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## Landscapes of the Body in Prudentius *Cathemerinon* VII

### Abstract

In his Hymn of Fasting, *Cathemerinon* VII, Prudentius is expounding and justifying a concept relatively unfamiliar to his audience. This article shows how he makes metaphorical use of landscape to do this, employing landscapes as external reflections of the healthiness or sickness of the soul and the state of the body. In his narration of the stories of five biblical figures who are associated with fasting, Prudentius shows how fasting detaches soul from body which then becomes part of the territory which is to be conquered; reduced to a dry and barren desert, it is miraculously revived by moisture which is produced by suffering or comes from God.

### 2-6 key words

Prudentius, fasting, landscape, body concepts

Controlling the body and its unruly appetites was an issue that greatly preoccupied early Christian theologians. It was during the period of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries that fasting was introduced as a means of assisting control. This practice, although not entirely unfamiliar in the pagan classical world, was largely of Jewish origin and caused some controversy among Christian writers and the Christian community in general. It was viewed as a substitute for martyrdom and as a means of keeping the sexual urges of the body under control, particularly in Jerome, although

influential writers like Augustine were careful to counsel moderation in such practices.<sup>1</sup>

So in his hymn before fasting, *Cathemerinon* VII, Prudentius is expounding a concept relatively unfamiliar to his Christian Roman audience. And as in many of his poems, Prudentius makes use of paradox and antithesis to illustrate the dichotomy between body and soul. He places emphasis upon the notion that the soul is at its healthiest when the body is unhealthy; this notion also occurs in poems such as *Peristephanon* 2.<sup>2</sup> In *Cathemerinon* 7 he uses the essential opposition between moisture and dryness to illustrate this antithesis. As Prudentius explains at the beginning of his poem, excess moisture causes the body to decay, cooling the spirit's spark, while fat crowds out and chokes the soul. Fasting dries out the body, particularly its reproductive fluids,<sup>3</sup> and gives the spirit room to breathe and see more clearly.

But the major vehicle that Prudentius uses throughout the poem to represent and reinforce the concept in his readers' minds are the 'landscapes' (or, more broadly speaking, the external environments) which form the settings for the stories he tells of

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<sup>1</sup> V.E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, the Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity* (London and New York 1996). For the relative lack of familiarity with fasting as a religious practise in the Greek and Roman worlds see p. 40. On Tertullian's advocacy of fasting as an alternative to martyrdom see 138-9. On Jerome's view see 163-166, 178. On Augustine's see 189-90. As Grimm observes, there had been quite a degree of controversy as regards fasting in Christian writers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries: "Some, deprecating it as a Jewish custom, useful only for the ostentation of piety, held that the practice was irrelevant and unnecessary for those 'living in Christ'; while others, finding the penitential fasting practices of the Jews efficacious also for the expiation of Christian sins and, as such, an act pleasing to God, urged the acceptance of the practice on all who would be truly religious." (191). However, one of Grimm's reviewers cautions that it is difficult to determine the beliefs and practices of contemporary Christians regarding fasting from these highly rhetorical and polemical authors (J.F. Donahue, *AJP* 119 [1998] 657). From Paulinus of Nola's observations of country life it appears that certain concessions had to be made to recently converted pagans who drank and reveled late into the night on the festival of Felix; see D. Trout, 'Town, Countryside and Christianization at Paulinus' Nola' in *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, R.W. Mathisen and H. S. Sivan (eds) (Aldershot, Hampshire 1996) 180.

<sup>2</sup> See M. McCarthy, 'Prudentius, Peristephanon 2; Vapor and the Martyrdom of Lawrence,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982) 285.

<sup>3</sup> G. Clark, 'The Bright Frontier of Friendship': Augustine and the Christian Body as Frontier' in *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, 228. The concepts of virtue as dry and hard and pleasure as wet and fluid were already present in pagan philosophers like Seneca; see C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge 1993) 173-174.

various prophets, around which the narrative section of the poem is structured. From ‘desert’ to mountain to stream, to city, to sea, to whale’s belly, back to sea, mountain, city and desert, there are a series of downward and upward movements in the poem as each of these physical environments is employed by Prudentius to illustrate different states of body and soul, both good and bad. The essential opposition between moisture and dryness is extended into a series of antitheses within and between these landscapes, antitheses between, for instance, clamour versus solitude, ‘civilization’ versus wilderness, depth versus height.

In addition Prudentius exploits the tension between moisture and dryness by bringing these elements together in the paradox of nourishing dryness, particularly in his images of a ‘dry’, infertile or unfertilized womb giving birth. The landscape which best represents this paradox is the dry and ‘barren’ desert with which Prudentius begins and ends the narrative section of the poem for this is the most productive landscape for nurturing of the soul; it may be the very antithesis of the *locus amoenus* depicted in pagan poetry but for a Christian it is a form of utopia. That both landscapes and people can be transformed and dystopias changed to utopias is illustrated in the final scenes of the poem in which the city of Nineveh repents of its luxurious ways and metaphorically turns itself into a desert. It is when this type of landscape is at its driest and most barren that it has potential for a miraculous transformation which usually involves water or liquid of some kind. This water, whether it is bestowed on the landscape or whether the landscape provides it, is not the excessive and unhealthy moisture which Prudentius associates at the start of the poem with indulgence and corruption; instead it is an instrument of cleansing and redemption.

As is characteristic of many of Prudentius' poems,<sup>4</sup> *Cathemerinon* VII has a concentric or ring structure. Toohey observes that the structure of *Cath.* VII is best described as triadic with an arrangement of introduction (st.1-5), narrative (st.6-39) and conclusion (st.40-4).<sup>5</sup> The introduction contains a lengthy explanation of the effects of fasting on the body and how it helps to liberate and reenergise the soul (st.2-5). The narrative section consists of five stories or *exempla* from the bible each focused around a prophet or preacher (Elijah, Moses, John, Jonah, Jesus) which are designed to illustrate the transformative power of fasting; on one level the first four stories are typological, designed to lead up to the climax of Jesus fasting in the desert (st.36-9). Yet only four stanzas are given to the story of Jesus, whereas Prudentius devotes seven to John and nineteen to Jonah (two stanzas each are given to Elijah and Moses). The story of Jonah contains its own internal ring structure with depictions of the city of Nineveh (st.17-20, 27-34) and the sea (st.22-3, 26) surrounding the description of Jonah in the whale's belly (st.24-5). And, as we will see, although the story of Jonah may initially appear a detour or diversion to the reader (who might have expected that the story of John would lead straight to that of Jesus) it is actually the spiritual climax of the poem.<sup>6</sup> The centre of the poem is the katabasis of Jonah in the whale's belly which plays with the concepts of eating and being eaten and is a metaphor for the body's flesh being consumed and transformed. Jonah is consumed to

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<sup>4</sup> P. Toohey, 'Concentric Patterning in some Poems of Prudentius' *Liber Cathemerinon* *Latomus* 52 (1993) 138

<sup>5</sup> P. Toohey, 'An Early Group of Poems in Prudentius' *Liber Cathemerinon* *Mnemosyne* 44 (1991) 395-6

<sup>6</sup> As P. Habermehl observes ('*Prisci Stemma Ieniunii: Das Buch Jona und Prudentius*' *Siebtes Tageslied* *Hermes* 32 [2004], 117), Prudentius also inverts the chronology of the Moses and Elijah episodes, placing Elijah first. Habermehl suggests that this is in part to relieve the monotony of a long list. I will also argue that Prudentius reverses the order of these episodes because he wishes to effect an upward movement from the landscape of Elijah's desert to that of Moses' mountain. This then leads into the minor climax of the poem which is the description of John baptising people in the stream (71-80). Prudentius then confounds his readers' expectations a second time by following with the story of Jonah which moves through the entire vertical plane from the depths of the ocean to the height of a mountain; see further below.

be reborn and his birth from the infertile ‘womb’ of the whale’s belly prefigures the rebirth of the dystopia of the city of Nineveh.

Before we turn to these five stories and the landscapes in which they are set, I would like briefly to examine the address to Jesus in the first five lines of the poem which complements the invocation to him at the end and establishes the concepts which will be taken up in the body of the poem:

*O Nazarene, lux Bethlem, verbum patris,  
quem partus alui virginalis protulit,  
adesto castis, Christe, parsimoniis  
festumque nostrum rex serenus aspice,  
ieiuniorum dum litamus victimam.<sup>7</sup>*

In the second line the paradox around which the poem revolves is introduced when Jesus is addressed as *partus alui virginalis* ‘offspring of a virgin womb’; this presents the reader with the concept of a ‘dry’ or unfertilised womb bringing forth life which will appear in a stronger form, for instance, in the story of John brought forth from an aged womb (*ante partu de senile effusus est*, 59). But it is *ieniunium* ‘fast’ in v. 5 which is perhaps the most significant word in this passage for it reappears throughout the hymn in noun, adjective and verbal form and, as we will see, frequently punctuates significant moments in the narrative (here at v. 5 and also at vv. 17, 35, 81, 146, 162, 178, 189, 209). This adjective which carries additional meanings of ‘barren’ or ‘unproductive’ can also be applied to land. Prudentius has already employed it in this way at *Cathemerinon* 5. 89-92 where he describes how at Christ’s command the

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<sup>7</sup> All quotations from Prudentius are taken from M.P. Cunningham, *Aurelii Prudentius Clementis Carmina* (Turnhout 1966).

barren (*ieiuna*) rocks of the desert gush with water, relieving the thirst of the people sweltering under the blazing sky:<sup>8</sup>

*cui ieiuna eremi saxa loquacibus  
exundant scatebris, et latices novos  
fundit scissa silex, quae sitientibus  
dat potum populis axe sub igneo.*

Note how in these lines Prudentius dwells upon the contrast between the barren and rocky desert (*ieiuna eremi saxa*) and the liquid with which it miraculously gushes (*exundant scatebris... latices... fundit*). It is significant that he applies the adjective *loquacibus* to the liquid for this endows the landscape with a human quality, literally the quality of speech, which has been taken temporarily from the *populis* whose throats are parched with thirst (*sitientibus*). An image such as this in a previous hymn not only adumbrates the paradox of nourishing dryness but also prepares the reader for the way in which Prudentius can merge the attributes of landscapes with those of humans.

It is also noteworthy that many of the terms Prudentius employs in the first five lines of *Cath. 7* are ones which are also employed in pagan religion and ritual (*castus, parsimonia, festum, ieiunium, victima*). In pagan terminology *victima* means an animal offered as sacrifice and *litare* means to make an acceptable offering to the gods. By using such terms here, Prudentius is perhaps implying that the Christian's sacrificial victim is his or her own body; note how he ends the fifth line with this image.<sup>9</sup> Thus by placing emphasis upon the separation between the Christian and his/her body at this early stage in the poem, Prudentius is preparing the ground for his

<sup>8</sup> He also employs it in similar fashions in the *Cont. Symm.* 2.924 and 1044.

<sup>9</sup> See also Prudentius' description of the soul as a temple in *Per.* 10.346-60 and the sacrifices (*victimae*, 354) which it offers to Christ and the father, including chastity of body (*castitatem corporis*, 357) and sober moderation in fasting (*ieiuniorum parcitatem sobriam*, 359).

association of the body with its external environment, an association which will become increasingly apparent in the stories he proceeds to narrate.

We will now examine each of these stories in turn; for the sake of clarity they have been placed under subheadings.

#### The Story of Elijah (vv. 26-35)

This is the first story that Prudentius narrates and significantly he has located Elias (or Elijah) within his external environment by the second line of the tale:

*Helia tali creuit observantia*  
*vetus sacerdos, ruris hospes aridi,*  
*fragore ab omni quem remotum et segregem*  
*spreuisse tradunt criminum frequentiam,*  
*casto fruentem syrtium silentio. (26-30)*

Prudentius firstly describes the place which Elijah inhabits as dry countryside, (*ruris hospes aridi*, 25). Here we see how Prudentius plays upon antithesis and juxtaposition, for *rus* is often employed of the cultivated areas of the country (OLD s.v. def. 1) and *hospes* suggests a nurturing relationship but the word *aridus* raises the question of how the nurturing will be achieved. This would recall the Christian reader to the particular passage in *Kings* where Elijah flees into the wilderness to hear the word of God.<sup>10</sup> The adjective *castus*, ‘free from’, ‘pure’ and the noun *syrtis*, derived from a particular desert region, also place emphasis upon certain qualities (dryness, barrenness, emptiness) which are the antitheses of those normally associated with the

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Kings 19:4-8. He is nurtured only by a cake and jug of water left by an angel which sustains him for forty days and nights as he makes his way to the mount of Horeb to hear the word of God. It is interesting that Prudentius makes no reference to the mountain in this story. I would argue that this is because he wishes to distinguish this location from Mount Sinai in the story of Moses which follows and also that by depicting the region which Elijah inhabits as a dry expanse (see the discussion on vv. 26-30) he is creating a link with the final story of Jesus in the wilderness.



pagan *locus amoenus*.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Prudentius stresses this landscape's remoteness from human clamour (*fragor*: OLD s.v. def.2b) and the opportunity which this affords to separate oneself from the accompanying sins; note how *fragor* and *frequentia* are associated in lines 28-9. With the final word of this stanza, *silentium*, Prudentius also lays emphasis upon the fact that freedom from human clamour and confusion gives the prophet the space to hear the still, small voice of God (1 Kings 19.12). That *castus*, which can also mean 'chaste' or 'sexually pure', is applied to the character of the silence rather than to Elijah indicates how attributes of landscapes can reflect the qualities of the humans which inhabit them.

Prudentius then proceeds to narrate Elijah's 'transformation' and transition into heaven. He describes how chariots of fire carried off this quiet man into the breezes (*in auras* i.e. the sky), an episode which is related in 2 Kings 2.11:

*Sed mox in auras igneis iugalibus  
curruque raptus euolauit praepete,  
ne de propinquo sordium contagio  
dirus quietum mundus adflaret uirum  
olim probatis inclytum ieiuniis. (31-35)*

The allusion to fire, while a reflection of the biblical text, also helps to establish a motif which will reappear in stories later in the poem for in the Moses and Jonah episodes fire is also employed as a manifestation of the powers of God.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Elijah's elevation into the sky adumbrates the first upward movement in the landscapes of the poem: from the desert to a mountaintop and Moses. With *ieiuniis* as

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<sup>11</sup> See E.R. Curtius' discussion of the *locus amoenus* in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (London 1953) 185-193. One of the earliest depictions of such a landscape is the grotto of Calypso in the *Odyssey* with shady trees, four springs, beds of violet and parsley and a loaded grape vine (5.63-74). There is often an association between the *locus amoenus* and the erotic which became most pronounced in the pastoral verse of poets such as Theocritus and Virgil (Curtius 187).

<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, although the word *ignis* is not employed in the John episode, there is a suggestion of the power of God's fire with Prudentius' use of the word *recocta* in v. 78; see further below.

the final word in the stanza and this story, Prudentius lays emphasis on the role that approved (*probatis*) fasting played in creating the legends around Elijah.<sup>13</sup>

The Story of Moses (vv. 36-45)

The story of Moses shifts the location to Mt. Sinai, referenced obliquely with allusions to heaven (*caeli* the first significant word in the stanza), sun and stars (*sol...sidera*, 39):

*Non ante caeli principem septemplicis*  
*Moses tremendi fidus interpretis throni*  
*potuit videre, quam decem recursibus*  
*quater volutis sol peragrans sidera*  
*omni carentem cerneret substantia.*      (36-40)

Prudentius identifies Moses as the ‘faithful intermediary of the fearful throne’ (37) and places emphasis on the prophet seeing (*potuit videre*, 38) God, not just hearing him, as was the case with Elijah.<sup>14</sup> Symbolically the mountaintop is the closest to heaven Moses can reach for the summit of a mountain is a liminal place, marking the extreme boundary between earth and sky. It is also associated with aspiration and clarity of perception; in the thin, clear air of a mountaintop things appear sharper and more vivid.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> With the use of the plural he is perhaps also making reference to other miraculous food episodes in Elijah’s life where he was nurtured by ravens (1 Kings 17.6) or the meagre fare of a widow (1 Kings 17.12-14). While these are not strictly fasts they are both episodes in which a prophet who would otherwise starve is provided by God with nourishment; see note 17 below and Grimm’s observations on the relationship between supernatural nourishment and the ‘true man of God’.

<sup>14</sup> Of course in Exodus 33:18-23 when Moses asks to see God in his glory, God can only show his back for no one can see God’s face and live (33:20). Prudentius is quick to qualify the idea of Moses ‘seeing’ God in v. 45 but nevertheless in this story emphasises the visual connection between Moses and God as a means of distinguishing this story from that of Elijah and heightening the sense of closeness to God to help the arc of his narrative rise to a climax.

<sup>15</sup> “Nietzsche, in his *Human, All Too Human* makes a call for ‘the cold, wild Alpine lands scarce warmed by the Autumn sun and *loveless*’. Thanks to the cold, the air gains in attacking virtues, it becomes spiritualized and dehumanized. In the frozen atmosphere, at higher altitudes, one finds

Moses, however, is unable to behold God until he has gone for forty days without food. Prudentius appears to link this act of fasting to the effects it produces on Moses' corporeal nature for his description of Moses being nourished on his tears alone in the stanza that follows suggests the idea of the body feeding on itself, of flesh nurtured on its own secretions:

*Victus precanti solus in lacrimis fuit;  
nam flendo pernox inrigatum puluerem  
humi madentis ore pressit cernuo,  
donec loquentis uoce perstrictus dei  
expauit ignem non ferendum uisibus.* (41-45)

The image that follows of the dust irrigated by Moses' weeping (42-3) extends this to the external environment: flesh and dust are equally nurtured by the tears secreted by the suffering body. The fragility of the flesh and its association with dust suggests *Genesis* 3.19: "dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return".<sup>16</sup> While the dust of the mountaintop recalls the dryness and barrenness of Elijah's desert, its potential for revival with liquid (*inrigatum*) looks forward to the story of John and his miraculous cleansing and transformation of souls through their baptism in the stream. This is the first instance in which liquid is associated with transformation and redemption but significantly it is a liquid which is produced by suffering not by over-indulgence. In addition, in the final line of his tale of Moses (45) Prudentius reiterates the motif of divine fire with his description of God as a fire which the eyes cannot endure. Once

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another Nietzschean quality: silence." (J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* [London <sup>2</sup>1971] 52). See also Bremmer's discussion of how the thin, cold air of the mountaintops would have produced a changed degree of awareness for maenads and a susceptibility to trances (J.N. Bremmer, 'Greek Maenadism Reconsidered' *ZPE* 55 (1984) 280).

<sup>16</sup> "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." *Genesis* 3.19 *King James Version*.

again, this looks back to the story of Elijah (v. 31) and forward to the story of John (v. 78 below).

#### The Story of John (vv. 46-80)

Unlike Elijah and Moses,<sup>17</sup> Prudentius gives John no specific title at the beginning of the narration of his story (significantly, as we will see, this is delayed until v. 71 where he is referred to as *hortator ille primus et doctor*, ‘that first preacher and teacher’, in the description of him baptising people). Instead Prudentius first places emphasis upon him being the precursor of Jesus (*Dei perennis praecucurrit filium*, 47), giving the reader the impression that Jesus’ story will follow on from this.<sup>18</sup> Jesus, and thus by extension John, is portrayed from the outset as a metaphorical transformer of landscapes: Prudentius alludes to him straightening the crooked paths, setting right the twisted ways (*curvos viarum qui retorsit tramites,/ et flexuosa corrigens dispendia*, 48-9) and changing the steep places to level and the rough to smooth (*clivosa planis, confragosa ut lenibus/ converterentur*, 53-4). This of course is an allusion to the ability to transform souls which will form the climax to John’s story (71-80).

Prudentius gives further development to the paradox of fertile dryness in John’s story with his description of how he is born from an aged womb:

*Non usitatis ortus hic natalibus;  
oblita lactis iam uieto in pectore  
matris tetendit serus infans ubera*

<sup>17</sup> Elijah in v. 26 is called *vetus sacerdos*, Moses in v. 37 *tremendi fidus interpres throni*.

<sup>18</sup> Grimm observes that “in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus’ forty-days fasting sojourn in the wilderness, which establishes him in the line of the holy prophets of Israel, following Moses and Elijah, is narrated following the story of his baptism at the hands of John” (*From Feasting to Fasting*, 130). This biblical sequence would be another reason for the reader to expect the story of Jesus to follow the baptism sequence with John.

*nec ante partu de senili effusus est  
quam praedicaret uirginem plenam deo.* (56-60)

He firstly depicts how this late infant strains his mother's aged breast which has forgotten its milk (57-8). The emphasis on moisture with *lactis* and *ubera* (which recalls *umor*) leads up to his description of how John is poured forth (like water) from an aged womb (59). Prudentius comments that this presages the virgin full of God (60) which looks back to the portrayal of Jesus at the beginning of the poem as *partus alvi virginalis* (v. 2), the offspring of a virgin womb. This association of the birth and infancy of John with water, miraculous water which is produced from the 'dry' (i.e. infertile) environment of an aged womb, also foreshadows John the Baptist's most significant environment: the consecrated stream in which he will transform the souls brought to him.

The first landscape in which Prudentius places John has similarities with the landscapes in the stories of Elijah and Moses. However, Prudentius here lays emphasis on John's active decision to inhabit this landscape in order to shun the corruptions of 'civilized' society:

*Post in patentes ille solitudines  
amictus hirtis bestiarum pellibus  
saetisue tectus hispida et lanugine  
secessit horrens inquinari et pollui  
contaminatis oppidorum moribus.* (61-65)

He firstly alludes to the wilderness as *patentes solitudines* 'wide solitudes', 61; the emphasis here is not only on solitude (as with Elijah's environment) but also openness which reminds the reader of the statement in v. 24 that the spirit requires room to breathe. Prudentius plays upon the contrast between the natural wilderness and the

wildness and corruption of towns: John reverts to nature and acts like the beasts, wearing their shaggy skins or covered with rough hair and coarse wool (62-3). Ironically this is because he dreads to be soiled and contaminated by the corrupt morals of towns. (64-5). The participle *horrens* in v. 64 could also suggest an animal bristling at danger.<sup>19</sup>

Prudentius then leads into the minor climax of his poem with his description of John's transformation of men's souls through baptism (and indeed, as previously stated, it is at this point that he gives John his title).

*hortator ille primus et doctor novae  
fuit salutis; nam sacrato in flumine  
veterum piatas lavit errorum notas,  
sed tincta postquam membra defaecaverat,  
caelo refulgens influebat spiritus* (71-75)

The landscape has now changed to a consecrated stream (72) with Prudentius laying emphasis upon the image of John washing away the marks of past errors and cleansing limbs stained by sin (73-4). In the following stanza Prudentius compares this transformation to the refinement of rough gold or the polishing of silver ore (*auri recocta vena pulchrum splendeat, / micet metalli sive lux argentei / sudum polito praeitens purgamine*, 78-80). The accumulation of words for glistening and shining at the end of the episode of John (*auri...splendeat...micet metalli lux argentei sudum polito*) heightens the feeling that the poem is proceeding to a climax while terms such as *recocta* and *sudus* create the impression that while the body is being washed clean, the spirit is being dried and tempered by fire.<sup>20</sup> Yet the richness of these words is

<sup>19</sup> cf. *quin etiam 'ferae', inquit Pacuvius, 'quibus abest ad praecavendum intellegi astutia,' iniecto terrore mortis 'horrescunt.'* Cic. *Fin.* 5.11.31

<sup>20</sup> *Recocta* literally means 'reheated' (*OLD* s.v. def.2); cf. *Peristeph.* 2.195-6. *Sudus* can also mean dry or not damp, perhaps under the influence of the popular etymology *sine udo* (*OLD* s.v. def.2).

countered by *purgamine*, the final word of the episode, reminding the reader that this refinement of spirit can only be achieved through cleansing and expiation.

The Story of Jonah (vv. 81-175)

As we have already observed, this emotionally charged description of baptism might lead the reader to expect Prudentius to proceed straight to the story of Jesus. Instead he takes a detour, proceeding by a circuitous route back to the Old Testament and the story of Jonah. Prudentius explains this as a *stemma*, literally a family tree or lineage, and states that it has been handed down in the ancient *volumen* (*referre prisca stemma nunc ieiunii/ libet fideli proditum volumine*, 81-2); such words are keys to how he will treat the episode, as a way of introducing the notion of and the tradition behind the fasting of ordinary people (see v. 146), as opposed to the prophets. In addition, the Jonah episode was much employed in the visual art of the Christian era because it was strongly associated with salvation and resurrection;<sup>21</sup> it is thus a fitting preliminary to the story of Jesus.

This is the longest episode in the poem and functions as its core. It enables Prudentius to descend not only in time but also in space from the heights of the mountain and the purity of the desert to the teeming iniquity of the city, the depths of the ocean and, in a form of katabasis, to the metaphorical hell of a whale's belly. In effect, he 'plumbs the depths' both literally and metaphorically.

Prudentius firstly describes the city of Nineveh and its iniquities. He depicts this environment as the very antithesis of the solitude and asceticism of the desert:

*gens insolenti praepotens iactantia*

*pollebat olim, quam fluentem nequiter*

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<sup>21</sup> On the association between the Jonah episode and resurrection and the frequent depiction of episodes from the life of Jonah in catacomb paintings (especially of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries) and on sarcophagi see pp. 64-65, 70-71 of B. Narkiss, 'The Sign of Jonah' *Gesta* 18 (1979) 63-76.

*corrupta vulgo solverat lascivia*  
*et inde bruto contumax fastidio*  
*cultum superni neglebat numinis* (86-90)

Note how Prudentius employs many words for crowds and people (*incolis, gens, vulgo*), giving a sense of the strength and power of the mob (*praepotens, pollebat*). In its lack of control Prudentius compares the *gens* to a liquid (*fluentem, solverat*) which has been released by *corrupta lascivia*; here for the first time in the poem the link between indulgence in food and sexual license is made explicit. The liquid in this stanza is not the instrument of cleansing and redemption which is a manifestation of the ascetic life of the prophets; instead it is the excess moisture which Prudentius has described at the start of the hymn, associated with the secretion of reproductive fluids, decay and quenching of the spirit. The *gens* is depicted here as a single, indistinguishable unit, a ‘body’ of people which is described in a manner reminiscent of the ways in which bodies are depicted in Roman satire; as grotesque, leaking with fluids, sexually promiscuous but ultimately sterile.<sup>22</sup> By drawing an analogy in verse 89 between the *fastidium* of the people of Nineveh and that of wild beasts (*bruto*), Prudentius creates the impression that this is the true wilderness of the spirit, as opposed to the physical wilderness which John inhabited.<sup>23</sup> This crowded environment is like the fat that constricts the spirit which Prudentius warned the reader against in vv. 9-10; in the case of Nineveh this leads the populace to neglect the cultivation of higher things, as he observes in v. 90 (*cultum superni neglebat*

<sup>22</sup> See P.A. Miller’s discussion in his article ‘The Bodily Grotesque in Roman Satire’ *Arethusa* 31.3 (1998) 257-83, especially p. 259 and p. 267.

<sup>23</sup> For *brutus* employed of wild beasts see *OLD* s.v. def. 2b. *Fastidium* in its earliest sense, according to the *OLD*, means ‘aversion for food’ (def. 1) and then comes to mean ‘aversion engendered by satiety’ (def. 2). The word is derived from *fastus* ‘pride’ and *taedium* ‘weariness’. Thus the disdainful satiety of the city is depicted as brutish. The idea that a life spent in pursuit of sensual pleasure was characteristic of beasts is also present in pagan literature including Cicero, Sallust and Aulus Gellius; see Edwards *The Politics of Immorality* 196-197.



*numinis*). It is significant that *cultus* can also be employed of the cultivation of the ground or the tending of plants for with the use of this term Prudentius is laying emphasis upon the sterility and barrenness of the city's spiritual environment.

Prudentius elaborates upon the notion of Jonah's reluctance which is not made clear until much later in the OT.<sup>24</sup> Prudentius makes it clear from the outset that Jonah flees because he does not believe that God will take vengeance. Indeed in the line in which God calls upon Jonah, Prudentius describes God as the 'gentle avenger' (*Ionam prophetam mitis ultor excitat*, 101), an oxymoron which helps to explain Jonah's dilemma. Prudentius thus places a different emphasis in his retelling of the bible story for in *Cath.* 7 this point in the story is Jonah's spiritual and emotional crisis; in the OT it will occur later when Jonah realises that God will not destroy the city as he threatened.<sup>25</sup> The physical environments which Jonah inhabits in this poem (the storm tossed sea, the whale's belly) are manifestations of the emotional journey that he undergoes. The stormy sea (*procellosum mare*, 108) is a reflection of Jonah's spiritual turmoil<sup>26</sup> while Jonah's headlong journey to the depths (*praeceps rotatur et profundo immergitur*, 113) is a katabasis and recalls the passage from the bible where Jonah

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<sup>24</sup> In the Book of Jonah, Jonah arises and flees in the third verse immediately after God has given his commandment. No explanation is given at this point; the reader is left to guess his motivation until the final scene where God does not carry out his threat to destroy Nineveh and Jonah is angry, telling God that he fled in the first place because he knew God was merciful and slow to vengeance (4.2). See further W.B. Crouch, 'To Question an End, to End a Question: opening the Closure of the Book of Jonah' *JSOT* 62 (1994) 101-112 who comments, "The final scene, instead of resolving the conflict between Jonah and Yahweh, serves to explain the previous actions of both characters in the opening scene." (109).

<sup>25</sup> "From the opening scene, the narrator has concealed the central conflict of the story from the reader... The reader expects nothing more to be resolved and is disarmed by the sudden reversal of closure obtained at the end of the third chapter" Crouch 'To Question an End, to End a Question', 106.

<sup>26</sup> "[I]t is at least easy to demonstrate that in early Christian literature, the sea, the abyss and the wilderness may be used not only as berths for conversation, but as images for a certain state of soul." M. Edwards, 'Locus Horridus and Locus Amoenus' in *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble*, Michael Whitby, Philip Hardie, Mary Whitby eds (Bristol 1987), 267-76

describes his plunge into the ocean as descending right to the depths, even to the bottom of the mountains ('rock bottom').<sup>27</sup>

The whale or fish which swallows Jonah is described firstly as a beast or monster with the term *beluinis* from *belua* emphasizing its size and strangeness.<sup>28</sup> The association between Hell and the whale's belly had already been established in the NT;<sup>29</sup> Prudentius may be drawing attention to this association by the use of terms such as *faucibus* (114) and *specu* (115) which Virgil also employed in his description of the underworld in the *Aeneid*.<sup>30</sup> The word *alvus* 'belly', which is placed first in line 115, carries additional levels of significance. It also references the virgin's womb (*alvi virginalis*) from v. 2 but its primary sense here is the belly as an organ of consumption; this latter meaning is reinforced by *hauritur*, 'devour', in the same line. Jonah is consumed alive by this ultimate symbol of wildness and prodigality of appetite.<sup>31</sup> Thus the whale's belly is triply stomach, womb and hell.

With his description of Jonah in the whale's belly, Prudentius strengthens the association with hell, emphasising the darkness, heat and choking fumes (vv. 124-

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<sup>27</sup> "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapt about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me forever." Jonah 2.5-6

<sup>28</sup> *Oxford Latin Dictionary* s.v. def. 2. As a convention I refer to the beast as a whale although neither the Book of Jonah nor Prudentius employ this term. The Book of Jonah alludes merely to a big fish which the Septuagint translates as *kētos*, 'sea-monster'. Prudentius refers to the beast successively as a *belua* (v. 114), a *ferinus* (v. 122) and a *monstrum* (v. 127).

<sup>29</sup> See Matthew 12:40 which compares Jonah's three days and nights in the monster's belly with the time that Christ spent in the heart of the earth after his crucifixion. For the origin of this association see Narkiss, 'The Sign of Jonah', 65.

<sup>30</sup> *vestibulum ante ipsum primisque in faucibus Orci*, 6.273; *hic specus horrendum et saevi spiracula Ditis/ monstrantur, ruptoque ingens Acheronte vorago/ pestiferas aperit fauces* 7.568-70. Cf. also Stat. *Theb.* 7.818. Habermehl ('*Prisci Stemma Ieniunii*', 111) also suggests that Prudentius may be influenced by Phaedrus 4.6.9-10 in which the stomach of a weasel is likened to a cavern of Hell (*quos immolatos victor avidis dentibus/ capacis alvi mersit tartareo specu*).

<sup>31</sup> According to Cirlot, monsters usually signify the base powers of the unconscious (*A Dictionary of Symbols*, 213). The whale has many similarities with the people of Nineveh for both indulge their base instincts and consume without thought. Prudentius' description of the whale also has parallels with his depiction of the figure of *Luxuria* in the *Psychomachia* for both have prodigious appetites, gulping (*haurire*) and belching (*ructare*) without concern (*perdita deliciis, vitae cui causa voluptas./ elumbem mollire animum petulanter amoenas/ haurire inlecebras et fractos solvere sensus. At tunc pervigilem ructabat marcida cenam* 313-316). Thus, in fleeing Nineveh, Jonah has with poetic irony been devoured by a monster that embodies the worst aspects of the city, including its *luxuria*.

125).<sup>32</sup> Jonah's journey through the whale is tortuous and difficult as he wanders through the darkness of the entrails and through the twisted windings of its guts (*errabat illic per latebras viscerum/ ventris meandros circumibat tortiles*, 123-4).<sup>33</sup> This recalls the reader to Prudentius' description of Jesus and John as ones who have the ability to straighten the crooked paths and set right the twisted ways (*curvos viarum qui retorsit tramites,/ et flexuosa corrigens dispendia*, 48-9). In his difficult spiritual journey Jonah must find the correct road through the crooked paths of the hell he has made for himself. While Prudentius is much more direct and detailed than the Book of Jonah in his description of Jonah's passage through the whale,<sup>34</sup> he makes no attempt to reproduce any part of Jonah's lengthy invocation to God that occurs at this point in the OT (2:2-9). It seems that Prudentius' Jonah is deprived of any opportunity of speech as long as he is in the whale's belly; significantly, his powers of verbal interaction are what make him a prophet.

When Jonah is finally belched up by the whale, Prudentius' depiction of this process lays emphasis upon the physicality of the act of disgorging (*vomentis pellitur singultibus*, 127; *ructatus*, 130). The gross and corpulent body of the beast rejects Jonah in a way that demonstrates that he no longer belongs in this most corporeal and visceral of environments. In addition, the violence of his ejection evokes birth pangs.

It is noteworthy that Prudentius devotes two lines to a description of the physical environment in which Jonah now finds himself (*qua murmuranti fine fluctus frangitur/ salsosque candens spuma tundit pumices;/ ructatus exit seque servatum*

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<sup>32</sup> Compare Prudentius' descriptions of hell at *Cath.* 5.135-136 and *Cath.* 9.76-77.

<sup>33</sup> Habermehl ('*Prisci Stemma Ieiunii*', 118) compares the interior of the whale to "ein infernalisches Labyrinth". Like Theseus in the Labyrinth, Prudentius' Jonah must endure a dark and difficult journey. The irony is that he is not trying to find a beast but seeking his way out of one. In a deeper sense, the beast he seeks to conquer is himself.

<sup>34</sup> As Habermehl ('*Prisci Stemma Ieiunii*', 111) observes, in the Bible Jonah's sojourn in the whale's belly is depicted as though in a dream, his experience only being related indirectly through his prayer to God.

*stupet.* 128-130). The pounding surf and the spray beating on the rocks accentuate the reappearance of noise after the enforced silence of the whale's belly while the adjective *murmuranti* imparts a human quality to the noise, suggesting that Jonah is coming back to an environment where he can interact verbally with other people. The adjective *candens* in v. 129, employed of the glistening white quality of the surf, recalls John's baptism of souls in the stream with all the words for glittering and shining symbolic of the rebirth of souls and their cleansing of the dirt from the world.<sup>35</sup> Jonah has emerged from the darkness and filth of the whale's entrails into a glittering white world.

After Jonah has proclaimed God's word to the people and threatened them with fire (*flamma*, 135), he ascends to a mountain top to see the destruction (*apicem ardui montis*, 136). In *Cath.* 7 Jonah has journeyed along the extremes of the vertical plane, from the depths of the ocean to the height of the mountain; like Moses on the mountaintop, he is now in touch with God. As a symbol of their connection and Jonah's spiritual regeneration, God sends a luxuriant plant to shelter and protect him (*tectus flagellis multinodis germinis/ nato et repente perfruens umbraculo*, 139-40). In the OT version God uses the plant to convey a moral lesson to Jonah; in Prudentius it signifies regrowth and renewal and presages the conversion of the city.<sup>36</sup>

The first verb Prudentius employs in his description of the repentance of the city is *hausit* in v. 142 to describe how thoroughly the people take up the suffering that is required of them. The same verb *hauritur* was used of the whale gulping down Jonah

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<sup>35</sup> Prudentius also applies the cognate adjective *candidus* to the souls in heaven at *Cath.* 5.124 (*calcant et pedibus lilia candidis*).

<sup>36</sup> Habermehl ('*Prisci Stemma Ieiunii*', 119) comments that at this point Jonah disappears from the narrative and becomes a silent onlooker; his gaze and that of the reader merge into one. In Prudentius' version of the story there is no disunity between the two, unlike in the Bible where Jonah's complaint to God at the end and his lack of response to God's explanation leaves the reader wondering just what Jonah's final attitude is. The ending of the Book of Jonah is deeply ambiguous (Crouch, 'To Question an End, to End a Question', 107), something which Prudentius appears to have attempted to resolve in his reception of the story.

in v. 114. Here the verb is employed in a somewhat different sense; the *civitas* are now not consuming food or luxury but *dolor* (v. 142).<sup>37</sup> Prudentius elaborates upon this description of the first public fast (*publicis ieiuniis*, 146), the first fast of ordinary people, extending his description for six stanzas. He depicts the city as though in its death throes or in mourning (vv. 141-170). The citizens spurn not only the habit of eating but reject all luxury: they take off their jewels and fine clothes, put on dark cloth and coarse haircloth and befoul their hair and bodies with dirt and sand. This signifies their reversion to the state of wild beasts (*bestialibus*, 153), a similar state to that of John the Baptist in the wilderness (*amictus hirtis bestiarum pellibus*, 62). Indeed their repentance goes to such extremes that even the cattle are prevented from eating or drinking (166-170), revealing the extent to which Nineveh's environment has become like the unproductive countryside (*aridum rus*) which Elijah inhabited at the beginning of the poem.

While the Book of Jonah mentions that fasting is extended to the beasts as well as humans (3:7), Prudentius takes it even further than this: he describes how the infants of Nineveh cry because the liquor of the breast is denied them (164-165). As in the story of Moses, the only liquid which is now produced comes from the tears of suffering and the infants wet their cradles with weeping (*fletu madescunt parvulorum cunulae*, 164), just as Moses wet the ground (*nam flendo pernox inrigatum puluerem/humi madentis ore pressit cernuo*, 42-43). And, as in the story of John, these infants are deprived of the milk of the breast; John because his aged mother's breast had forgotten its milk, these infants because their nurses turn away from them. While this extreme state of affairs is soon mitigated by the mercy of God (171-175), it serves to reinforce the point to the reader that transcendence comes through suffering and

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<sup>37</sup> For this metaphorical sense of the verb used in relation to emotions such as grief see *TLL* s.v. I.2.B.b. which cites Cic. *Sest.* 63 and *Cael.* 59.

deprivation of the body.<sup>38</sup> The tears of the infants underline the transformation that the city has undergone; the corrupt populace of Nineveh displayed a stubbornness and independence in its disdain of God and was compared to a fluid which was leaking and unable to be contained. It has now been reborn through the tears of its most vulnerable and dependant inhabitants and the moistening of their cradles can be equated with the fertilization of the barren and virgin wombs in the stories of John and Jesus.

vv. 176-195 Story of Jesus in Wilderness

Having described how God has mitigated his sentence toward the people of Nineveh, Prudentius then proceeds to describe the fast of Jesus. All the previous stories are designed to lead up to this one but it is not the emotional climax of the poem. Instead, Prudentius employs it to reiterate upon and elaborate his notion of body and soul which he set forth at the beginning of the poem. Jesus who is *nobiscum Deus* (180) was burdened by a mortal body and liberated it by fasting. Jesus secluded himself in an inhospitable place (*inhospitali namque secretus loco*, 186), recalling Elijah who was a *hospes aridi ruris* (27). His body is described both as a *vas*, a container for liquids, foods (*vas adpetendis inbecillum gaudiis*, 190) and as *limum tabidum* ‘perishing clay’ (*miratus hostis posse limum tabidum/ tantum laboris sustinere ac perpeti*, 191-192); the latter allusion reiterates the association of the body and land. Jesus in v. 185 is described as a *victor* (*regnantis ante victor et cupidinis*) and the faster who follows his example is depicted in v. 200 as an *imperator*, one who

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<sup>38</sup> In verse 175 Prudentius reiterates the notion that God shows favour to the tears of mortals (*fitque fautrix flentium*).

triumphs over the territory of his or her own body (*late triumphet imperator spiritus*).<sup>39</sup>

### Conclusions

Prudentius' use of landscape in this poem is complex, multifaceted and constantly evolving. He inverts the chronology of the biblical stories (Moses after Elijah, Jonah after John) not only to keep the reader interested but also so that he can lead the reader up and down the vertical plane of the various landscapes he depicts, towards his minor climax (John baptising people) and his major climax (Jonah's ejection from the whale and Nineveh's repentance). He plays with concepts of inversion and paradox to such an extent that symbolic objects can be used to quite different effect in different parts of the poem: we have seen how liquid is linked with the diseased state of the soul at the beginning of the poem but then becomes an instrument of cleansing and redemption. The silence of the desert enables a prophet such as Elijah to hear the voice of God and thus become his mouthpiece but the enforced silence of the whale's belly deprives Jonah of his powers of verbal interaction which is what makes him a prophet.

Both bodies and the external environments which they inhabit in this poem can be associated with or merge with one another to good or bad effect. The teeming and unconstrained city of Nineveh and the twisted and fume-filled entrails of the whale are external reflections of the spiritual sickness of those who inhabit them. But Prudentius has shown how through fasting bodies consume themselves, weakening the barrier between inner and outer and thus the body becomes not 'of us' but part of the territory which needs to be conquered by the will or the soul. The soul is at its

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<sup>39</sup> Note how *spiritus* is placed in apposition with *imperator* in this line; the successful faster has become all spirit and is not identified with the body at all.

strongest when the body is unhealthy and is transformed into a dry, infertile environment for, in Prudentius' Christian perspective this 'desert' environment can miraculously bring forth new life just as a barren womb can be fertilized by the grace of God. This is the very opposite of the lush, fruitful and frequently sexualized *locus amoenus* of the pagans which to them was usually the most fruitful environment for the cultivation of love and of poetry. But Prudentius has created a very different concept of the *locus amoenus* in this poem: for him the *locus amoenus* is a place which is created within oneself by depriving the surrounding envelope of the body of external nourishment and looking to God for spiritual regeneration.