die than live any longer under the rule of a God "pat þus me les make³", or in other words reduces his stature, or harms his reputation. Our view of Jonah's stature is by this point in the poem a fairly jaundiced one, which makes his statement a trifle ridiculous, but the ramifications of his argument are serious in the extreme. Presumably the implication of his complaint is that his reputation should have been valued more highly than the lives of the Ninevites, that God should have damned them rather than allow his stature to be impaired. This type of blind concern with worldly reputation is not to be taken lightly: most

Christian moralists would probably have regarded it as a result of Pride, the chief of the Seven Deadly Sins.

God remonstrates briefly with Jonah, asking

" ... is this ryzt so ronkly to wrath,
For any dede þat I haf don, oþer demed þe 3et?"
(431-2)

The question remains unanswered, and Jonah leaves "al joyles & janglande" (433). These words remind us of the prophet's previous troubles, for when he refused to obey God's first command, he left for Joppa "ay janglande for tene" (90), and when the storm struck the boat, it was described as a "joyles gyn" (146). He wanders off, finds a place in a "felde" (435) and

þer busked hym a bour, þe best þat he myzt,
Of hay & of euer-ferne & erbe3 a fewe,
For hit wat3 playn in þat place, for plyande greue3
For to schylde fro the schene, oþer any schade keste.
(437-40)

This is Jonah's third "bour", and like the first, this one is sought out while he is rebelling against God. It is also dark, like both previous "bours", though on this occasion the darkness is a welcome relief from the sun, while in the case of the second, it was a source of discomfort. This may bring to our attention a point of contrast between the first and third "bours" on the one hand, and the second on the other. Jonah enters the second "bour" in a repentant frame of mind, while in the other two he is in a state of violent rebellion against God. The pattern of moral

behaviour reflected by this consists of a movement from sin to repentance and back again to sin.

While Jonah is sleeping "sadly" (442) in his "lyttel bope" (441) that night,

... God of his grace ded growe of þat soyle
þe fayrest bynde hym abof þat euer burne wyste.
(443-4)

When day dawns, or rather, to retain the poet's emphasis, when God sends the dawn, Jonah awakes to find the woodbine covering his "bour" has converted into a delightful dwelling-place. His reaction to this is extreme:

Þenne wat3 þe gome so glad of his gay logge,
Lys loltrande þer-inne lokande to toune;
So blyþe of his wod-bynde he balteres þer-vnder,
þat of no diete þat day þe-deuel-haf! he ro3t.
& euer he lazed as he loked þe loge alle aboute,
& wysched hit were in his kyth, þer he wony schulde.
(457-62)

He does not thank God for this gift, or even reflect upon his good fortune; instead he immediately develops an intense pride of ownership, and lies around all day gloating over his house, laughing in a ridiculous manner, and lamenting the fact that the house is not situated in his own country. When we hear that Jonah "balteres" or tumbles about in his house we are reminded of his involuntary tumbling within the whale. In that instance, unsolicited misfortune and suffering brought the prophet to

patience and repentance, while here his voluntary tumbling may indicate how ^{he} is failing to "stere" his "hert" in this unexpected good fortune. Another word reminds us of his sojourn in the whale. He is too idle to go and find himself food, and dismisses the idea with the exclamation "þe-deuel-haf!", which reads slightly ironically, for not so long ago the devil nearly had him. His anger over the Ninevites completely forgotten, Jonah goes contentedly to sleep.

The poet now tells us how God commands a worm to come and dig up the root of the woodbine so that by morning it is withered. Then He orders the dawn to come up and instructs "3eferus" the West Wind to "syfle warme" so that

... þer quikken no cloude bifore þe cler sunne,
& ho schal busch vp ful brode & brenne as a candel.
(471-2)

We may recall the emphasis earlier given to the fact that "hit wat3 playn in þat place" (439), which was Jonah's original reason for building his "bour". This fact intensified his delight in the woodbine, for no sunlight, not even "þe mountaunce of a lyttel mote" (456) could penetrate the thick walls of the woodbine "logge". Now the prophet awakes "of his wyl dremes" (473) (a passing hint which reinforces our impression of his lack of stability), to find that his woodbine "bropely wat3 marred",

Al welwed & wasted þo worþelych leues;
þe schyre sunne hade hem schent, er euer þe
schalk wyst. (475-6)

Once more Jonah is faced with the immense power of God working through the forces of nature. Not only is he stricken by grief at the loss of his woodbine, but also he is without any shelter from the blazing sun:

þe man marred on þe molde þat mozt hym not hyde;
His wod-bynde wat3 away, he weped for sor3e. (479-80)

Again he speaks to God, in "hatel anger & hot" (481):

"A! þou maker of man, what maystery þe þynke3
þus þy freke to forfare for-bi alle oþer?
With alle meschef þat þou may, neuer þou me spare3:
I keuered me a cumfort þat now is ca3t fro me,
My wod-bynde so wlonk þat wered my heued;
Bot now I se þou art sette my solace to reue.
Why ne dy3tte3 þou me to di3e? I dure to longe".
(482-8)

By now, this manner should be fairly familiar to us. Striking the pose of the ill-used innocent, he bitterly attacks God for depriving him of the "cumfort", asks why he is specially picked out for such cruel treatment, and ends by repeating his earlier request for death -- all of course without any thought for the quality of his own conduct. He fails to remember that the gift which God removed was given by Him in the first place. Neither does he realize that this gift made him behave in a thoroughly ridiculous and unworthy manner, and that he failed to give thanks

for it. For Jonah to realize such things would require steady self-criticism, an activity of which in his present mood he is completely incapable. The instability of his state of mind is vividly illustrated if we merely list the permutations which have taken place since the pardoning of the Ninevites. This event plunged Jonah into the depths of despair and prompted his first request for an immediate end to his life; he was brought out of this depression by the appearance of the woodbine, which immediately changed his mood to one of immense satisfaction; now this in turn is ended by its loss, which causes his return to extreme sorrow and self-pity. God answers his ill-humoured speech with two questions:

"Is þis ry3t-wys, þou renk, alle þy ronk noyse,
So wroth for a wod-bynde to wax so sone?
Why are þou so waymot, wy3e, for so lyttle?" (490-2)

Simple though it is, this brief speech points directly at the heart of Jonah's malaise. His conduct is certainly not "ry3t-wys": indeed, it is characterized by its complete lack of righteousness. It is also out of all proportion, for all this "ronk noyse", Jonah's anger, sorrow, and desire to end his life, is brought on by the loss of a vegetable. God may well ask Jonah how he can be so "waymot" for "so lyttle". The prophet has no answer other than to contradict God and repeat that he wishes he were dead:

"Hit is not lyttel," quop þe lede, "bot lykker to
ry3t;
I wolde I were of þis worlde wrapped in molde3."
(493-4)

Sadly, these petulant and self-righteous words are the last
Jonah utters in the poem.

God now makes a conciliatory speech of some length, in which
He explains to Jonah the precise significance of his gain and loss
of the woodbine:

"Þenne byþenk þe, mon, if þe forþynk sore,
If I wolde help my honde-werk, haf þou no wonder;
þou art waxen so wroth for þy wod-bynde,
& trauaylede3 neuer to tent hit þe tyme of an howre,
Bot at a wap hit here wax and away at an oþer;
& 3et lyke3 þe so luþer, þi lyf wolde3 þou tyne;
Þenne wyte not me for þe werk, þat I hit wolde help,
& rwe on þo redles þat remen for synne;
Fyrst I made hem myself of materes myn one,
& syþen I loked hem ful longe & hem on lode hade;
& if I my trauayl schulde tyne of termes so longe,
& type doun 3onder toun when hit turned were,
þe sor of such a swete place burde synk to my hert,
So mony malicious mon as mourne3 þer-inne;
& of þat soumme 3et arn summe, such sotte3 for madde:
As lyttel barne3 on barme þat neuer bale wro3t,
& wymmen vnwytte, þat wale ne coupe
þat on hande fro þat oþer, for alle þis hyze worlde".
(495-512)

We are perhaps impressed most of all by the gentleness and mercy
which informs this speech in every line. God reasons with Jonah
in a way which the prophet has certainly not deserved through any
righteousness of his own, a way which must show that the poet
was concerned to portray Him as essentially gentle and reasonable,

and above all merciful. Our first impulse may be to object that previously God's manner has often been brusque and imperious. But we should not forget that God's speeches, though they have mostly begun in the gruff manner, have usually grown progressively gentler. The brusque exterior gives the impression of the immense power which God wields, but in spite of this He is mild and merciful in any matters of importance, and His manner in his more intimate conversations with Jonah reflects this. God here explains that Jonah's anger over the loss of the woodbine is not consistent with his anger over the pardoning of the Ninevites. If Jonah feels such sorrow over the loss of the woodbine, for which he did not work, which merely appeared and then disappeared, then he should be able to understand God's desire to spare the Ninevites, whom he made with His own hands, and for whom He has laboured long and hard. God's final words to Jonah are a perfect summary of the prophet's failings:

"Wer I as hastif as þou heere, were harme lumpen;
Coupe I not þole bot as þou, þer þryued ful fewe;
I may not be so malicious & mylde be halden,
For malys is noȝt to mayntyne boute mercy withinne".
(520-23)

At the beginning of the poem, we were told that "quo for þro may noȝt þole, þe þikker he sufferes" (6), and clearly Jonah has proven the point. Now even God says that He must "þole". In this case, God's endurance was a necessary prerequisite to the operation

of mercy: He had to endure the wickedness of the Ninevites in order to give them time to repent, and indeed after their repentance, He has had to endure Jonah's angry complaints. The final line does, appropriately enough, lay its main emphasis upon mercy. It summarizes the way in which God has acted throughout the poem, and is here set before Jonah as a standard of conduct to which he must aspire.

It is impossible to tell with any degree of certainty where the poet stops reporting God's words to Jonah and speaks once more as the preacher addressing his congregation.¹⁰ In any case, the lines in question read:

Be no3t so gryndel, Godman, bot go forth þy wayes:
Be preue & be pacient in payne & in joye,
For he þat is to rakel to renden his cloþe3,
Mot efte sitte with more vnsounde to sewe hem togeder.
(524-7)

The point is well made, for if we cannot tell the difference between the words spoken by God to Jonah and those spoken by the preacher to us, then we must certainly realize both that the preacher is communicating the Word of God to us, and that we are in a position very similar to that of Jonah. All of us, then -- we and Jonah -- receive the same words of advice and encouragement, that we should try always to be "preue" and "pacient" in "payne" and "joye": in effect that we should "stere" our hearts. The final

lines of the poem are unquestionably spoken by the preacher, as he once more applies the moral to his own life:

Forþy, when pouerte me enprece3 & payne3 inno3e,
Ful softly with suffraunce sa3ttel me bihoue3;
For þe penaunce & payne to preue hit in sy3t,
at pacience is a nobel poynt, þa3 hit displese ofte.
Amen. (528-32)

Our final impression is that all men, the teachers and the prophets as well as we, must suffer, that all are bound by the same Rule of Life, in obedience to a God of limitless mercy.

Chapter Five: Footnotes

- 1 J.A. Burrow makes some interesting observations on this subject: A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London, 1965), pp. 1-4.
- 2 For a fuller discussion of the meaning of patience and poverty, see Chapter 2.
- 3 Gollancz, 2nd ed., p. 41.
- 4 It is interesting to note that the myth of the whale being beaten from the bottom of the sea by rough weather appears in the Middle English Bestiary.
- 5 J.B. Zavadil, "A Study of Meaning in Patience and Cleanness," Ph.D. diss., Stanford Univ., 1962.
- 6 See Chapter 3.
- 7 See Chapter 4.
- 8 This point is made in Peake's Commentary on the Bible, edd. M. Black and H.H. Rowley (London, 1962), pp. 627-8.
- 9 Bateson, p. 32.
- 10 See my Note on this, p. 67

Conclusion

At the end of our reading of Patience we may cast our minds back and realize that the poet has indeed illustrated how and why "pacience is a nobel poynt þa3 hit displese ofte". But in the process, what at the beginning seemed likely to be straightforward didactic exercise has turned into a work of considerable complexity. The poem is full of multiple and often paradoxical significances and of symbolic patterning which hints at meaning but is elusive of definition. None of these apparent contradictions are resolved in any final way, except by their inclusion within an all-embracing moral scheme ruled by an infinitely patient and merciful God.

It is true that Patience is full of paradoxes. Jonah is a good man and a bad, and possibly (as I would have it), both a type and an antitype of Christ. God is a hard task-maker and wielder of terrifying power on the one hand and, on the other, the gentle, merciful Lord who forgives His repentant servants in spite of every provocation. The whale's belly undoubtedly re-

presents hell, but is also in some sense a "munster", or holy place; and the woodbine, which is both a source of physical comfort and a gift from God, tempts Jonah to sin. In the last analysis, Christianity is presented both as a gentle religion of mercy and love, and as a terribly difficult and demanding way of life. But this recurring pattern should not present an insurmountable problem to anyone brought up on the teaching that

He that findeth his life shall lose it: and
he that loseth his life for my sake shall
find it. (Matt. x. 39)

The apparent contradiction which appears at the meeting-point of the human and the divine, the finite and the infinite, disappears with the recognition of the essential difference between the two, of the fact that the greatest of earthly good pales into insignificance when compared with heavenly bliss. Patience is about the meeting of the human and the divine -- about the difficulty which imperfect men will have in their attempts to live up to a standard of conduct which is modelled upon Christ.

The story of Jonah is an account of a man sinning, repenting, and sinning again. Indeed this movement is built into the very structure of the poem: in two of the three major episodes Jonah rebels against God and makes angry and unreasonable speeches to Him; in the other, his words are noble and righteous, and he

carries out the work allotted him with resounding success. The relationship of the three "bowers" also images this movement, for Jonah's sleep in the first and the third can clearly be seen to symbolize his lack of the moral awareness which he achieves during the period when he reaches repentance watching and contemplating in the second. The message of Patience may at first seem a rather depressing one: that though a sinful man may repent, he will in all probability return to his evil ways. But in view of the severity with which such backsliding was normally treated by Christian moralists, we should perhaps consider the question more carefully. There are depressing and disappointing things in the poem, but the poet does not emphasize only these. We should bear in mind that Jonah's conduct during the central two hundred lines of the poem, which represents nearly half of the story, is absolutely exemplary. What the poet seems to suggest is that all men -- himself in the persona of the preacher included -- will have to struggle hard and continuously to live up to the standards of Christian conduct. This will be the more difficult because life inevitably brings sorrow and pain, hardship and poverty, which must be accepted with fortitude, and even with pleasure. Still more treacherous are times of ease which will test a man by tempting him to self-indulgence and idleness. Like

Jonah, all men should be busy about God's business, doing His work ceaselessly and tirelessly, and striving at all times to

Be preue & be pacient in payne and in joye.

The poet suggests that this will probably involve not sinning and repenting just once, but following sin with repentance over and over again. Thus man's only hope is in the operation of God's boundless mercy; and he may best hope to deserve this by learning and living by the lesson

¶at pacience is a nobel poynt, þa3 hit displesse ofte.

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