

**AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION  
IN THE BOOK OF JONAH**

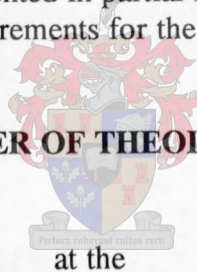
*by*

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February 2000

## **DECLARATION**

I the undersigned hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:

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## SUMMARY

### AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

The issue addressed in this study and its hypothesis are outlined in chapter one, and concern the general problem of variety in theological interpretation of the Bible. Specifically, the research problem is identified with the existence of different readings of Jonah as Scripture, and the need for these readings to be authoritative. A secondary issue has to do with the role of author's intention in theological interpretation. The hypothesis of this study states that the existence of various models of Scriptural authority can account in part for the different ways that interpreters produce meaning in the text of Jonah, by appealing to the one aspect of the text which is thought to be authoritative.

In chapter two the concept of scriptural authority is defined. The writings of theologians who have expressed authority in terms of models is compared and contrasted. A synthesis is attempted which aims at providing a definition of each model of authority with which to analyse the theological interpretations of select authors. In this chapter, the main focus is on the different ways that the Bible is regarded as authoritative in the church.

Chapter three provides an analysis of three Jonah commentaries each written from the perspective of one of the models of authority. The specific way in which each author understands the meaning of Jonah is identified through a consideration of the exegetical arguments. The single aspect of the text which is taken to be decisive in the articulation of the understanding of the theological message is traced in the author's argument. The interpretation is then compared with the definition of the particular model assumed to be underlying the exegesis.

The final chapter consists of an evaluation of the validity of the central hypothesis; some concluding remarks concerning the role of author's intention in authoritative interpretation; and an identification of areas for further research.



## OPSOMMING

### OUTORITEIT EN INTERPRETASIE IN DIE BOEK JONA

Die probleemstelling en hipotese van hierdie studie kry in hoofstuk een aandag. Die probleem het te doen met die verskeidenheid teologiese interpretasies van die Bybel. Die spesifieke navorsingsprobleem word met die bestaan van verskillende verklarings in die boek Jona wat gelees is as die Heilige Skrif, geïdentifiseer. 'n Sekondêre saak het met die rol van die outeur se bedoeling in 'n teologiese interpretasie te doen. Die hipotese wat die studie rig, sê dat die verskillende maniere hoe vertolkers die bedoeling uit die boek Jona kry, teruggevoer kan word na die bestaan van verskeie modelle van skriftuurlike outoriteit. Dit gebeur omdat 'n enkele aspek van die teks as outoritêr behandel word.

Die bepaling van skriftuurlike outoriteit word in hoofstuk twee behandel. Die resultate van teoloë wat outoriteit as modelle beskrywe het word vergelyk en teenoorgestel. Die modelle is saamgestel tot 'n definisie van elke model van outoriteit om die teologiese interpretasies van sekere outeurs te ontleed. Die hoofbrandpunt van hierdie hoofstuk is die verskillende maniere waarop die Bybel as outoritêr in die Kerk verskyn.

Hoofstuk drie bestaan uit 'n ontleding van drie kommentare van die boek Jona wat vanuit die perspektief van 'n spesifieke model beskou kan word. Die manier waarop elke outeur Jona verstaan word geïdentifiseer deur 'n oorweging van die eksegetiese argumente. Die enkele aspek van die teks wat bepaal hoe die teologiese boodskap verstaan is, word vervolg in die argument van die outeur. Die definisie van die spesifieke model wat die outeur blykbaar aanvaar, word daarna vergelyk met die interpretasie.

In die slothoofstuk word 'n evaluering van die geldigheid van die sentrale hipotese opgeneem; verskeie slotopmerkings betreffende die rol van die outeur se voornemens in gesaghebbende verklaring; en die identifisering van velde vir verdere ondersoek.



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 The research problem

More than forty years ago Brevard Childs wrote that 'there have been few books within the Old Testament which have roused more vigorous controversy than the interpretation of the Book of Jonah' (1958:53). The controversy to which he referred concerns the historical reliability of the miraculous events which form an important part of the narrative. Interest in Jonah as a book of history has in recent times given way to an interest in the book as a fictional narrative. This literary approach has 'replaced traditional ways of dealing with the Bible', so much so that it has been described as reflecting a 'paradigm shift' (Ryken 1993:49) and a 'revolution' (Macky 1986:263-4) in biblical studies. Although there are still modern interpreters who defend the historical accuracy of Jonah, their interpretations are regarded by some as aberrations rather than contributions (Burrows 1970:81; Salters 1994:41).

### 1.1.1 Variety of interpretation of Jonah

Not surprisingly, the recent concentration of studies of Jonah as literature has not produced any unanimity whatsoever with regard to the particular type of literature that Jonah is supposed to be. This has understandably given rise to a multiplicity of interpretations of the book. Furthermore, literary interpretation tends to be subjective merely because historical questions concerning the production of the text (e.g., date of composition, authorship, intention) have been bracketed. This has further compounded the problem of plurality in the interpretation of Jonah. Today there remains 'vigorous controversy' over the book of Jonah, centred not on its reliability as history, but on its contribution to a theological understanding of the Old Testament. The beginning student of the book of Jonah is faced with a bewildering array of interpretive options. This much is suggested by the authors of a book intended as a text for undergraduate students at South African universities.

There are . . . totally different interpretations of the book of Jonah. Some believe that Jonah was physically swallowed by a big fish; others attach a symbolic meaning to the episode. Some see the message of Jonah primarily as a warning that one should not be shy or afraid to proclaim the gospel; others focus on the importance of one's attitude towards political enemies; and still others believe that the magnitude of God's mercy is the core message. Some are of the opinion that everything in the book of Jonah should be taken literally; others think that

none of the events took place at all -- that it is fictional with an important theological message.

(Conradie et al 1995:7).

A common thread running through modern research in the book of Jonah is that the book has a didactic quality and was written to *teach* something. Even a literary analysis of Jonah has been shown to have 'implications for theology' (Collins 1995:28 note). Because the Bible is read by Christians as their Scripture, their interpretation of it is theological. It is through the words of the Bible that the Word of God can be heard. When the book of Jonah is read theologically, it is done so that the message of the book can be received as the divine Word. But just what is this message? Conradie and others (1995:56-63) have identified seven *possible* theological interpretations. The book of Jonah: 1) is about God commissioning his servant for missionary activity among the heathen; 2) is about the patience of God with the disobedient Jonah; 3) is about the wide extent of God's grace; 4) represents a rejection of narrow-minded Israelite nationalism; 5) is an apologia for unfulfilled prophecy; 6) is a theodicy concerning God's judgment and forgiveness; and 7) is about repentance.

The question duly arises as to which of these interpretations can be regarded as the 'correct' one. Historical criticism, in seeking to determine the historical meaning of biblical texts, endeavored to produce *the* single correct meaning which was thought to be available to any interpreter using the appropriate tools of exegesis. The priority of historical criticism, along with its attendant need to identify the intention of the author, has now largely been abandoned in favour of methods which emphasise the role of the reader. Interestingly, the seven theological interpretations identified by Conradie and others, all derive their understanding of the theological message of the book from a consideration of one or more historical features of the text (1995:56-63). In the case of Jonah however, as Craig (1993:6), Tribble (1994:108) and Bolin (1997:64) have pointed out, historical criticism has *not* led to a scholarly consensus on the standard questions of authorship, date of composition, the identity of the original readers, and (most importantly) the purpose of the writing.

An area where wide disagreement among scholars exists, which is perhaps more fundamental than the foregoing, is in the precise classification of Jonah as a type of literature. While for some the choice is simply between fact or fiction (Alexander 1985; de Haan 1957), for others the question is more complex. If taken to be a work of fiction,



an imaginative work, the choices would seem to be between allegory; midrash; parable; prophetic parable; legend; prophetic legend; novella; satire; didactic fiction; satirical, didactic, short story (Alexander 1985:36-7). Against the view that the correct classification of the literary genre of Jonah is not required for an adequate interpretation of the book (Bolin 1997:64), is the assertion that only through the correct genre identification can the author's purpose and meaning be determined (Burrows 1970:80; Allen 1976:175; Salters 1994:41). With so much divergence of scholarly opinion over these basic issues, the impression is created that a consensus on the theological message of the book can never be realised.

### 1.1.2 The problem of pluralism

Are we faced with the dreaded problem of pluralism in the book of Jonah? Since literary approaches, with their emphasis on the autonomy of the text, produce a variety of different interpretations; and historical approaches, committed as they are to achieving the single objective interpretation of the book, are practically unable to do so because of a lack of historical controls in the text (Bolin 1997:64), the hope of interpreting Jonah in an authoritative way looks bleak. The presence of interpretive variety is a serious challenge to the reader of the Bible as the Word of God. Questions concerning the contemporary relevance of the Bible in the church naturally arise. In what way can the Bible be regarded as the authoritative Word of God? Are *all* interpretations to be regarded as authoritative or only some? How does one decide? Furthermore, if a text like Jonah can be taken to mean just anything, it is difficult to see a continued use for textual criticism, biblical exegesis, and other studies intended to determine what was actually said by its author.

One way of dealing with the problem of variety is to take asylum in an exclusivistic approach, whereby an interpretation is defended on the grounds that only one method holds the key to the correct understanding of the text. But this recourse will not do, since it presumptuously treats all other methods as the perpetrators of misinterpretation. Various approaches have been produced in the attempt to find the middle ground between the two extremes of relativity and objectivity. In a recent study titled *Exclusivity and Variety*, Jonker suggests a model of 'multidimensional exegesis', intended to integrate various methods of exegesis, thus providing a controlled rather than 'cacophonous' variety. His concern is to avoid the dangers of the extremes of both variety and exclusivity. The upshot of such a mediating position is: plurality in interpretation does not need to be viewed as a necessary evil that must be tolerated; and the



quest for an authoritative theological interpretation does not need to be abandoned simply because there are subjective elements inherent in the interpretive process.

Goldingay (1995:51) admits of the possibility of holding on to the principle of objectivity in interpretation while recognizing that 'different people can come to different *legitimate* [italics added] interpretations of a story'. The idea that some interpretations are legitimate begs the question that others are not. This has the effect of creating a boundary whereby arbitrary readings can be identified: 'We are right to rule out at least some readings' (Fish 1980:346). The assumption of this study is that legitimate interpretation is that which offers a careful reading, 'properly grounded in the evidence of the text' (Patte, cited in Jonker [s a]:50).

Returning to the question of how a variety of interpretations can all be legitimate, four explanations have been given by Goldingay (1995:51-53).

- 1) All texts are open to some degree; not everything is made explicit, but sufficient is said in order to make communication possible.
- 2) Some texts are deliberately open or ambiguous to enable a certain desired effect to develop.
- 3) Many stories are rich and complex, which means that they are multi-faceted. No one interpretation can do these texts justice.
- 4) Any text may have one 'intrinsic meaning' but many significances or applications.

The nature of biblical texts (or any texts, for that matter) is such that a variety of interpretation is not only possible, but very likely. In the case of Jonah, many interpreters have noted that the author has deliberately left out historical details; the ending of the story appears to be rather abrupt with God's final question to Jonah going unanswered; and there are a number of different themes in Jonah (unfulfilled prophecy, judgment, repentance, etc). It has already been noted how the reading of Jonah has generated a multiplicity of 'meanings'.

The variety in interpretation which results from the inherent qualities of the text is further augmented by the dynamic character of both author and readers. Vanhoozer (1998:417-418) has written on the subject of interpretive plurality with similar ideas to those of Goldingay.

- 1) There may be a plurality of authorial intentions. That is to say the author may have had more in mind than just a single intention.

- 2) This plurality may also exist at the level of the text. Different stages of tradition distinguishable from the final canonical form exist in an intertextual sense giving rise to interpretation occurring at various layers.
- 3) The plurality of readers and of readers' contexts can also give rise to a variety of differing interpretations. Gender, race and class [and sexual orientation?] or any combination create a complex matrix of various needs and desires.
- 4) The plurality of reading strategies whereby a text is studied in any number of different ways exists because of special interests and separate interpretive goals.

### 1.1.3 The role of authority

Goldingay and Vanhoozer have drawn attention to some of the important characteristics of the interpretive process which account for variety in interpretation. When the goal of interpretation is to determine the 'original meaning of the text or its meaning in the context in which it was written' (Goldingay 1995:51), the subjectivity of the reader is a factor which cannot be ignored. When the quest for meaning is theological, then there is an additional factor which plays an important role: that of authority. A theological interpretation of the Bible as a means of hearing the Word of God often belies the fact that authority is understood in vastly different ways.

In a 1975 study, Kelsey investigated the writings of seven theologians to determine how they 'prove a doctrine from scripture' (Kelsey 1975:1). His thesis is that there are a variety of different uses of Scripture, 'each of which brings with it a different concept of "authority"' (Kelsey 1975:3). This differing use of Scripture was found to derive from a *prior* decision made by the theologian about how Scripture was to be construed and used. This 'pre-text' decision has to do with the imaginative characterization of the 'mode of God's presence' among the faithful (Kelsey 1975:167).

Kelsey's study centred on the writings of Christian theologians, whose reflections happen to be concentrations on either one of the Testaments or both. In this study an attempt will be made to gauge the effect that these prior theological commitments regarding the nature of Scripture will have on the work of biblical scholars dealing with a single biblical text. As Kelsey affirms, Scripture is construed in a variety of ways, and this fact alone can account for plurality of method at a foundational level. No matter how Scripture is construed, what is of importance is that the different methods of interpretation can be shown to be legitimate. Accordingly, this study will focus on exegetical commentaries, 'properly grounded in the evidence of the text'. It should be



pointed out however, that not all legitimate interpretations will necessarily be acceptable interpretations. The social and cultural factors which bear upon Bible readers in so many ways can result in disagreement even within a community unified in their way of construing of Scripture.

#### **1.1.4 What about author's intention?**

Dissatisfaction with the historical method in general resulted in the application of literary critical theory to the Bible by biblical scholars. Author's intention, the once all-important key for obtaining the single correct meaning of a biblical text, is disregarded in modern hermeneutical theory. Avoidance of the 'intentional fallacy' has become the hallmark of modern literary criticism. The written text, being completely divorced from its historical meaning, is said to be autonomous, and has a life all of its own. Therefore, the intention of the author is not only unrecoverable, but also undesirable for determining meaning (Wimsatt 1976:136). Why restrict the potentially rich meaning of a text to what its author intended?

In spite of this argument, there are still reasons for holding on to the 'idea that the meaning of a text is there in the text where it was put by its authors' (Goldingay 1995:35). An appeal to author's intention as a key to determining the original or historical meaning of a text is not necessarily a claim to know what the author was thinking at the time of writing. That would be a fallacy. But, as Barton points out, it is a claim that the author intended that the text should mean X rather than Y (Barton 1984:168). In Jonah, this is well illustrated by attempts at the literary classification of the book. Did the author intend to write an accurate historical account, or was the intention to write fiction? Provided the evidence for arguing these positions is found in the text, without violating the historical norms of the text, there would seem to be little reason for banishing the author altogether. The notion that meaning resides in the text can be seen as a control whereby 'subjectivist understandings of stories' are safeguarded against (Goldingay 1995:35).

## **1.2 The hypothesis**

It is the hypothesis of this study that the existence of different models of authority allows for a variety of legitimate theological interpretation of the book of Jonah, on the



basis that each of these models presupposes a different aspect of the text which renders the theological construct authoritative.

This hypothesis needs to be qualified in two areas. First, not all legitimate interpretation can be regarded as acceptable by all readers. Those outside of the interpreter's circle will obviously find much with which to disagree. While many readers within the same authority framework as the interpreter will find the interpretation acceptable, others will not because of differences in cultural or social values. Second, not all exegesis done with the presuppositions created by any one model of authority will produce similar results. Simply operating (consciously or otherwise) within a model of authority does not guarantee a fixed result which others will also achieve.

While it is recognised that there are many factors which may give rise to variety in interpretation, the endeavor to determine the original meaning of Jonah is neither pointless nor impossible. Although it is not the main focus of this study, the importance given to authorial intention with regard to achieving a theological interpretation of Jonah will be observed and noted. Different ways of understanding intentionality may have some bearing on the theological implications of the book of Jonah.

### **1.3 The methodology**

The book of Jonah is suitable for an investigation into the relationship between scriptural authority and theological interpretation: many unresolved critical issues remain which continue to divide the scholarly community; and many ideas as to its theological message have been argued for. Three exegetical commentaries -- Wolff (1986), Alexander (1988), and Bolin (1997) -- will be examined with regard to their understanding of the theological import of Jonah. They have been selected primarily on the basis of their representation of each of the models defined in Chapter Two. Also, they provide careful readings of the text, interact with other literature, and offer a theological interpretation of Jonah. Other writings of these authors will be referred to in a supplementary way.

In Chapter Two a definition of scriptural authority will be attempted. The primacy of the church as an interpretive community of the Bible will be argued for. The reading of the Bible as Scripture will be differentiated from other readings. Different models of scriptural authority in the church today will be discussed in order to understand how

different groups within the church approach the Bible expecting it to function in different ways.

Chapter Three will consist of an analysis of each of the Jonah commentaries in turn to establish the particular way in which Jonah is thought to be authoritative. The interpreter's understanding of the *meaning* of the book will be defined and elucidated. Attention will be given to the single aspect of the text which is seen to authorise a theological construct. Secondly, the interpreter's understanding of authorial intention in Jonah and how it impacts on the overall theological message will be traced and commented on.

In Chapter Four a synthesis will be attempted in order to ascertain whether the hypothesis should be allowed to stand. Second, a conclusion regarding the viability of intentionality and authority will be drawn. Finally, remaining questions requiring further study will be suggested.

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## 2 AUTHORITY AND THE BIBLE

### 2.1 Authority in the church

Authority in the church could be understood as either theological, ecclesiastical, or scriptural. Definitions of these categories are not straightforward and there will always be a certain amount of overlap. However, a simplified definition would show the three to be quite different. In a Christian context, the ultimate authority is God. This *theological* authority, although difficult to define further, is that which is exercised by God over the church. *Ecclesiastical* authority is that which the church exercises over itself in the form of church polity or government. This also takes on many different forms. *Scriptural* authority is the authority which the Bible is said to have in the life of the church. This is also difficult to define precisely, most of all because it is understood in various ways. While both theological and ecclesiastical authority can take the form of a 'power' which commands obedience, scriptural authority is more of an influence which is willingly embraced. The present study is concerned only with scriptural authority and the role it plays in the interpretation of the book of Jonah.

Some recent writers have bewailed the fact that in the modern church the authority of the Bible is in a crisis. A general distrust of authority in western culture has not left the Bible untouched. Froehlich suggests that the rational intellectualism of the present age is the reason why more and more biblical scholars are seeing 'scripture as an indispensable *resource* rather than as binding authority' (Fretheim & Froehlich 1998:12). Whereas the authority of the Bible was simply assumed throughout the history of the church (Bird 1997:33), the widespread acceptance of the historical-critical method by the scholarly community has resulted in a Bible which has, for the purpose of engendering faith in the life of the church, 'lost its voice'. This is the opinion of Braaten and Jenson in an introductory chapter of a symposium, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (1995:ix). Their view (and the view of their contributors) is that the Bible, as an authoritative book, has been lost to the church. Foundational to this assertion is the understanding that the Bible 'exists on account of the church and for its sake' and that 'its authority derives from the same gospel that gave birth to the church' (1995:xi).

For conservative evangelicals the authority of the Bible has never been lost, for they have resolutely resisted any form of biblical criticism that presupposed that the Bible is anything *but* the 'inspired' Word of God. The Bible is authoritative because it is the inspired Word of God. Therefore, merely utilising the Bible in a religious or theologi-

cal sense is recognising its authority. If the authority of the Bible has diminished in evangelical churches it is not because there has been a formal denial of Scripture's authority. Carson attributes the problem to the antiauthoritarian stance 'endemic to the Western world', and the arrogance brought about by a smug allegiance to religious conservatism (1986:46). There seems to be little sense in upholding the Bible as a supreme authority and then failing to embrace that authority in practical terms.

Scriptural authority is certainly something worth holding on to. When Christians speak in support of a Christian position, whether it be in the field of politics, or physical suffering or morality, appeals are made to the Bible as their authority (Bird 1982:21). Far from being incidental to the life and faith of the church, the Bible is the Church's book in a way that it is no other's. Many profit from reading the Bible as history, literature or art, but it is the Bible that provides the church with 'metaphors to live by' (Deist 1994:334). According to Ramsey, neither the church nor the Bible can be explained without the other. God speaks to men and women through the Bible 'in the context of their existence' (Ramsey 1962:7).

## 2.2 The nature of authority

The term 'scriptural authority' is used here in preference to 'biblical authority' in order to maintain the necessary distinction between the church's use of the Bible in a religious sense and the use of the Bible by other groups for non-religious purposes. There is a 'confessional' use and a 'non-confessional' use. Although many may speak of the authority of the Bible, Christians use the Bible as their primary source of authority to order their lives and to shape their perceptions of God. This of course does not mean that the church's use of the Bible is the only legitimate one, but only that the church's use of the Bible is to be distinguished from other uses. This is also not to say that simply because the church uses the Bible differently from the university (for example) it follows that the church's use cannot be academic. Academic study of the Bible can be approached from a confessional standpoint, thereby suggesting that there are two separate disciplines which Davies refers to as 'scripture' and 'biblical studies' (1995:13). The very term 'scripture', according to James Barr, implies a religious use of the Bible (1976:794).

If scriptural authority refers to the authority of the Bible in the church, how is this authority to be understood? First, the term scriptural authority conveys the idea that the



Bible has 'some commanding influence' over the content of the church's faith and actions (Barr 1976:794). As Scripture the Bible provides standards for belief and behaviour, or 'faith and practice', informing the community what to believe and what to say and do. Second, the Bible 'creates and preserves the self-identity of the community of faith' (Gnuse 1985:2-3). The church receives insight from the Bible on being Christian in the world. Accordingly, its lifestyle can be adapted along scriptural lines or patterns in each new generation (Gnuse 1985:123). When hobbyists refer to the single most authoritative book or manual in their field as 'the bible', they are merely reflecting the normativeness of the Bible's authority in the church. Third, the authority of the Bible in the church is sometimes seen in a relational way. For Barr, authority has to do with the relation between the Bible and ourselves, as well as the 'relation between the Bible and other documents or sources of knowledge' (1973:23). Thus, in relation to us, the Bible has 'some commanding influence' over us, and in relation to other documents and sources, the Bible has primacy.

That the Bible is authoritative in the church is undisputed. Yet the Bible is often referred to as the church's supreme authority for faith and practice. This is an appeal made to the Scriptures as the *sole* authority in the church. Creeds and confessions, while helpful in providing exposition of church doctrine, are made subordinate to the authority of the Bible and need to be interpreted in light of the teaching of the Bible (Schrotenboer 1987:42). Evangelicals are horrified at Catholicism's affirmation that 'sacred theology rests on the written word of God together with sacred tradition' (Vatican II document, *Dogmatic constitution on Divine revelation*, cited in Schrotenboer 1987:44). Even if this sacred tradition was to be relegated to a subordinate position, interpreting and not supplementing Scripture, Stott thinks Catholicism would need to go further, by explicitly stating that the tradition is fallible while the Scripture is not (Stott 1970:82). The Reformers are recognized as the propagators of the concept of *sola Scriptura*, but the supposition that the Spirit spoke through the Scriptures is made explicit in the Westminster Confession: 'The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture' (article 1:10, Hodge 1958:42). Bloesch, in his affirmation of the church's authority residing in Word and Spirit, is able to express the supreme authority in the church as Jesus Christ (Bloesch 1994:159).

### 2.3 Models of scriptural authority

How can the Bible be said to have authority? Is its authority inherent or is it external? In what way can biblical narrative be said to have authority? (cf Wright 1991). The formulation of the doctrine of scriptural authority is certainly not without difficulty as attested by the variety of ways authority has been understood. The results of scholars who have investigated the phenomenon of models of authority will be utilised in this study. The intention is not to evaluate their models, but to summarize and synthesize their findings in order to provide a framework within which the biblical commentaries can be analysed.

In his book *The uses of Scripture in recent theology* (1975), David Kelsey examines the writings of seven Protestant theologians in order to determine the different ways Scripture is used in theology. His thesis is that in practice there is no standard concept of Scripture by which theologians approach the theological study of the Bible. What he found is that there is a 'variety of ways in which theologians have construed and used scripture in the course of their actual practice of theology in order to help authorize their theological proposals' (1975:2). Simply put, 'Scripture' is not the same for everyone. This helps to explain how a biblical text (like Jonah) is capable of producing such a variety of interpretations. Scripture cannot 'serve as the final court of appeal in theological disputes' (1975:14). Since the text will answer only those questions put to it, the Bible functions in whatever way it is expected to.

Kelsey's findings were that, in all cases, 'biblical texts were taken to be scripture [authoritative?] in virtue of their *doing* something', and 'what they do is shape persons' identities so decisively as to transform them' (Kelsey 1975:90). Taken one step further, scriptural authority has to do with a prior judgment concerning the way God makes himself present (Kelsey 1975:96). The Scriptures represent the reality, which is the presence of God in the church. The prior judgment concerning the construal of the mode of God's presence underlies the theologians' construal of Scripture and the decision to use it in one way and not another (Kelsey 1975:167). Kelsey identified three 'families of ways to construe the *mode* in which God is present' (Kelsey 1975:161). The *ideational* mode occurs when God is taken to be present in the Scripture through either its doctrine or concepts. The central theological task is to analyse the doctrine or concepts with the intention of proposing reform in 'current forms of church belief and speech'. The mode of *concrete reality* happens when God is present through some or other reality (an agent) which is rendered present through Scripture (Barth). Here the



central theological task is to reform church belief and speech 'in the light of [a] description of this agent and of the implications of his presence for men's lives'. The mode of *ideal possibility* happens when 'God is taken to be present in and through existential events that are occasioned by scripture's kerygmatic statements which announce the possibility of authentic existence (Bultmann)'. The theological task is a 'reformist criticism of current forms of churchly speech and action in the light of an account of what "authentic existence" is like and how it is possible' (Kelsey 1975:161-162).

The Bible is authoritative because it points in 'some way' to a reality. According to Kelsey, this reality is the mode of God's presence among the faithful. But the biblical text itself can also be considered a reality as it is the ultimate 'way' to the 'Reality that is God'. This is the view of Van Huyssteen (1987), who has developed three models of scriptural authority based on scientific models of rationality. The different ways of understanding authority are merely different ways of understanding the link between the biblical text and the Reality. Each model is derived from the way the *realism* of the text is perceived. As it turns out, van Huyssteen's models are in essential agreement with Kelsey's. Having laid down the general principle that the biblical text refers in some way to reality, like Kelsey, van Huyssteen is interested in determining the way in which it refers to the Reality (van Huyssteen 1987:24). Thus, he can describe the different ways that the biblical text has been seen to 'function epistemologically' in terms of its realism. Van Huyssteen's three models; *naive realism*, *instrumentalism*, and *critical realism* correspond to Kelsey's three modes; ideational, concrete actuality, and ideal possibility.

A more recent, although brief, contribution to the discussion on the various models of scriptural authority is that of Bloesch (1994). While he affirms that an exposition of these models must account for their relation to both theological methodology and the philosophical understanding of truth, it is regarding the former relationship that his work is so helpful (Bloesch 1994:40). Unlike Kelsey, Bloesch does not offer an in-depth treatment of the subject; his descriptions of the three models of authority are merely observations on their response to four concepts: the Bible, revelation, faith, and theology (Bloesch 1994:40-45). The terms he uses to describe the models, the *scholastic*, *sacramental*, and *modernist* models, being relatively unambiguous, are adopted in the following discussion of the models.

Returning briefly to Kelsey, four questions were put to selected writings which provided answers that enabled Kelsey to draw certain conclusions concerning the use of

Scripture. The questions are: (1) What aspect of Scripture is taken to be authoritative? (2) What is it about this aspect of Scripture that makes it authoritative? (3) What sort of logical force seems to be ascribed to the Scripture to which appeal is made? (4) How is the Scripture that is cited brought to bear on theological proposals so as to authorize them? In each case, certain aspects of Scripture were clearly seen to be authoritative. Thus Kelsey's three models of authority are identified on the basis of the *theological content* of Scripture, the *narrative quality* of Scripture, and the *symbolism or imagery* of Scripture. His analysis is not meant to be exhaustive nor should it be taken as typical (Kelsey 1975:15). Bloesch is in agreement: 'No one theologian or system of theology can be completely identified with any one model. Yet this kind of typology is helpful in clarifying the tensions that exist among different schools of theology on the subject of biblical authority' (Bloesch 1994:41).

### 2.3.1 The scholastic model

The scholastic model of scriptural authority finds its most typical expression in the writings of B B Warfield, the last of the "Old Princetonian Theologians", best known for his efforts at defending the conservative view of the inspiration of the Bible (Noll 1984:1156). In this model it is argued that it is not an aspect of Scripture which makes it authoritative, but its *content*. 'What it *says* is what's important.' (Kelsey 1975:16). The doctrines of Scripture are authoritative, an emphasis which becomes evident in frequent appeals to the 'teaching' of the Bible in order to support doctrinal convictions. Being a form of the naive realistic model, scholasticism views the content of the Bible as a 'careful and accurate description' of the Reality (van Huyssteen 1987:19). The term 'scholastic' is used here to denote the formal and dogmatically direct way in which the model relates Scripture to the Reality.

What is it about the doctrinal content of Scripture that makes it authoritative? It is authoritative because it is the Word of God. Based on the assumption that 'the infinite is accessible to the finite' the Bible *is* written revelation and therefore consists of 'revealed truths or revealed propositions' (Bloesch 1994:42). The Bible is not a record of or witness to revelation; it *is* revelation. This assertion requires the verbal plenary view of inspiration, which holds that the very words of the whole of Scripture are God's words. This does not necessarily lead to mechanical dictationism, as some think, for 'in some way' God superintended the thoughts and intents of the human authors so that their words are his words. In this way the Bible can be spoken of as the authoritative Word of God.



Now this doctrine of inspiration has a rather important feature. Because Scripture is said to be the direct revelation of God, it follows that it is absolutely trustworthy, and therefore it is said to be inerrant. All that Scripture records is true in the sense that it does not contain factual error. In an extreme form of this view, inerrancy is taken to include matters of science and history even though, admittedly, the purpose of Scripture is neither scientific nor historical. Although some prefer the term infallible to inerrant in describing the Bible's inspiration (Bird 1997:59), the underlying concern is that the Bible be preserved as a trustworthy guide in Christian faith and practice. As Bloesch explains, 'Scripture is incapable of deception or leading astray' (1994:37). This has yet a further implication: being the very Word of God, the Bible, when viewed from a naively realistic point of view, offers an accurate record of historical events. To the user of this model, the account in Jonah of the big fish is taken to be an accurate description of what really happened. This much was the finding of an investigation into the interpretation of Jonah in the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa (van Heerden 1988).

Scripture is used directly to authorize theological proposals. Since Scripture is intended to teach, the theologian's task is to organize its teaching, restating passages which are clear and interpreting others which are not immediately understood (Kelsey 1975:23). When using Scripture to support a particular doctrinal position, appeals to its teaching can be made directly without having to venture out into the uncertain arena of biblical criticism. In this model, faith is understood as an intellectual assent to the revealed propositions in the Bible (Bloesch 1994:43).

### **2.3.2 The sacramental model**

In this model it is not the doctrinal teachings of Scripture that are authoritative, but its narrative aspect. Since much of the Bible is story telling and not didactic literature, it stands to reason that its authority will be found in its narrative. Kelsey examines the writings of two theologians, G Ernest Wright (*God who acts*, 1952) and Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics*, especially 'The Royal Man'). Although there are significant differences in how these two theologians use Scripture in theology, Kelsey finds sufficient common ground in their treatment of the biblical narrative to group them together (1975:50). Bloesch too finds this model in Barth but also in Augustine, Calvin and Luther (1994:40). The term 'Sacramentalism' is used in the sense that Scripture has a sacred function in the church, much like the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.

What is it about the narratives in Scripture that are authoritative? Biblical narrative represents the historical events through which God makes himself known or knowable, and therefore they provide our 'one link with revelation' (Kelsey 1975:50). The Bible itself is not revelation, but is a record of revelation. 'Scripture is said to be important because it preserves the content of revelation. This means that it narrates revelatory events, not that it teaches the divinely sanctioned doctrines (1975:32). The Bible is seen as an instrument or channel of divine revelation in much the same way as the church's sacraments (Bloesch 1994:41). According to Bloesch, this model 'understands revelation as God in action, God revealing the depth of his love and the mystery of his will to the eyes of faith' (1994:42). Interpreters working with this model of authority are freed from the restrictive constraint of inerrancy, since the central theological message is not affected by human imperfections (Gnuse 1985:67-8).

The sacramental model sees authority lying not in an inherent quality or feature of Scripture such as inspiration or inerrancy, but as a *function* in the life of the church (Kelsey 1975:47). This function 'provides us with a link to God and his self-disclosure in Jesus Christ' (Gnuse 1985:76-77). Along with the church and sacraments, Scripture is taken to be an 'instrument of divine activity', witnessing to the acts of God in history. 'The Bible is seen as both a human witness to divine truth and God's self-revelation through human authors'. In this way, Scripture is both the Word of God and the word of man at the same time (Bloesch 1994:40-41). According to van Huyssteen, the instrumental nature of this model allows 'the different uses of genre in the Biblical text [to be] seen as *functional* and not as referring in the realist sense of the word' (van Huyssteen 1987:22).

The relationship between Scripture and authoritative theological constructions is indirect. Scripture is authoritative through the narration of the activity of God in history. The Bible can then paradoxically be said to be both the Word of God and the word of man but, as Bloesch points out, this is only so when apprehended by faith. 'Revelation has a personal, a propositional and an experiential pole. What is revealed is a personal presence in conjunction with a spoken or written witness and received by a believing heart' (1994:42). For Barth the written Scripture 'becomes the Word of God through preaching' (Gnuse 1985:76). Merely reading and understanding a passage of Scripture does not constitute scriptural authority. But a 'revelatory event' may occur when Scripture is used in the church 'as the basis of preaching and worship' (Kelsey



1975:47). Faith is regarded as an 'existential commitment to the personal God revealed in Jesus Christ' (Bloesch 1994:43).

### 2.3.3 The modernist model

Kelsey uses the writings of three theologians, Thornton, Tillich and Bultmann in his exploration of a third model he lightheartedly refers to as a 'string-of-beads' or 'muffin-full-of-berries' model. Because of the diversity of literary forms in the Bible, it is held that the words of Scripture are unable to communicate effectively in the modern world, and must therefore be read symbolically. By this is meant the recognition and appreciation of non-rational communication devices, 'images', 'myths' or 'symbols'. Hence, it is not the theological content nor the narrative aspect which is authoritative, but the collection of a multitude of these *literary patterns* which 'express the occurrence of a revelatory event' (Kelsey 1975:56). The Bible is not the Word of God in the sense of either of the other two models, but is merely a 'record of the religious experience of a particular people in history' (Bloesch 1994:42). The Bible is not revelation, nor does it witness to revelation, but 'revelation is said to be an event in which man is made new, in which he becomes a new creature' (Kelsey 1975:56). The biblical symbols *express* these revelatory events. The term 'modernist' is used here to indicate the rationalistic and scientific approach to Christianity, also referred to as Liberalism.

What is it about these biblical symbols or 'non-rational communication devices' that are authoritative? Thornton, Tillich and Bultmann would not agree on the way Scripture is used authoritatively, but they do agree that 'scripture is authoritative insofar as it expresses the occurrence of a revelatory and saving event in the past and occasions its occurrence for someone in the present' (Kelsey 1975:83). (For the sake of clarity and brevity only the example of Tillich will be used in the remaining discussion). Because the same symbol functions in both the original and the dependent revelatory events, a continuity exists, linking the present with the past (1975:66). These symbols thereby communicate meaning which elicit various religious responses expressed in doctrine, liturgy, preaching, teaching, and art (Gnuse 1985:81). This meaning is revelation, not in the sense of providing 'information concerning the nature of God or the plan of salvation but a new awareness of ourselves in relation to the divine and to fellow humanity' (Bloesch 1994:43).

In the scholastic model, the force ascribed to Scripture to which authoritative appeal is made is inerrancy. In the sacramental model this force is the function of Scripture in

the believing community. In the modernist model, this force is an external power which transforms the inner man (Kelsey 1975:72). 'The Bible is an aid in making contact with the deepest within the self, but it is not indispensable for this experience of oneness with God' (Bloesch 1994:43). Scriptural authority is derived from the human response of faith to the saving content of revelatory events (Barr 1973:25).

How is Scripture used to give authority to theological proposals? Both directly and indirectly. Concerning the original revelatory event, biblical symbols bear directly on theological proposals, for they provide our only access to that event. For dependent revelatory events the relationship is indirect. The original event is the paradigm (Kelsey 1975:72-3). 'Hence what is authoritative about scripture is not its surface content of doctrine, concept, or narrative, but its non-informative *force* as expression' (1975:85). The imagination is relied on to provide the theories which are said to represent the reality (van Huyssteen 1987:24). Theology is understood as 'an interpretation of our experiences of God' rather than an 'explication of God's self-communication in Scripture' (Bloesch 1994:44). Faith is a 'venture of discovery that enables us to make contact with the creative power at work in nature and history' (Bloesch 1994:43).

## **2.4 Authority and the Word of God**

To ask 'How is the Bible authoritative?' is to ask 'What is the relationship between the Bible and God?' Some may prefer to ask 'In what way can the Bible be said to be the Word of God?' Barr describes scriptural authority as the relation between ourselves and the Bible, but makes it quite clear that the ground for scriptural authority 'does not lie within the nature of the Bible . . . but in the authority of God himself' (Barr 1973:24). According to Wright, using the phrase 'authority of Scripture' is really a shorthand way of saying that 'though authority belongs to God, God has somehow invested this authority in scripture' (1991:14). This relationship between the Bible and God is foundational to any formulation of the doctrine of scriptural authority.

Deist has shown that the Bible itself does not claim unambiguously to be the Word of God, but that the phrase 'Word of God' has had different referents in the course of its own history, making its definition historically relative. He provocatively goes on to suggest that any referent or content of the phrase is created by an act of interpretation. Therefore, the Bible can be one 'Word of God' to one person, but a different 'Word of God' to another (Deist 1979:57-8). The hypothesis of this study is that this plurality of



'Words of God' can be explained in part by the presence of different models of authority, but the problem becomes more intriguing when the diversity is found among interpreters working with the same model. Some of these factors were noted in chapter one.

The question of how God and the Bible are related is dealt with by Poythress in an article which explores the dual authorship of the Bible. His underlying assumption is that a biblical book like Amos (or Jonah) has two authors -- the human and the Divine. Because of this, the book must be interpreted as God's words but also as the human author's words. Therefore there are two separate interpretations to any biblical book. Granted that the differences between the two may be either significant or only subtle, because the Bible must be taken seriously as both a human and a divine book, the two interpretations must be allowed to stand and not simply be meshed into one (Poythress 1988:81-3). He then goes on to explain how the dual nature of the Bible can be understood in practical terms. Contrary to this view is the one taken by W Kaiser. Unhappy with the double meaning of scriptural texts that such a proposal would doubtless lead to, Kaiser contends that the divine meaning is not different from the human, neither does it exceed the intention of the human author (Kaiser 1984:444-446).

The problem of how the Bible can be called the word of man and the Word of God is also addressed by Bloesch, for whom the Bible itself is not the revelation of God, but the 'divinely appointed means and channel of this revelation' (1994:57). The Bible can be called the Word of God because it 1) contains a revelatory core of meaning from God; 2) is the inspired witness to revelation; 3) is the vehicle of revelation; 4) is the document of the final revelation and by the action of the Spirit participates in this revelation (1994:70). How is the Word of God accessible to the reader of Scripture? In contrast to the fundamentalist error of restricting the Word of God to the Bible, Bloesch argues that the Word of God 'is not the text itself but the divinely intended meaning of the text' (1994:71), thereby also arguing for responsible interpretation.

These two prevalent views of the 'Word of God' -- that the Bible has a dual authorship, and that the Bible is a witness to and channel of the Word of God -- are critiqued by Barr in *The Bible in the modern world*. Like Deist, Barr finds the Word-of-God terminology unhelpful in describing the nature of the Bible. He suggests three reasons why the use of the phrase 'Word of God' as a synonym for Scripture has fallen out of use in recent times: 1) The idea belonged to the world of systematic theology, and as such has seemed alien to recent biblical scholarship; 2) the hermeneutical emphasis of recent scholarship has shifted the discussion from the difference between divine and

human to the difference between ancient and modern; 3) the concept of a divine Bible is questionable on theological grounds in that there is 'no good reason why the relationship between God and man in the person of Christ should be supposed to hold good also for the relationship of divine and human in the Bible' (Barr 1973:21).

The three models of scriptural authority under consideration view the relation between the Bible and God differently. For the scholastic, the relation is direct: the words of the Bible *are* the Word of God. In the sacramental model the relation is indirect: the words of the Bible *become* the Word of God through the Spirit and by faith. In the modernist model the relation is imaginary (or virtual): the symbols or images of the Bible serve to heighten an inner awareness of God.

## 2.5 Authority and interpretation

In the preceding section it has been suggested that the two issues of the authority of Scripture and its interpretation are not entirely separate issues. If Scripture is to be authoritative, it must be through its interpretation. Green argues from the nature of Scripture that it needs to be interpreted because 'the meaning is never simply given', and to 'read the Bible as Scripture *is* to interpret it,' and again the 'literal sense of the biblical text tells us (if we are reading scripturally) what God *says*; but it requires an act of interpretation to discern what God *means*' (1996:29-30). The importance of relating scriptural authority with hermeneutics can also be seen in Packer, who recognizes that 'biblical authority is an empty notion unless we know how to determine what the Bible means' (1975:3). His hermeneutic is determined by his scholastic model of biblical authority, which he acknowledges must be open 'to challenge from the biblical texts' through exegesis (1975:7). Some, however, would argue that when working within this model of authority, Scripture does not need to be interpreted, as its meaning is identical with the propositions it makes (Green 1996:24). While authority is the property of God, Gillespie says that without interpretation scriptural authority can be formal but never real (1986:192). The problem he goes on to address is how the meaning of historic literature can be expressed in changing historical situations. This is the hermeneutical challenge.

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### 3 AUTHORITY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF JONAH

#### 3.1 A scholastic interpretation

Desmond Alexander's commentary on Jonah, which is bound together with commentaries on Obadiah and Micah in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series (Baker, Alexander & Waltke 1988), will form the basis of an investigation into the role of the scholastic model of authority in the interpretation of Jonah. A prior article dealing specifically with the genre of Jonah (Alexander 1985) will also be referred to in the analysis of Alexander's method. In the preface of earlier editions of the Tyndale series Wiseman emphasised the commitment of contributors to the 'divine inspiration, essential trustworthiness and practical relevance of the sacred writings' (e.g., Kidner 1967:5). Wiseman's preface to the present commentary states merely that authors have the freedom of expressing their own point of view (Baker, Alexander & Waltke 1988:5). The aim of the commentary is 'to provide the student of the Bible with a handy, up-to-date commentary . . . with the primary emphasis on exegesis.' An introduction, which deals with critical issues such as authorship and date, unity of composition, genre, and so on, is provided. Longman comments on the series as brief, informative, written by respected evangelical scholars for non-specialists (1991:54).

##### 3.1.1 The purpose of Jonah

Since it is the purpose of this study to investigate the effect that a particular view of scriptural authority might have on the theological interpretation of Jonah, any question concerning the theology of Jonah should be framed in the language preferred by the author. Alexander's commentary does not claim to provide a contemporary interpretation whereby the 'meaning' of Jonah is given in modern terms, an enterprise often referred to as 'applying' the text. For Alexander the 'meaning' of Jonah is equivalent to the author's historical intention. This is touched on in the preface to the commentary, and again in the discussion of the book's genre, but is brought into sharper focus under the heading 'Purpose' (1988:81). Alexander reviews four broad categories of how the 'message' of the book has been understood. These are 1) repentance; 2) unfulfilled prophecy; 3) Jewish attitudes towards Gentiles; and 4) theodicy.

As far as Alexander is concerned, none of the interpretations, with the possible exception of the fourth, gives an adequate explanation of the theological significance of the city of Nineveh in the narrative. The view that Jonah is about Jewish repentance does

not do justice to the story, since 'Jonah does not object to repentance *per se*, rather, . . . he objects to the Ninevites being the recipients of divine forgiveness' (1988:83). This does not explain why Nineveh is an important element in the story. On the second view, that Jonah provides a response to the problem of unfulfilled prophecy, Alexander has reservations. Does not the response of the Ninevites indicate that Jonah was in fact a true prophet? (1988:84) Furthermore, given that the lack of prophecy fulfillment is a 'very real problem for Jonah' is it because he believes *all* prophecy should be fulfilled, or is he reacting only to the non-fulfillment of his prophecy against Nineveh (1988:85)? As for the third view, concerning Jewish nationalism, Alexander (along with many others) is not convinced by the arguments for a universalist or missionary interpretation (1988:86-87). 'We must distinguish carefully between Jonah's general view of Gentiles and his particular attitude to the Ninevites; it is the specific deliverance of Nineveh that angers Jonah' (1988:87). The fourth view, that the book of Jonah is a theodicy, has Jonah questioning the wisdom of God in granting pardon to the Ninevites of all people (1988:89). Wickedness justly deserves punishment, but pardon cannot justly be given to the Ninevites. Jonah does not object to the concept of divine mercy, he simply does not believe it should be shown to the inhabitants of Nineveh. Alexander concludes: 'Of the various proposals for the purpose of Jonah, it is apparent that there is little to choose between them; it is easy to see why no consensus has been reached' (1988:89).

Thus Alexander thinks that the 'view that Jonah is ultimately concerned with justice and mercy has at least one major advantage over the others. While the other proposals rightly reflect important themes in the story, they can all be satisfactorily subsumed under the heading of theodicy' (1988:89). This view places importance on the place of Nineveh in the entire narrative. 'It is the deliverance of Nineveh, and this alone, which is the cause of Jonah's dissatisfaction' (1988:89). Jonah reacts 'vehemently' towards Nineveh in particular and not towards Gentiles in general. Being the capital of the Assyrian empire, Nineveh was responsible for the destruction of the Northern Kingdom (2 Kgs 17). The book of Jonah attempts to answer the question possibly raised by God's people after the destruction of Samaria in 721 BCE by the Assyrians. 'By focusing on the issue of theodicy, it addressed those who, like Jonah, questioned the wisdom of God's sovereign purpose at this time'. 'How could God allow the Assyrians to do this? Was this actually part of his sovereign will? Did Israel really deserve such harsh treatment?' (1988:90)

In order to sustain this conclusion of the book's message or purpose, Alexander needs to show the following:



- \* a date of composition of 721 BCE or shortly thereafter;
- \* that the book has a historical (and not legendary) view of the great city of Nineveh;
- \* that the book was intended by its author to be a historical (and not fictitious) account; and
- \* that Jonah knew about the destruction of Samaria by Nineveh in advance.

### 3.1.2 The method of interpretation

This initial investigation into Alexander's identification of the purpose of Jonah provides a starting point for determining which aspects or features of the book are authoritative in his formulation of that central message or purpose. In other words, what is it about the text of Jonah that causes Alexander to view the book as a vindication of God's freedom to show mercy to whomever he wills? In what way does his commitment to authority contribute to his handling of scripture? All critical issues are dealt with in the introductory section of the commentary, thus making plain the assumptions underlying certain exegetical decisions in the commentary. Accordingly, most of the questions into Alexander's method will be answered here. His headings will be followed in their original order.

#### 3.1.2.1 Authorship and date

In spite of his reservations concerning the suitability of audience identification as a means of dating Jonah (1988:62), the identification of an audience *is* a primary criterion for Alexander to argue his view of the book's purpose. In this section alone reference is made no less than three times to the possibility of a North Israelite provenance around 721 BCE. This is because his entire proposal is based on how a North Israelite audience would respond to the destruction of Samaria by Assyria, epitomised by the wickedness of the city of Nineveh as it was historically in the eighth century BCE (1988:55,62,90). Most scholars would agree that the events of Jonah are to be dated in this era, but Alexander argues for the composition of the book in this period.

The character named Jonah in the prophetic book of Jonah is reasonably supposed to be the same Jonah 'son of Amittai' as that in 2 Kings 14:25, who prophesied during the reign of Jereboam II (782/81-753 BCE). Since no other biographical details are given, the dating of the events recorded in Jonah as occurring in the eighth century BCE is

confidently assumed (Alexander 1988:51). The actual dating of the book's composition is not as straightforward, though. In attempting to narrow down the period during which the book was probably composed, Alexander interacts with four critical concerns in Jonah: linguistic features, legendary descriptions, literary dependence, and the original audience.

a) *Linguistic features.* The presence of Aramaisms in the book of Jonah has long been taken by scholars to be a reliable guide to its date of composition. Thus, the book has been thought to have originated in the postexilic period at a time when the Hebrew language was influenced by Aramaic. The seven words in question are מַלְיָה 'sailor' (1:5), סַפְנָה 'ship' (1:5), יַתְעַשֵּׂת 'he will consider' (1:6), שׁ 'which' (1:7, 4:10), מִנֵּה 'appoint' (2:1, 4:6-8), טֶעֶם 'decree' (3:7), and רַבּוֹ 'myriad' (4:11) (Allen 1976:187).

This conclusion has not been without its critics, the first of which is believed to be Driver (1909), who suggested that some of Jonah's linguistic features might (possibly) be compatible with a pre-exilic origin in northern Israel' (cited in Landes 1982:147). Loretz (1961) has subsequently argued that certain of the words commonly considered to be Aramaisms could reflect a Canaanite-Phoenician influence and would therefore undoubtedly be preexilic (Alexander 1988:53). These are מַלְיָה 'sailor' (1:5), סַפְנָה 'ship' (1:5), רַבּוֹ 'myriad' (4:11), and the relative particle שׁ 'which' (1:7, 4:10). While Alexander makes mention of Loretz's work, it is the detailed linguistic analysis of Landes (1982) as an approach to dating the book of Jonah which receives more attention. Recognizing that no real scholarly consensus had been reached concerning which biblical Hebrew words can be regarded as Aramaisms, Landes has 'another look' at the problem of dating Jonah linguistically (1982:147). Earlier, Landes had written:

'Reference is often made to a group of so-called Aramaisms in the book, deemed an indication of a postexilic milieu. However, closer scrutiny of these terms in light of comparative Semitic philological data has tended to show that most of them stem from northern Israelite-Phoenician usage rather than Aramaic. But since both northern Israelite-Phoenician and Aramaic linguistic phenomena were in use in Hebrew both before and after the Exile, and almost none of those occurring in Jonah can be clearly demonstrated to have only postexilic currency, they are not very helpful for dating'.

(Landes 1976:490)



In addition to the five supposed Aramaisms which Loretz considered to be of Canaanite-Phoenician provenance, Landes investigated other words believed to be Aramaisms and came to the conclusion that only three words could be regarded as such, but of these three only one word, **תַּעֲשֶׂה** 'he will consider' (1:6), seems reasonably certain to have come into Hebrew directly from Aramaic after the sixth century BCE. Since this word occurs only once in biblical Hebrew (every other occurrence is found in Aramaic), Landes is hesitant to concede a date for the composition of Jonah later than the sixth century BCE, unless 'a fair number of other linguistic features' in support of a postexilic date can be demonstrated (1982:157).

Landes then investigates two other types of linguistic phenomena which may be taken as giving an indication of a postexilic date to Jonah: 1) 'Special word usages, which because of their distribution in the Bible, as well as their contrast to earlier expressions which they appear to replace, may point to features characteristic almost exclusively of later writers;' and 2) 'Grammatical-syntactic constructions which consistently turn up only in indisputably dated post-exilic sources' (1982:158-162). He assesses seven examples which have been identified as possible late usages. Of these, Landes considers only one, a 'diachronic chiasmus' (where the order of two terms of a particular phrase used in the preexilic period are reversed in the postexilic period) to be indicative of a late date. The phrase **חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם** 'gracious and compassionate' (4:2), occurs seven other times in the Old Testament in the same sequence as in Jonah, and three times in the reverse order (1982:160). Following the work of Brenner (1979), Landes agrees that the author of Jonah used the construction in its late form, but hastily adds that 'this is not terribly significant' unless 'it can be shown that it belongs with a number of other linguistic features which are characteristic predominantly of late Biblical Hebrew' (1982:160). Referring to the work of Polzin (1976), Landes next looks at five grammatical-syntactic constructions, pertinent to the book of Jonah, which Polzin believes are distinguishable as late biblical Hebrew (Landes 1982:161). Again, only two of these are thought by Landes to be significant: 1) 'a predominance of pronominal accusative objects being attached directly to the verb forms', of which four are identified; and 2) 'a preference for the plural forms of words and phrases where the earlier language employed the singular', of which one example only is found in Jonah (Landes 1982:161-162).

In summing up his analysis of linguistic data often used in establishing a postexilic date for Jonah, Landes is cautious. First, he is hesitant to allow a date after the sixth century BCE since 'there is relatively little in the language of the book' to support this

(1982:163). Second, evaluating the four features in Jonah he believes can be 'best explained as post-exilic' (one Aramaism, the diachronic chiasmus, pronominal accusative objects, and plural nouns instead of singular), he is not convinced that a sixth century BCE date can be ruled out entirely. Third, Landes is not sure that a more precise sixth century BCE date can be determined on linguistic grounds alone (Landes 1982:163).

Accordingly, Alexander summarizes Landes' position as *inclining* 'towards a sixth century date' (1988:55). He argues that since the word יתעשת in 1:6 is a *hapax legomenon*, its significance for dating purposes is doubtful (Alexander 1988:53). With regard to the reversed sequence phenomenon in 4:2, he concedes that this may indicate a later development, but raises the possibility that the transition may have occurred in the sixth or seventh century, and not necessarily the fifth century BCE (1988:54). On the issue of the plural forms, Alexander argues that the use of the plural form of גורלות 'lots' (1:7) could be determined by pagan and not exilic usage (1988:54). However, it should not be overlooked that Landes himself considered the evidence to be 'not overwhelmingly impressive', and that the use of the form in Jonah is possibly 'more in keeping' with the post-exilic period (1982:162).

Because of these disagreements with Landes' evaluation of the linguistic evidence for dating, Alexander thinks that an even earlier date than the sixth century BCE is probable (1988:55). At this point, Alexander introduces for the first time the possibility that the book could have originated in the northern kingdom.

With the capture of Samaria in 723/2 BC by the Assyrian king Sargon II, the northern kingdom of Israel became an Assyrian province. Most of the population were deported to Assyria and replaced by peoples from elsewhere (cf. 2 Ki 17:23-24). Thus if the book of Jonah originated in the north, it would seem necessary to assume that it was composed prior to 723/2 BC, or soon after.

(Alexander 1988:55 note)

Seeing that he entertains the possibility of a northern provenance, which means a date prior to the fall of Samaria, it is strange that he later argues for a date after the fall of Samaria in 721 BCE (Alexander 1988:90).



b) *Legendary descriptions.* The discussion in this section is centred mainly on the supposed legendary descriptions of the city of Nineveh and also on certain customs which are said to indicate a late date. Long after its destruction in 612 BCE, Nineveh is described by the author of Jonah in legendary terms, which have no historical value as such. The size of the city is exaggerated, 'an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth,' (3:3), as is its population 'a hundred and twenty thousand persons' (4:11). The designation 'king of Nineveh' (3:6) is regarded by many as having no historical basis. The statement that Nineveh *was* an exceedingly great city is taken to mean that at the time of writing it no longer existed. Finally, two customs unusual to Assyria but typical of the Persian period add to the fictitious nature of Jonah. Against this generally held position, Alexander raises arguments to show that the historical Nineveh of the eighth century BCE is really intended by the author (1988:56).

i) *The size of Nineveh.* The description of Nineveh as a city of 'three days' journey' is considered to be a 'gross exaggeration' of the city's size by many commentators. Given that the city's size, as determined by 'modern archaeological surveys' and a 'contemporary document' in which Sennacherib is said to have enlarged the city's circumference to 21 815 cubits, Alexander affirms that the city could not have been more than 'a mile across at its widest part' at the end of the eighth century BCE (1988:56). He notes three possible solutions to the difficulty of explaining the words literally, before giving his preference. First, it has been argued that the three days did not refer to the length of Jonah's journey, but the time it took to complete, going up and down streets, from corner to corner. Second, Wiseman has suggested that 'in accordance with the ancient Near Eastern practice of hospitality' the three days would include a day for arrival and a day for departure. Third, the three days is intended as a symbolic reference, indicating the immense size of the city (Alexander 1988:57).

Following the work of Parrot (1955), Alexander argues for a literal understanding of the phrase as applying to a wider geographical area. Here Nineveh is said to designate a larger district than just the walled city itself, referred to as the 'Assyrian triangle', stretching from Dur-Sharrukin in the north to Calah in the south, between the rivers Tigris, Zabû and Ghazir. While this explanation solves the problem of the three days' journey, the facts that Nineveh is referred to as a city, and that Jonah is said to have sat outside of it (4:5) are still problematic. Alexander solves the problem by pointing to a reference in Genesis (10:11-12) to 'the great city', which, it is noted, includes Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah, and Resen (1988:57-58). For this view he draws on the

support of Keil (1864). Thus, in modern terms, the great city of Nineveh could well be referred to as Greater Nineveh.

ii) The population of Nineveh. The phrase 'more than a hundred and twenty thousand' in 4:11 is taken by many scholars to be a gross exaggeration of Nineveh's probable population. Wiseman (1979) explains the phrase as referring to the 'greater' Nineveh of Genesis 10. He estimates the population of Calah to be eighteen thousand. Assuming that, in Jonah, Nineveh means 'Greater Nineveh', Alexander thinks that a hundred and twenty thousand would be 'quite appropriate' as an estimation for the population of Nineveh (1988:59).

iii) The king of Nineveh. The term 'king of Nineveh', if referring to the eighth century Assyrian ruler, is believed to be legendary since it does not appear in Mesopotamian documents so far discovered, and in any event, the Assyrian king would normally be referred to as the 'king of Assyria'. Allen thinks that the use of the former designation 'betrays a remoteness from historical actuality' (1976:186). Alexander points out that, outside of Jonah, the term 'king of Nineveh' does not occur anywhere in the Old Testament, and that when the ruler of the fallen Assyrian Empire is referred to, 'king of Assyria' is used (2 Kgs 18-20; Is 37:37). Assuming a postexilic composition for Jonah, Alexander finds it strange that the author would take his prophet from the book of Kings but 'did not likewise draw upon this same work for information concerning the Assyrians' (1988:60). Ferguson has argued more recently, based on an 'intriguing body of evidence', that the title 'king of Nineveh' was deliberately chosen by the author instead of the more usual 'king of Assyria' quite simply because he was referring to the governor of the province of Nineveh and not to the head of the entire nation (1996:313).

Alexander's alternative to this view is that the designation 'king of Nineveh' is used because that is precisely what is meant -- the Assyrian Empire had not yet reached its zenith, and exercised control over a limited area only, centred in Nineveh. Since it was 'only towards the end of the eighth century BC that the Assyrian empire re-emerged as a major world power' the title 'king of Assyria' may accurately have reflected the current political situation (1988:60).

iv) Late customs. It is further argued that certain customs typical of the Persian period are recorded in Jonah, adding weight to the view of its postexilic composition. These are: 1) the decree which is given out by the king and his nobles (3:7); and 2) the



wearing of sack cloth by animals as a sign of mourning (3:8). In reply to the first assertion, Alexander appeals to an alternative view (Lawrence 1986:121-132) which suggests that the political situation of the eighth century BCE allowed for the joint issuing of decrees by the monarch and his nobility (1988:60-61).

### 3.1.2.2 Unity of composition

Since the late eighteenth century, the view that the Jonah psalm (2:2-9) was not part of the original composition of the book, but was inserted at a later date by someone other than the author, has had a place in critical studies of Jonah. This view is held mainly because of supposed incongruities between the psalm and the prose section of the book. No self-respecting author would compose a disjointed work, it is argued, and so the psalm must have been added without his knowledge at a later date (Alexander 1988:64). Alexander notes that during the last twenty years (since 1968) there has been a resurgence of writers who have argued for the book's overall unity. Alexander affirms that the question of unity is closely related to those of authorship and date, and although he does argue for a unified Jonah, this is not used directly either in the development of his early date proposal, or in the formulation of the purpose of the book. It would seem, therefore, that he assumes a single author would support the view of an early date.

*a) Arguments for a late psalm considered.* The arguments for the psalm as a later insertion are outlined by Alexander in five points (1988:64-65). First, because the psalm in general is one of thanksgiving, and this is hardly an appropriate response after being swallowed by a great fish, the psalm doesn't fit the context of the book, and therefore must have been added later. Second, Jonah's character in the psalm contrasts with that elsewhere in the book. In the psalm he gratefully praises God, but further along in the story, he is portrayed as 'rebellious, sullen and unappreciative'. Also, while he does not seem to be concerned about staying alive in 1:12, 'his words in 2:2 reveal tremendous anxiety in the face of imminent death'. Third, sentiments in the psalm are at variance with statements in the prose narrative. Was it the sailors (1:15) who were responsible for throwing Jonah overboard or Yahweh (2:3)? Does Jonah flee of his own accord (1:3) or did God banish him (2:4)? The psalm expresses derogatory remarks concerning pagans (2:8), while the sailors and Ninevites are viewed favourably in chapters 1 and 3. Fourth, linguistic discrepancies between the psalm and the rest of the book cannot be accounted for by distinguishing between poetry and prose alone. The term used for 'throw' in 2:3 is different from that used in 1:12, 15. In 2:3 the plural form for 'sea' is used, but in chapter 1 it is the singular. In addition to this,

certain words common in the prose section are completely absent from the poem, for example 'although "great" comes fourteen times in the prose narrative, it never occurs in the psalm.' Similarly, 'evil' occurs seven times in the prose, but never in the poem. Fifth, studies in the literary structure of Jonah have argued that the original structure of the book is restored when the psalm is excised. Alexander cites the two examples of Lohfink (1962) and Tribble (1963).

b) *Arguments for a unified composition.* Alexander provides the following counter-arguments in support of a unified book. First, against the commonly held idea that the psalm does not fit the context of the narrative (Jonah is thankful when he should be in distress), Alexander explains that Jonah is in fact showing gratitude for not having drowned. He finds this view in Allen (1976), Walsh (1982) and Christensen (1985). Second, in contrast with the view that Jonah's character here is incompatible with his character in the rest of the book, Alexander states that it is Jonah's gratitude to Yahweh which sends him to Nineveh in chapter 3. Third, in answer to the claim that many contradictions exist between the psalm and the rest of the book, Alexander merely draws attention to agreements between the psalm and the rest of the book. These are God's sovereignty in 2:3 and 1:15; Jonah's banishment in 2:4 and 1:3; and the theme of idolaters in 2:8. This, of course, speaks for the unity of composition. Fourth, in response to the claim that there are also linguistic discrepancies between the poetry and prose sections, Alexander observes that:

- \* traditional cultic language could account for differences between the poetry and prose (cf Johnson 1946)
- \* the psalm and narrative may have been composed by different individuals, but this does not mean the psalm is a later insertion.
- \* the 'going down' theme is mentioned throughout chapter 2.

Finally, on a more positive note, Alexander argues for the overall unity of Jonah on the grounds that the structure would be broken if the psalm was excised. 'The weight of evidence favours the retention of 2:2-9 as part of the author's original draft. It is an essential element in the plot of the book, providing a very necessary bridge between the events of chapters 1 and 3' (1988:69).



### 3.1.2.3 The genre of Jonah

Probably the most perplexing question concerning the interpretation of the book of Jonah is its classification as a specific type of biblical literature. Many authors have drawn attention to its unique character, a canonical prophetic work, but containing a single prophetic oracle, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' (3:4). The remainder of the book is a narrative which emanates around this oracle. Attempts to classify Jonah as a specific type of biblical literature have been numerous and have shown little unanimity. Almost in sympathy with the allegation made by C S Lewis that biblical scholars 'lack literary judgment' when it comes to recognising the literary genre of biblical books, Alexander provides a long list of proposals for the book's genre showing little agreement. These are: history, allegory, midrash, parable, prophetic parable, legend, prophetic legend, novella, satire, didactic fiction, satirical didactic short story (Alexander 1985:37).

Nevertheless, it remains a worthwhile exercise for Alexander to 'correctly' decipher the genre to which Jonah belongs, for 'If we are to grasp correctly what the author sought to communicate, we must identify the literary category to which his work belongs'. This concern with the book's 'correct' classification is an important interpretive one for Alexander, as without it, the book cannot be 'correctly' understood. Therefore, the question of genre hinges on his understanding of authorial intention. The question is not as much 'What kind of literature did the author of Jonah write?' but rather 'What kind of literature did the author *intend* to write?' (1985:40-42; 1988:69). In the analysis of the proposed genre classifications, Alexander, in keeping with his own agenda, reduces the available options to two general categories: fiction and history.

a) *Arguments against Jonah as fiction.* Since Alexander thinks that terms like parable, legend, and novella are 'deliberately chosen because they designate non-historical writings', and that differences between these genres are relatively minor, he is content merely to merge them all under the rubric of fiction (1988:71). This would seem to be necessary quite simply because Alexander wants to show that Jonah is a work of history. There is little point in entertaining the interpretive values of the various proposals for the genre of Jonah if it can be demonstrated with a reasonable amount of certainty that the author did not intend his work to be read as fiction. Alexander responds to a number of concerns raised by scholars in support of the fictional nature of Jonah. These are: the historical improbability of certain events; the frequent use of hyperbole; the book's obvious symmetrical structure; and the didactic nature of the story.

i) Historical improbability. To the modern reader, certain events recorded in Jonah are historically improbable. These are: the great fish rescuing Jonah; the repentance of the entire city; and the swift growth and destruction of the plant. But Alexander is concerned with what the author intended to communicate, and not so much with modern perceptions of what is unlikely to have happened. 'Although he may have thought them extremely unusual, he need not necessarily have dismissed them as completely improbable' (1988:72). So committed is Alexander to the author's intention, that he even leaves the door open for the possibility that should it be 'clearly demonstrated' that some of the miraculous events did not take place, it would not necessarily 'indicate that the author of Jonah did not view them as historical' (1988:72). (One would need to show that the author did in fact view the events as historical, which is something Alexander does attempt later).

Interestingly, Alexander does not employ arguments to discount theories which do not accommodate a historical understanding of the miraculous events of Jonah. Typically, interpreters who view Jonah as a historical account, are more inclined to insist that everything took place exactly as recorded (Stek 1969:23; Eybers 1971:215; Hasel 1976:104; Stuart 1987:440).

ii) Hyperbole. Because of the way in which the author of Jonah portrays everything in a 'larger than life' fashion, it has often been concluded that he does not intend his work to be read as a historical account (Alexander 1988:73). The adjective גדול 'great' is used frequently (14 times in all), to describe the city of Nineveh, the wind, the tempest, the sailors' fear, the fish, Jonah's displeasure and his well-being.

According to Alexander, 'a careful analysis of the text suggests that events are not exaggerated but rather reflect accurately the situation described.' He states matter-of-factly that if the fish is described as 'big' it is only because a big fish is required to swallow a man. So, if the events are taken literally, there is no hyperbole (1988:73).

iii) Symmetrical structure. According to many, the obvious structure and symmetry of Jonah reveals that the book is intended to be a work of fiction and not a literal account of historical events. Alexander cites Fretheim as saying that a heightened concern for structure and symmetry 'is more suggestive of an imaginative product' than 'straightforward historical writing' (Fretheim 1977:66).



However, Alexander does not agree that the use of literary structures diminishes the historical quality of Jonah. The two issues of literary style and content should not be confused. 'The fact that the author of Jonah employs particular literary devices tells us more about his skill as an author than about the historicity or non-historicity of his account' (1988:73). This is also the view of Stuart (1987:440), who does not agree that sensational story-telling is restricted to fiction.

iv) Didactic nature. The didactic nature of Jonah is widely accepted by scholars, including those who view the book as historical. That the author of Jonah intended to teach something is a feature of the work which, for many interpreters, is yet further evidence that the book cannot be a work of history. According to Alexander, the creation of this 'quite unnecessary' distinction between historical and didactic works is unwarranted. It could be both historical and didactic. What would be gained by having a didactic work which was also historical? For Alexander the 'very reality of these events . . . adds significance to the teaching of the book' (1988:74). This sentiment also appears in Stuart, who holds that 'the audience's existential identification with the characters and circumstances is invariably heightened' if the events are viewed as historical (Stuart 1987:440).

After briefly examining these four arguments for the fictional character of Jonah, Alexander concludes: 'In spite of their popular appeal, these arguments . . . are not as decisive as they may at first appear' (1988:74).

b) *Arguments in support of Jonah as history.* In the face of overwhelming scholarly consensus for the non-historical view of Jonah, to argue for the historical view would need at least one or two compelling reasons. Alexander names other writers who have accepted the historicity of Jonah. They are Aalders (1958), Trépanier (1951), Sutcliffe (1953), and Robinson (1970). To this list could be added Archer (1974), Young (1985), Stuart (1987), Hasel (1976), Stek (1969), Eybers (1971), and Harrison (1969). (The last two mentioned authors are undecided as to whether Jonah is history or parable). Because reputable scholars still (in 1962) champion the view that Jonah 'is a record of historical facts', Burrows finds it necessary to offer a rebuttal (1970:80). Twenty four years down the road, Salters is surprised that an author can be found defending the historicity of Jonah as late as 1985 (1994:41). How exactly does Alexander argue for the historicity of Jonah?

i) Traditional understanding. Since the fictional view of Jonah is a 'relatively recent development' (last one hundred years or so), it is significant to Alexander that 'such unanimity existed for so long. He readily admits that 'traditional positions are not necessarily correct' (1988:74), but finds it hard to accept that earlier generations of scholars and writers could be 'blind' to features we now see clearly, since they lived and studied in an environment 'much closer to that of the author than we do' (1985:58).

Alexander cites Josephus as supporting the historicity of Jonah by incorporating it in his *Antiquities*: 'But, since I have promised to give an exact account of our history, I have thought it necessary to recount what I have found written in the Hebrew books concerning this prophet' (Alexander 1988:75). It should be noted, however, that Josephus includes the story almost reluctantly.

ii) Historical introduction. The identification of Jonah with the North Israelite prophet of the same name is accepted by almost all Old Testament scholars. The significance of this identification is viewed differently, however. Some who hold to the fictional nature of the book see the reference as little more than providing the story with a historical setting; while others may see nothing of any real consequence (Eissfeldt 1974:405). Alexander is not one of these. If the events in Jonah were not meant to be viewed historically, then why make a clear identification of the story's character with the historical Jonah in 1 Kings 14:25? 'Is it not strange that having invented the entire plot the author did not likewise invent his central character?' (1988:75). This 'initial generic signal', according to Alexander, influences the reader to 'instinctively place[s] these events within a particular historic framework . . . . Thus details not supplied by the author must be provided consciously, or subconsciously, by the reader' (1985:56).

Similarly, the introductory formula, 'Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, . . ."' has a familiar ring: 'Then the word of the Lord came to him [Elijah], "Arise, go to Zarephath, . . ."' (1 Kgs 17:8-9). The prophetic formula also functions as a 'generic signal' compelling Alexander to read Jonah as a historical book (1988:75). 'To anyone familiar with Hebrew narrative, such an introduction must surely have suggested that what followed was intended by the author to be treated as fact' (1988:76).



### 3.1.3 Concluding remarks

How does Alexander understand the purpose of the book of Jonah? It is to answer the question possibly raised by God's people after the destruction of Samaria in 721 BCE by the Assyrians. Confronted with the harsh reality that the covenant God of Israel used a bitter enemy, Assyria, as a tool of punishment against them, is almost too much for eighth century BCE Israelites to bear. 'Was this actually part of his sovereign will? Did Israel really deserve such harsh treatment?' (1988:90) The author presents a theodicy, whereby God is shown to be more merciful and forgiving than Israel had imagined.

It was noted above that in order to sustain this conclusion of the book's message or purpose, Alexander needed to show the following:

- \* an eighth century BCE date of composition;
- \* the book has a historical (and not legendary) view of the great city of Nineveh;
- \* that the book was intended by its author to be a historical (and not a fictitious) account; and
- \* that Jonah knew about the destruction of Samaria by Nineveh in advance.

The feature most important for Alexander's interpretation is that it assumes an early date of composition. In spite of the difficulties in dating Jonah, an eighth century BCE date is thought to be not only possible but also probable. How does Alexander argue for an early date of composition?

First, he examines the linguistic arguments put forward by scholars favouring an exilic or postexilic date for the composition of Jonah. He initially establishes the possibility of a preexilic date by following the proposal of Landes, who tentatively dates the book in the sixth century BCE. Second, he then casts doubt on the validity of three of Landes' conclusions, thus leaving the door open for a date of composition earlier than the sixth century BCE (1988:62). Finally, without any support, but undoubtedly to reinforce his own view, Alexander mentions the possibility that Jonah is a North Israelite composition, thus requiring an eighth century BCE date.

This supposition allows Alexander to identify a nationalistic audience who lived during the time of the Assyrian expansion. That this is important to Alexander is borne out by the lengthy excursus he provides on eighth century Assyria. Nineveh is said to be

described in accurate historical and not legendary terms. Alexander provides plausible literal alternatives to each point raised by the legendary view.

Alexander treats the book of Jonah as an accurate historical account. His literal explanations of the size of Nineveh, its population, and the designation 'king of Nineveh' characterise this position. The historical nature of Jonah is important in order for Alexander to argue for an early date. If the book was composed shortly after the fall of Samaria in 721 BCE, there would hardly have been enough time for a legendary view of the city of Nineveh to have developed. So the early date and the historicity of Jonah go hand in hand.

It was noted that Alexander does not capitalise on the argument that authors who question the historical probability of certain events in Jonah are, *a priori*, biased against the supernatural. Alexander, while not actually denying the miraculous, allows the 'possibility that author was mistaken in thinking that certain events actually occurred'. But, he argues, provided the author viewed the events as historical, and intended the book to be read that way, this alone determines the nature of the work' (1985:46). Alexander also refrains from using the argument that since the events in the book of Jonah were regarded as historical by Jesus, they must be factual (Mt 12:41; Lk 11:30) (Young 1985:262; Archer 1974:320). He does however raise two points to argue positively for the view that Jonah is history and not fiction. The first is the precedent set in antiquity; and the second the introductory formula in 1:1.

Because the historicity of Jonah has been the traditional position, it has a certain weight which modern interpretations do not have. (Here he makes the suggestion that modern interpreters may be biased against the supernatural.) Yet, the single ancient authority which he cites, Josephus, is more likely than not including Jonah in his history of the Jews reluctantly. In any event, to argue for the historicity of Jonah simply because early writers were convinced of it seems like a 'simplistic appeal to authority' (Carson 1984:125). Their views should be properly evaluated and not accepted merely because they happened to 'live and study in an environment much closer to that of the author of Jonah than we do'.

Second, Alexander argues that because the author of Jonah provided a recognizable historical setting (2 Kgs 14:25) for his story, he *intended* the events which he recorded to be viewed as historical. Also, the style of introduction is similar to that in other historical works -- here he cites the opening of the Elijah cycle in 1 Kings 17:8-9. But this



begs the question. A history-like story would need to begin in a similar way to a historical narrative. Furthermore, the introductory formula of Jonah is also similar to that of other prophetic books. These factors alone do not present a strong argument in support of the historicity of Jonah. That the weight of modern scholarship leans heavily towards a classification of Jonah as some form of fiction with a lesson to teach is acknowledged by Alexander in his final conclusion that Jonah is 'didactic history' (1988:77).

It seems that there is an underlying supposition which makes it important for Alexander to hold onto the historicity of Jonah. The prior commitment to the view that the Bible is Scripture because it is the Word of God, is a position which takes biblical content to be a factual record of events. Biblical truth has to do with historical veracity (Salters 1994).

### 3.2 A Sacramental interpretation

The primary source of this investigation into the basis of authority for a sacramental interpretation is the English translation of Hans Walter Wolff's commentary on Jonah (1986). The German original appeared in 1977 in the *Biblischer Kommentar* series together with the author's commentary on Obadiah. Wolff states in his Preface that the message of Jonah is to be found in the literary forms of the book, and not in its form as a historical account. Thus his attempt to expound this message employs an inductive approach 'so as to discern from the text itself its literary genre, and what the text wants to tell us' (1986:12). The introductory sections of the commentary deal with the normal issues of introduction science: the canonicity of Jonah; the date of composition; the unity of the book; the literary genre; the purpose. The section concludes with a comprehensive list of literature on Jonah. The commentary section consists of five sections corresponding to Wolff's division of the novella into five scenes. Reference will also be made to an earlier series of four articles published in *Currents in Theology and Mission* (Wolff 1976a; 1976b; 1976c; and 1976d).

#### 3.2.1 The purpose of Jonah

The terms employed by Wolff to describe the theological import of Jonah are the *narrator's guiding concern* and *purpose*. At the end of each major division of the commentary there are brief sections headed 'Purpose' which give Wolff's ideas of how the narrator has achieved his purpose through the narration. Also provided is a reflection on how the theology of the book may be relevant to Christians living in today's world. In the series of articles by Wolff attention is given to this aspect of interpretation rather than to exegetical or critical concerns.

According to Wolff, the story of Jonah is a novella which makes Jonah a caricature of a typical Hebrew living in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period. This particular generation of Hebrews, although religiously devout, would be experiencing a crisis of faith brought about by a contradiction in the traditions of Israel. 'Its underlying assumption is that there are men and women who are no longer able to understand Yahweh's forbearance with the great heathen powers to which Israel had been a prey for centuries' (1976:85). On the one hand, Yahweh's mercy and forgiveness knows no limit, and on the other, Yahweh's definite and unconditional threats of judgment upon Israel's enemies have still to materialize.



The narrative is intended to speak beyond the world of the text into other worlds. The absence of historical detail in the story gives the entire message a generic form which transcends not only Jonah's but any historical situation. This is brought about through an allegorical interpretation of the significance of the narrator's choice of Jonah and Nineveh. To illustrate this method of interpretation, two quotations are given.

Jonah is presented as a person faced with the divine claim; Nineveh is shown as pattern example of the great and wicked world; and Tarshish is the place that symbolizes remoteness from God. Since all historical details are lacking, and since Nineveh and Tarshish will have been as familiar to the story's first readers as Moscow and New York to readers today, we may deduce that--by permitting no more detachment than is offered by a mirror held in front of one's own face--the narrator is throwing down a challenge to the vacillating faith of particular devout groups.

(Wolff 1976:103)

Through Jonah, our narrator addresses the whole of his Israel; and in the same way the Christian church should look at itself in the mirror of this grotesque third scene. Very many groups within the church deserve no more than to be devoured and spat out; and yet that church must not forget the playful triumph of her God who, in spite of all, still makes her serviceable and ready to set out at long last on the way to Nineveh.

(Wolff 1976:142)

### **3.2.2 The method of interpretation**

The message of Jonah is to be found in the literary form of the book and not its historical form. This forms the backbone to Wolff's interpretation of Jonah. Although the commentary does contain discussions on critical-historical questions, the results of these analyses are not fully integrated by Wolff in his formulation of the book's message. This is to say, even though Wolff makes an attempt to date the composition of Jonah, he makes no further attempt using this 'date' to identify either the author or the original audience. He also discusses at length the question of the authenticity of the psalm in chapter two, but takes the view that the canonical form is authoritative. The single most important aspect of the text remains its narrative quality.

### 3.2.2.1 Preliminary concerns

A brief summary will be provided of the first three parts of Wolff's Introductory section, namely the discussions on the canonicity of the book; the date of composition; and the book's literary growth. Attention will be focused on the issues of the narrative quality of Jonah, and the narrator's guiding concern or purpose.

a) *The book of Jonah in the canon.* Since so many scholars have drawn attention to the uniqueness of Jonah in relation to the other canonical prophets, what explanation can be given to account for its inclusion in the book of the Twelve? At the beginning of the second century BCE, the book of the Twelve is mentioned in Sirach, which indicates that by that time (at least) 'independent accounts of the lives of prophets had long come to seem just as worthy of transmission as the prophetic proclamation itself' (Wolff 1986:75). As additional examples Wolff cites the narrative sections in Isaiah 36-39 and Jeremiah 37-43.

b) *The date of composition.* Wolff argues against an early date of composition on the grounds that 1) the author of Jonah makes use of a vocabulary typical of the latest Old Testament writings (Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, and Daniel); 2) the story is far removed from historical reality; and 3) the author's use of certain thematic references places the book towards the beginning of the fourth century or later (1986:76-78).

First, of the words which occur only in Jonah that are often regarded as Aramaisms, Wolff points out that, in at least some cases, their use in Jonah could be attributed to the uniqueness of the situation described and therefore do not have much weight in dating the book of Jonah. But he does conclude that the use of certain 'characteristic expressions', that is, words which do not occur elsewhere in Old Testament Hebrew, but are found repeatedly in late biblical and non-biblical Aramaic texts, are indicative of the *late* postexilic period (1986:76).

Second, the author's 'uninhibited juggling' of historical facts suggests that historical accuracy is not a primary concern. For example, in 2 Kings 14, Jonah prophecies to eighth century Jereboam II, but in Jonah, his message is addressed to the inhabitants of Nineveh, significant to Israel's history only a century later. Also, Nineveh is viewed as a city-state, and not as the capital of the Assyrian empire. Other historical and geographical details are skipped over which, according to Wolff, is possible 'only if the main characters have become buried in the dust of the past' (1986:77).



Finally, Wolff appeals to certain thematic references in the book as a means of dating the work more precisely. The similarities between Jonah and the Elijah narratives in 1 Kings, namely Elijah's flight, his dialogue with God, and his death wish, raises the possibility that Jonah's author may have been influenced by the Elijah narratives. The author's familiarity with the phraseology and concepts of a 'theology of repentance' reminiscent of Jeremiah 18, is also more in keeping with the postexilic period. A 'clear milestone' towards a closer date for Jonah is the dependence of Jonah upon Joel seen in the 'merciful withdrawal' of Yahweh's judgment (1986:77). According to Wolff, the use of the divine attribute of mercy in Jonah shows a development from that in Joel as it is applied to a Gentile city, and not Israel. Based on his study of Joel, Wolff is unable to assign a date earlier than the middle of the fourth century BCE, and in consideration of the author's use of non-biblical sea motifs, he narrows the date of composition down to the end of the fourth century BCE. A 'date in the early Hellenistic period is slightly more probable than one in the late Persian era' (1986:78).

c) *Literary growth.* On the question of the unity of Jonah, three issues are discussed by Wolff; 1) the originality of the psalm (2:1-9); 2) the change in the divine name in 4:1-11; and 3) the repetition in 3:1 of the wording of 1:1.

Scholars are divided on the issue of the originality of the psalm in Jonah. Did it form part of the original composition, or did it exist independently of the composition, to be grafted in by the original author or by a redactor at a later time? As just one example, Christensen (1987) takes the view that the psalm was an 'integral part of the structural design of the book'. On the other hand, Walsh (1982) attempts a rhetorical critical study of the psalm on the assumption that it once stood as an independent literary unit. Wolff approaches the problem by posing three important questions. 'How is the language of the psalm related to the language of the narrative?'; 'How do the situation and main themes presupposed in the psalm relate to the immediate and wider context?'; and 'How does the portrait of Jonah given in the psalm fit in with the picture we gain from the prose narrative as a whole?'

In comparing the psalm with Jonah's prayers in the prose section of the book (1:14; 4:2-3), Wolff observes that while the prayers are genuine prayers of lament and fit the events of the story, repeating words occurring in the context, the psalm, on the other hand, is not directed to God, uses different words, and makes no mention of the preceding events (1986:129). Second, given that the psalm is a song of thanksgiving



after deliverance, and is therefore typical of a temple psalm in which Yahweh is both spoken to and spoken about, Wolff argues that the psalm is an inappropriate one for the context in Jonah (1986:129). He concludes that the psalm is more in keeping with the temple than the belly of a sea creature. Following von Rad, Wolff is not convinced that the repentant Jonah portrayed in the psalm is the same 'mulish Jonah, who afterwards behaves in an even more incredible way than he did before' (1986:130). For Wolff, the Jonah in the psalm is a later, wiser character, having learned a bitter lesson at his own expense. 'It presents the reader with a Jonah who has repented in the most exemplary way -- a Jonah we do not as yet find at the end of the ancient prose narrative' (1986:79).

The change in the use of divine names (Yahweh to God) in chapter four has been thought by some to be evidence of editorial activity, the conclusion being that the scene with the castor oil plant was an independent fragment interpolated into the story. Wolff is more willing to view 4:1-11 as a unified literary fragment which has been made up of other smaller fragments, but its inclusion in the Jonah narrative, although obvious, is seamless (1986:79). Similarly, the contention that the book consists of two incongruous halves simply because of the repetition in 3:1 of 1:1 is rejected by Wolff (1986:79). The differences in the two halves can be attributed to stylistic devices, which contribute towards the appreciation of the narrative character of the book as prose (1986:80).

### 3.2.2.2 Genre identification

The narrative character of Jonah is emphasised by Wolff in his understanding of the author's 'guiding concern' or purpose. Addressing the problem of identifying the correct genre of Jonah, Wolff admits of its difficulty which, he believes is due mainly to the disparate character of the materials in the book. 'Here we find learned theology side by side with original experiences, sacred texts beside dramatic stories, contemporary material flanked by the fabric of tradition' (1986:80). As has been pointed out numerous times in the literature, Jonah is not actually about prophecy, but about a prophet named Jonah. In fact, Wolff points out that, in the book named after him, Jonah is not even called a prophet (1976b:9).

More significantly though, the reader is not provided with biographical or historical information about Jonah or the times in which he lived. The book does not attempt to 'drag us into the thicket of questions relating to what was supposed to have taken place in the dim past' (Wolff 1976b:9). It is to be regarded as a work of literary art (Wolff 1986:81). Burrows describes Jonah as a 'work of consummate artistry, told with a



restraint and economy of language characteristic of the best biblical narratives' (1970:87).

Turning now to a description of the kind of literary art Jonah is, Wolff considers three categories -- legend, midrash, and novella (cf Alexander, 1985, who lists no less than eleven). That Jonah is described as a legend at all is partly due to its points of contact with the Elijah narratives in Kings (cf Eissfeldt 1974:405). Wolff is unsatisfied with this label, since Jonah is not portrayed as a hero to be emulated, which would be the case in a legend, but rather as some form of comic hero. More importantly though, the book of Jonah does not purport to tell the story of Jonah, but tells of 'Yahweh's dealings with Jonah' (1986:81). The book of Jonah has been described as a midrash on 2 Kings 14:25. The term 'midrash', which occurs in the MT of 2 Chronicles 13:22 and 24:27, refers to the annals or records of Abijah and Joash. In the postexilic period the term came to designate a rabbinic commentary on a scriptural passage (Miller 1976:594). Wolff agrees that Jonah could be viewed as a midrash on 2 Kings 14:25 and Jeremiah 18:8, but to do so would 'lose sight of the story's specific artistic form' (1986:81).

The most appropriate genre to take in the 'warp and woof of narrative and dialog' in Jonah is thought to be the novella. Wolff gives a definition of novella, the terms of which he finds have an exact correspondence with the story of Jonah.

'A limited sequence of events is brought to a conclusion in the light of an opening incident. The progress of these events is by no means straightforward, but is crossed through by surprises. The tension that spans the story from beginning to end is preserved in its most concentrated form in what is unexpected. Every sentence has its place in the main happening. The sequence of scenes does not strictly follow the temporal sequence, as it does in a drama; the tension of the impending goal can carry an individual scene so far forward that the scene that follows has to cast back in time . . . . And, like the leap in time (1:5b; 4:5), a change of place (1:3; 2:10) is also entirely possible within a scene in a novella. The essential point is that the main group of actors remains unchanged. All the individual scenes, from the opening onwards, are directed towards the conclusion of the limited series of events.'

(Wolff 1986:82).

The book of Jonah, if rightly classified as a novella, 'is one of its earliest examples in the literature of the world' (Wolff 1976:82). Lewis's warning (1996:280) that biblical scholars do not know literature well enough to be able to determine the genres of biblical books with certainty, seems appropriate in many cases. The wide variety of suggestions would seem to support his assertion. Having no other early literature of this genre with which to compare Jonah, Wolff depends on his ability to detect characteristics of the novella in Jonah.

The narrative is divided by Wolff into five scenes (or acts, Wolff 1976) which each make a unique contribution to the build-up of the narrator's concern.

*Scene one (1:1-3)*. Jonah's relationship with Nineveh is introduced as the primary theme of the story. But in this scene, the focus is on the tension that has developed between Jonah and Yahweh.

*Scene two (1:4-16)*. Jonah attempts to thwart Yahweh's will, only to fail and, as a result, to bring the heathen sailors to faith in his God. A contrast is established between the eagerness of the heathen sailors to live and Jonah's resignation to a watery grave.

*Scene three (2:1-3:3a)*. Jonah is again alone with Yahweh, who sends him out once more on his mission to Nineveh. In the fish's belly, Jonah is preserved by Yahweh, who manipulates his creatures in order to achieve his purpose.

*Scene four (3:3b-10)*. Jonah delivers Yahweh's message of impending doom to Nineveh, only to find that their repentance leads to Yahweh's forgiveness and mercy. Again, the heathen give Yahweh no trouble at all, unlike Jonah who responds in anger, and Yahweh is provoked to confront him.

*Scene five (4:1-11)*. The closing scene in the novella is where Jonah is expected to affirm Yahweh's work among the heathen, but the narrative leaves the question unanswered. Jonah's anger is due to his inability to come to terms with the covenant God's display of compassion towards the enemies of Israel. Since he cannot go on serving Yahweh, he must die.

Of importance for Wolff's understanding of a novella is that all the details in the story point towards the conclusion which, in Jonah's case, is never actually reached. The question that is asked in scene one waits until the final scene for an answer. Throughout



the story, human response to Yahweh's activity is reported immediately. The reader is therefore conditioned to expect a similar reaction to the final question (1986:83). This leads Wolff to further classify the genre of Jonah as didactic literature. Doctrinal statements concerning faith in Yahweh, the God of heaven, sea and land, and Yahweh's merciful withdrawal of intended punishment have already shaped the story thus far. But the 'final open question shows the *didactic* character of the work even more forcibly than the questions scattered throughout the rest of the text' (1986:83). Stuart, who views Jonah as a historical narrative, comments that although all biblical narratives are didactic to some degree, the author of Jonah has heightened the didactic component of the narrative through selectivity and minor chronological rearrangement (1987:435).

This didacticism is not overtly introduced into the story, but finds its way in through comedy. Evidence is found of satire (scenes one and two), the grotesque (scenes three and four), and irony (scene five). Burrows, while acknowledging Wolff's recognition of the book's satirical nature, does not think that Wolff's classification of the book as a novella goes far enough (1970:91, commenting on an earlier work, 'Ist die Bibel Gotteswort oder Menschenwort?', 1959; cf Holbert 1981:59 and Ackerman 1981, 1987). That Jonah is 'everywhere made to appear ridiculous' and narrated events are 'wildly fantastic' gives Burrows the clue that the work is to be classified as a satire (1970:94). It is Jonah's 'self-centered, arrogant attitude' towards Yahweh's universal compassion that is the object of the satirization (Burrows 1970:102). The book of Jonah cannot simply be described as a novella, since it does not accord well with the definition that even Wolff supplies. There is a strong didactic element as well as the obvious satire. He therefore resorts to the rather awkward periphrasis 'ironically didactic novella' (Wolff 1986:84-85; cf Fretheim 1977, 'a satirical didactic short story'; and West 1984, 'a short story characterized by irony').

One of the significant features of Wolff's interpretation of Jonah is the allegorical element which he uses to centre his argument of the narrator's literary purpose (1986:85). This is not to say that Wolff *allegorizes* the book as a means of interpretation, but that the book has a certain symbolism which he has seen allegorically. Jonah is said to represent Israel, and Nineveh is the archetype of 'the great city' (1986:99). Another feature of Wolff's view is the Wisdom element that he detects, seen in the way the narrator deals 'playfully' with his creatures (1986:132).

### 3.2.2.3 Analysis

In his commentary, Wolff's comments on each of the scenes are structured so that it is easy to access the required information. Beginning with a bibliography of relevant literature for each section, Wolff provides a translation of the text; a set of text-critical notes; and then discussions of the form and setting of the scene; followed by the commentary, and a final section where an attempt is made to draw out the author's purpose. Here Wolff also suggests ways that the text could have significance for the modern church.

a) *Scene one: The strain of disobedience.* The problem which forms the backbone of the entire story is presented in the opening scene in narrative form. Immediately, there is a relationship set up 'between Jonah and Nineveh, and also between Jonah and Yahweh. What will the outcome be of Jonah disobeying Yahweh's instruction to go to Nineveh?' Wolff believes that in these first three verses of the narrative, there is already evidence of the particular genre of the book. 'The introduction of different arenas for the action, together with different groups of actors, certainly makes the reader expect several scenes' (1986:96). The scenes are expected to focus on the tension created by Jonah's disobedience. Because Yahweh's command is furnished with a justification, and Jonah's action is explained, Wolff detects a theological or didactic overtone to the scene, which is also said to have a comic effect, in view of the ridiculousness of Jonah's hope of escaping the presence of Yahweh (1986:97).

We may well ask why the author chooses Jonah as his protagonist and the inhabitants of Nineveh as his charge. The identification of Jonah as 'Amittai's son' leaves no doubt that he is the Northern Kingdom's 'prophet of salvation' who successfully prophesied the expansion of Israel's borders during the reign of Jereboam II. Since this prophecy took place while Jereboam 'did what was evil in the sight of the LORD', and since eighth century Assyria was 'Israel's chief enemy', the selection of Jonah as the hero of the story becomes intriguing. No other biographical details are given (only enough is provided to make an identification), apparently to allow the story to be told unhindered by presuppositions (Wolff 1986:98). Because Jonah was known as a nationalistic prophet (based on 2 Kings 14), and because no other details concerning him had been recorded in the 'Judean collection of holy books', Allen feels he is the ideal candidate to bear the brunt of an attack on religious nationalism (1976:179).

Nineveh, 'stripped of every historical feature' as it is, functions as the archetype of 'the great city' (Gn 10:11). Although not the capital of Assyria at the time of the historical



Jonah, Nineveh is used as an example of the wickedness of Assyria, a nation 'incomparably more brutal than the empires that followed, evoking terror and abhorrence' (cf Nahum; Wolff 1986:100).

*b) Scene two: The missionary fruits of a flight from God.* The scene changes to a ship on the high seas, and the heathen sailors are introduced. The link with scene one is the intervention by Yahweh, controlling natural events so as to confront Jonah's action of 'fleeing from the presence of the LORD' (1:10) (Wolff 1986:108). The conclusion of the scene (1:15a-16), where the sailors are said to fear Yahweh, corresponds 'precisely' to its opening (1:4-5a), when they were described as afraid, thus completing the action upon Jonah's exit into the sea (1986:108).

Wolff notes that the flow of the narrative does not necessarily reflect the flow of events. For example, we are told only at a later time that Jonah had gone below deck to sleep. The story divides into two streams after Jonah is thrown overboard. The sailors offer a sacrifice to Yahweh, and Jonah ends up in the belly of a large fish. This weaving together of the two strands in this scene and then their separation again is said to give evidence of the author's 'architectural artistry' (1986:109).

Other characteristics of this novella are to be seen in this scene. The barrage of questions addressed to Jonah on board the ship have a 'didactic side', in that the answers provide the theological framework for the novella. Yet even the didactic nature of this is 'clothed in satire'. A 'good-for-nothing sleepyhead' tries to run away from his God, but in a move quite beyond his control, non-Israelites are brought to faith in his God! (Wolff 1986:109).

*c) Scene three: Swallowed and vomited up.* The action now moves to the inside of the large fish, and Jonah is once again alone with his God. Even though Wolff has an extended discussion on the origin of the Jonah psalm, which presents the possibility of two separate literary strata in the narrative, he nonetheless concedes that the canonical form of Jonah has 'independently fused together traditional material that had already taken on more or less fixed shape' (1986:131). This does present certain exegetical problems for Wolff who must admit that the Jonah in the psalm is a 'transformed Jonah' who 'reacts quite differently' from the Jonah in chapter four. More recently, Craig has argued that the insertion of the psalm is 'part and parcel of the author's overall strategy since it creates in the reader a need for more information about the prophet' (1993:77). Wolff, on the other hand, thinks the psalm introduces a legendary element

into the novella, since Jonah becomes a model to be emulated. Previously he was silent, later he will protest against Yahweh's goodness to others, but here he humbly offers thanks for deliverance from danger (1986:141).

Wolff's understanding of the fish motif is that it is based on legendary heroes who survived similar ordeals.

'On the coast people told stories about legendary heroes such as Heracles or Perseus who climbed into the mouth of a sea monster, killed it from within, and then emerged from the slain beast again. The hero of the Jason saga is devoured by a dragon. He frees himself by means of a magic ointment, which makes the beast so sick that it spews Jason out.'

(Wolff 1986:132)

The 'three days and three nights' motif signifies that Jonah was entrapped sufficiently long for it to be a problem. 'After so long a period there is hardly any hope of survival' (Wolff 1986:133). Yahweh is his only hope, and so he 'cries out painfully, drowning in doubt and distress' (Wolff 1976c:88). Jonah's 'about-face', which is viewed by Wolff symbolically, occurs inside the fish's belly, since he goes in head-first and is vomited up again head-first (1976c:88). The tenor of his three-day-and-three-night sojourn is one of repentance. The author is able to link up scene three with the conclusion of scene two because Jonah finally does what the heathen sailors before him do -- offer sacrifice to Yahweh (cf Emmerson 1976:87).

d) *Scene four: Even the cattle repent.* The centre for all events in scene four is the city of Nineveh. Jonah enters the scene and departs shortly after, while the inhabitants of Nineveh respond to the divine message delivered to them. At the close of the scene, attention is focused on Yahweh (Wolff 1986:145).

The didactic concern of the narrator comes to the fore -- Nineveh is devoid of any historical interest. Based on the description in 3:3, Nineveh is said to be given a 'saga-like' character which is not in line with archaeological findings (Wolff 1986:147). 'One can look through the annals of Assyrian kings in vain for any reference to Jonah's prophetic activity' (Wolff 1976c:91). Nineveh is thus portrayed as a great city of the distant past, and the reader is not invited to dig deeper into this past. The king of Nineveh is unnamed, and no mention is made of his period of reign as in Kings and Chronicles. Wolff argues that he is presented as an antitype to Jehoiakim (Jer 36) who



refused to stand up in response to the prophecy of Jeremiah (1986:146). The Jeremiah passage which affirms that Yahweh will withdraw his word of judgment if the people repent of their ways is seen to be fulfilled in Jonah. Thus, the storyteller not only makes use of the Jeremian motif of divine repentance, but also critiques 'life in Jerusalem as it was really lived' (1986:146).

Wolff notes the satirical element in scene four, in which he sees an antithesis to Jerusalem, but he also emphasises the *grotesque* aspect of the humour. This is brought about through exaggeration, namely, the description of the city's size, the extent of the fasting, and the participation of animals in the fast (1986:146). This is to emphasise the totality of Nineveh's repentance and the effect that human decisions have on even dumb animals (Wolff 1976c:92). The Ninevites and their animals understand and speak Hebrew (according to Wolff), which is not too surprising given that Jonah is an 'ironically didactic novella' (Wolff 1986:149).

*e) Scene five: Jonah complains of God's compassion.* Jonah has not been heard of since he proclaimed Yahweh's word of doom in 3:4, and now he reacts angrily because Nineveh has not been overthrown. Wolff's translation of נצ' ('go out') in 4:5 as a pluperfect (Limburg 1993:94, note), gives the understanding that Jonah had already gone out of the city some time before the fifth scene opens in 4:1 (Wolff 1986:159,163,169). This is contrary to the view of other scholars and versions, which has Jonah going out of the city only after he has been confronted by Yahweh for the first time. Although it is a completely new scene, it is related to previous scenes by virtue of its focus on Nineveh (1986:161).

The final scene has to do with Jonah's opposition to the work of God in Nineveh (Wolff 1976d:142). The didacticism of the novella is made evident in the way that Jonah has 'nothing but questions put to him by Yahweh in the dialog sections'. The final question (4:11), unanswered as it is, challenges the reader to become a participant in the dialogue with God. Of course, says Wolff, the answer is obvious in the light of the 'racy satire' in which Yahweh couches his repeated question concerning Jonah's persistent anger (1986:162).

The novella now highlights the question that has been lurking beneath the surface all along. By flashing back to the beginning, when Jonah was still in his 'own country', the narrator reveals why Jonah was reluctant to go to Nineveh in the first place. What was it that 'Jonah knew what Nineveh did not know'? 'You are a gracious God and

merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' (Wolff 1986:166). This Israelite confession of the character of God is offensive to Jonah only as it can now be seen to apply to non-Israelites. Yahweh's prophet is faced with a theological dilemma. Jonah rebels out of despair. 'God does not abide by his word of judgment. On the contrary, through his mercy he puts himself on the side of Israel's merciless enemies' (1986:168).

Jonah's action of sitting down in the shade and waiting to see what would become of the city is in fact a response to Yahweh's question concerning the appropriateness of his anger: 'we shall see if my anger is justifiable or not!' Yahweh joins in the game with the provision of a shade plant 'to save him from his discomfort', which results in Jonah's being 'very happy'. The next day, Yahweh arranges for the plant's destruction, orders a hot desert wind, and Jonah's 'great joy is quickly swallowed up in complete exhaustion (Wolff 1986:171-172). Once again he expresses his wish to die, and the narrator exposes him as self-pitying, revealing the real reason for his initial outburst. Yahweh's next question concerning Jonah's justification for his anger checkmates Jonah, for he is unwilling to condemn himself, nor is he willing to admit to God's freedom to forgive the Ninevites (1986:172). Jonah's pity is ironically defined as 'compassionate grief' for the plant, for Jonah is not really missing the plant, but the comfort it provided.

Yahweh's final question in 4:11 focuses on the unevenness of Jonah's behaviour. 'What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.' The unhappy prophet was not surprised to discover that Yahweh had forgiven the Ninevites; this much he knew while he was still in his own country. But this was not the way Jonah wanted it. To continue serving God would be pointless. Jonah's theology is shown by the narrator to be inflexible and it is this which causes his self-centredness. Yahweh attempts to draw him out of this condition so that he might see the folly of his reasoning (Wolff 1986:176).

### 3.2.3 Concluding remarks

What is the purpose of the book of Jonah? Wolff's argument is that the novella attempts to address a crisis of faith probably existing in a postexilic generation of the people of God. This is brought about by a seeming contradiction in the traditions of Israel concerning the nature of God. The long-awaited fulfillment of his promises to vindicate Israel by exacting retribution on her enemies is in tension with his unlimited mercy and



forgiveness. By allowing the reader a look behind the scene, the narrator deftly shows that the problem does not lie with God, but with Jonah, the Israelite.

It has been noted that Wolff's interpretation hinges on the narrative quality of Jonah. If Alexander gives only a polite nod to this aspect of the book; Wolff appeals to this aspect in a fundamental way. Alexander maximizes the historical elements of the text; Wolff downplays them. Wolff's entire commentary section is structured according to his understanding of the novella as a literary category. The discussions of critical issues have minimal importance, and the conclusions in these discussions are not decisive in determining the purpose of the book. As an example, Wolff concludes that Jonah is a postexilic composition, possibly as late as the beginning of the Hellenistic period. But he makes no attempt to identify a particular historical situation from which the author's purpose can be derived. He limits himself to the form of the text to do this. Yet, by discussing the critical issues, he acknowledges that the text is a part of the history of Israel, and whatever historical features it might have merely witness to this.

The question of author's intention is not addressed directly by Wolff, but it is clear that it is to be found in the genre of the book (1976:86). The didactic element of Jonah, specifically as it is seen in the unanswered question of 4:11, although subtle, is nonetheless intended to be instructive (1976:84). Unlike Alexander, Wolff makes no appeal to extra-biblical sources in his understanding of intentionality; the structure of the text alone is evidence of this.

How is the narrative aspect of Jonah authoritative? According to the sacramental model, biblical content is authoritative because the acts of God are represented by the narrative. But can this hold true for fictional narrative? Which acts of God are being represented in Jonah? (The scholastic position would argue that the acts recorded in Jonah are authoritative). Here it is not the events in the story, but the traditions which give rise to the occasion of the story. Thus, Yahweh is known as a merciful and forgiving God who turns away from his anger (Ex 32; Jer 18); but he is also known as a faithful God who can be depended upon (i.e., according to Wolff). The story of Jonah provides a link with revelation by drawing attention to a problem associated with an inadequate understanding of the infinite God. The open-endedness of the story calls for a response from the reader. Thus the reader is confronted with a reality -- this is what God is really like! The reality is merely represented by the narrative aspect of the story.

The inclusion of comments suggesting the contemporary significance of Jonah indicates the theological concern of Wolff's interpretation. While the other two commentaries analysed in this study may not have had the freedom to do this because of publisher's constraints, that it is done at all by Wolff is significant. The scholastic model presents the facts recorded in Jonah and a suggestion as to how this relates to the theological purpose of the author. The church's faith response is an intellectual assent to these facts. Wolff has shown how the book of Jonah functions authoritatively in the church. The generic nature of the narrative (as understood by Wolff) makes the theology accessible. God's unanswered question in 4:11 becomes everyone's to answer. By faith the word of God is heard in the story of Jonah.



### 3.3 A Modernist interpretation

*Freedom beyond forgiveness: The book of Jonah re-examined* by Thomas Bolin is in many ways a unique book. While not a commentary in the traditional sense, it follows the form of the biblical book much as a commentary would. An introductory chapter reviews and interacts with the history of interpretation of Jonah, functioning as a backdrop for the author's own views. The book is a revision of the author's doctoral dissertation, and is therefore of a high technical standard. In addition to the strong literary and theological quality of the book, there are also substantial philological comments which Bolin marshals in support of his view. Accordingly, the book is directed more to the professional scholar than to either the minister or lay person.

A unique aspect of Bolin's work is that it does not allow for Israelite history and the Bible to mutually support and explain each other. Believing this to be a fallacy, Bolin offers an interpretation of Jonah 'independent of any historical speculation derived from hypothetical reconstructions of Israelite history' (1997:7). As such the book 'questions the interpretive judgments, assumptions and methodologies of much of the modern exegesis of Jonah'. This is a primary principle of the work, which is made clear right from the start. Bolin's treatment of Jonah, therefore, stands in stark contrast to one like Alexander's, which places great emphasis on the history of eighth century Israel in order to interpret the book.

In his first chapter, Bolin provides a useful survey of Jonah interpretation under the headings *Pre-Modern Interpretation of the Book of Jonah* and *Modern Exegesis of Jonah*. Under the first heading, Bolin treats the interpretive traditions of Judaism, early Christianity, and Medieval and Renaissance Christianity. Under the second heading two broad issues are evaluated: the genre and date of the book, and the message and purpose of the book. Bolin himself does not venture any contribution to the discussions of the genre or dating of Jonah, as he believes that there are insufficient historical data and controls whereby these can be determined with any degree of certainty (1997:64). This of course does not deter him from reading Jonah as a post-exilic fictional work of ancient Israel. Under message and purpose, Bolin considers three ideas about the book's purpose: Jonah as anti-exclusivistic; Jonah and prophecy; and Jonah and the divine nature. Arguing against the first two categories, Bolin contends forcefully for a view of Jonah which addresses the question of divine freedom in a unique way. This particular understanding of divine freedom is one which 'is not limited in its exercise to

forgiveness, mercy or tender concern as typically understood by humankind' (1997:63).

'In sum, the book of Jonah is not history; nor, it appears, is it satire, tragedy or any other known genre. It defies dating, comes from no clearly known historical context, is not written for or against any known group or party. It is not a literary code waiting to be cracked, nor a world beckoning to be entered, nor an object of art to be gazed upon whose magic is to work its subversive power on unsuspecting yet appreciative minds. The book is about prophecy, but it is also about the nature of God and repentance. It is the work of a single hand, yet it draws upon that author's literary traditions. The book is a text from the literary strata of ancient Israelite religion, and as such has a point to make and a story to tell about various aspects of that religion, its adherents and their God. To discover these points in this story is the goal of this investigation.'

(Bolin 1997:66-67).

In addition to *Freedom beyond forgiveness*, reference will also be made to an earlier article by Bolin, 'Should I not also pity Nineveh?' (1995), as it pertains to the discussion on the city of Nineveh.

### 3.3.1 The meaning of Jonah

The difference between Bolin's view and others which see divine freedom in the book of Jonah is the *absolute* quality of the freedom for which Bolin argues. The divine attributes of freedom, power and sovereignty are exercised beyond the bounds of human logic. This position, which 'gives common sense a battering' is also argued for by Cooper, who arrives at his conclusion by way of an intertextual analysis (1993:144). Unlike Bolin's, his treatment of intertextuality does not divorce Jonah from 'the grand sequence of sacred history', but places it firmly within the historical context of Israel (Cooper 1993:148, 159). Each of Jonah's four chapters is said to make a distinct contribution to this theme. First, Yahweh is portrayed as the 'all-powerful creator from whom no one may escape'; second, praise is the proper response to a God who is the cause of both distress and salvation; third, God's way of dealing with 'wrongdoing and its recompense' work in an other-worldly way 'impenetrable to human understanding'; and in the final chapter, Yahweh is seen to be a God who does not mind losing a city over which he 'has not bothered himself' (Bolin 1997:183).



Whereas the usual view of divine freedom is that God is free to forgive whomever he chooses (Bolin 1995:109), here God is said to be free to forgive, but also free to destroy the very people whom he has just forgiven for no apparent reason other than that he is able to do so. 'In this theological view lies an affirmation of a God who is not only free to love whom he will, Jew or Gentile, but also perfectly free to change his mind on such matters, even those which concern the fate of 120,000 people and their animals (Bolin 1997:184).

Although Bolin is not in agreement with proposals which focus on either anti-exclusivism or prophecy, he does not exclude these possibilities. Preferring to examine Jonah in the 'light of its use and evaluation of elements of Israelite religion in general,' Bolin's approach touches on these elements as well as others -- Jew and Gentile, good and the wicked, the function of prophecy, and the concepts of justice, punishment, repentance, sacrifice, praise, prayer and divine freedom (1997:65).

The meaning of Jonah is given in terms of authorial intent, said by Bolin to be a primary goal, which 'functions as a methodological control on any conclusions' (1997:64). Part of Bolin's concern is to demonstrate how the author utilized an existing cultural and literary matrix to craft his story. He argues against the practice of interpreting Jonah as dependent on other biblical texts which, he believes, will inevitably lead to a reading of Jonah as a 'counter-cultural tract of its day' (1997:182).

### **3.3.2 The method of interpretation**

What features of the text allow Bolin to read Jonah as a literary work of ancient Israel which presents Yahweh as a God free to forgive and destroy? In the book's preface, the reader is alerted to the author's methodology. Believing the predominant practice of reconstructing the history of Israel in order to interpret Jonah to be flawed, Bolin distances himself from speculative attempts at reconstructing the historical background and suggesting of a date of composition for Jonah. The firm stance he takes on this does not however prevent him from using 'traditional historical-critical' methods instead of newer literary approaches. Bolin allocates considerable space to textual and grammatical analysis, giving particular attention to ancient translations.

Bolin is concerned with analysing 'biblical and extra-biblical traditions, motifs and conventions' which he believes 'provide an interpretive context for the book' (1997:7). Bolin states that 'the key to unlocking the meaning of Jonah' lies in knowing exactly which portions of the biblical text are being referenced by Jonah, either by citation or allusion. Here the work of Magonet (1976:70-73) is cited as an example of this type of source-critical work on Jonah. Bolin does not concern himself with tracing bits and pieces throughout the biblical corpus which the author of Jonah may have referenced. Instead, he examines how the author may have used larger units in the writing of his book.

Of more importance though, is the identification of biblical and extra-biblical motifs and literary traditions employed by the author. 'It is in the determination of how these larger units, motifs and traditions inform and comprise the book that the purpose of the author will be discerned'. This becomes a very worthwhile enterprise for Bolin, as he attempts to show how the book of Jonah was written long after the demise of Nineveh in 612 BCE, at a time when the once great city was renowned for the simple fact that it no longer existed. The link between Jonah and extra-biblical literature investigated by Bolin provides him with an 'interpretive matrix' for understanding the message of the book as a whole (Bolin 1997:135).

Bolin employs three of the traditional historical-critical methods in his exegesis:

- 1) Textual and philological/linguistic analysis in order to establish a text and its semantic range;
- 2) Form-critical methods which delineate and analyze attested literary units used by the author of Jonah in the writing of the book;
- 3) Tradition history, in an attempt to determine Jonah's use of biblical traditions, and the place of such usage in the context of a tradition's meaning throughout the Old Testament.'

(Bolin 1997:65).

### 3.3.2.1 Important textual features of Jonah

The single most important feature of the book of Jonah for Bolin is that the author draws on both biblical and extra-biblical literary traditions and motifs. There is no dependence on other Old Testament books apart from the frequent allusion to biblical traditions. Of course, these are no more important than the extra-biblical traditions. Thus, the Nineveh of Jonah is informed by Greek literary traditions and not by the Old



Testament and Assyrian texts. The book had to have been written long after the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE since the Nineveh described in Jonah is the once great and mad city, now fallen. That readers of Jonah would almost certainly have known that Nineveh had been destroyed and not forgiven is a problem highlighted by Payne, who thinks the author is referring to a previous act of repentance (1979:7). Another problem is how God can forgive the Ninevites and then destroy them shortly afterwards. Bolin argues that God is free to do whatever he chooses, and can pronounce forgiveness and destruction almost at the same time without contradicting his nature.

### 3.3.2.2 Greek literary traditions of Nineveh

Bolin's view is that the Nineveh portrayed in the book of Jonah is informed by traditions of the city from the Persian and Hellenistic periods as attested in Greek literature. He rejects the common tendency of viewing Jonah's Nineveh through the spectacles of the Old Testament and eighth century Assyrian texts. Therefore, the Nineveh of Jonah cannot be seen as 'representing the zenith of the cruel Assyrian empire, Israel's bitter enemy,' but rather as the 'idyllic city of long ago, full of gross excess, exotic opulence -- and utterly destroyed' (1997:145).

This legendary view of Nineveh is so important to Bolin that he views the entire message of the book as hinging on this theory. Since there are common elements in Jonah and the Greek literature concerning Nineveh, it provides Bolin with an 'interpretive matrix in which to understand the larger message of the book' (1997:135).

Bolin considers four portrayals of Nineveh; 1) the historical city revealed by archaeological research; 2) the great city described in Jonah 3; 3) the rapacious enemy of the remainder of the Old Testament; and 4) the long-lost exotic city of Greek/Hellenistic literary tradition (1997:121).

a) *The historical Nineveh.* Referring to archaeological work spanning the last 150 years, Bolin notes that the site known as Nineveh had an initial occupation as early on as the fourth millennium, and that the city reached its zenith at the beginning of the seventh century BCE when Sennacherib made it the capital city of Assyria (1997:129). This glory, however, was not to last, as Nineveh fell to the Medes and Babylonians in 612 BCE. Excavations have shown that the destruction of Nineveh was complete -- nothing remained but a memory of a city that once was great but had been completely destroyed. After this destruction by Babylon, the site was never again substantially populated, and 'quickly passed into the realm of legend' (1997:130).

b) *Nineveh in the book of Jonah.* According to Jonah 3:3 ‘Nineveh was a city great to God, a journey of three days’ (Bolin’s translation). This verse is said to offer three pieces of information about Nineveh: 1) Nineveh was (היתה); 2) a city great to God (עיר גדולה לאלהים); 3) a journey of three days. First, the use of the *qal* of היה is an indication that the book was composed ‘long after the city had been destroyed’ since the *qal* form signifies past or completed action. Narrative past tense would normally have the apocopated *waw*-consecutive form of היה (eg 1:1,4; 2:1; 3:1; 4:8) (Bolin 1997:130). Second, the juxtaposition of the nouns ‘God’ and ‘city’ is intended to convey the importance of the city, either to God, or because of its great size. Third, the description of Nineveh as a city of three days’ journey, is explained as a ‘circumlocution denoting an appreciable passage of time’. This phrase, when used together with ‘a city great to God’, forms a hendiadys which is used to create the mental image of a city far bigger than would normally be expected (Bolin 1997:132). This frees the reader from attempting to reconcile the long time period of three days with the relatively small size of the city. Bolin concludes that the author of Jonah is not referring to the historical city of Nineveh, but to the legendary city which, although in its day it was of an ‘incredibly large size’, no longer existed at the time of writing (1997:132).

c) *Nineveh in the Old Testament.* Apart from Jonah (which contains the most references to Nineveh in the Old Testament), reference is also made to the city in Genesis, Nahum and Zephaniah. In Genesis 10:8-10, Nineveh is mentioned together with other Mesopotamian cities. In the two prophetic books Nineveh’s role as symbol of the Assyrian empire is emphasised; ‘the mortal enemy of Israel, renowned for brutal conquest and cruelty’ (Bolin 1997:132). Even the Assyrians’ own records and reliefs attest to their ruthlessness in the subjugation of peoples (1997:132, note). Bolin comments that many scholars have taken the Nineveh in Jonah to be the Nineveh described in Nahum and Zephaniah. But he argues that there are no common points or similar vocabulary between the Nineveh of Jonah and the Nineveh of the other prophetic books ‘especially in regard to the nature of the city’s wrongdoing’ (1997:134).

d) *Nineveh in Greek and Hellenistic literary traditions.* Bolin here shows that Nineveh in Greek and Hellenistic literary traditions is viewed as a great city, now destroyed (Bolin 1995:110; 1997:135). Bolin’s earlier article ‘Should I not also pity Nineveh?’ deals specifically with this issue and forms part of the fourth chapter of his monograph. Beginning with the earliest Greek reference known to him, Bolin traces the



motif diachronically in Greek and Hellenistic literature where Nineveh is referred to in these terms. A summary of his analysis follows:

i) *Sentences* of Phocylides (sixth century BCE). 'A city on a peak ruled in accordance with nature is more powerful than senseless Nineveh'.

Bolin thinks that since Phocylides lived and wrote in close historical proximity to the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BCE he would likely have made his comment from knowledge that the city fell because of her lack of reason. Because Nineveh is compared rhetorically with an unnamed city, Bolin takes this to be indicative of the author's view that Nineveh was a powerful city. A second conclusion Bolin makes is that the city was 'not governed by reason' (Bolin 1997:135).

ii) Herodotus, *History* (fifth century BCE). 'the Assyrians who held Nineveh' . . . 'had formerly ruled all of Asia' . . . 'among them even Nineveh'

This author testifies to the greatness of the city of Nineveh in that the cities of Assyria, the nation which once ruled all of Asia, were taken by the powerful Medes, 'among them even Nineveh'. Therefore, the city was once great, but is now destroyed (Bolin 1997:135).

iii) Plato, *Laws* (fourth century BCE). 'of the Assyrian power which was in Nineveh; and still the remainder of this kingdom was not small, even as now we fear the great king'.

Bolin (1997:135) extracts the following points from Plato's statement:

- 1) Nineveh is the capital of the Assyrian empire;
- 2) it no longer exists;
- 3) even in its waning years it was still a force to be reckoned with, even as the Persians ('the great king') are in Plato's day.

iv) Xenophon. 'a great stronghold, deserted and lying in ruins.'

This is how Nineveh looked to Cyrus' passing army. Xenophon also described the impressiveness of the city walls, and thought it so impregnable that its fall to the Persians could only be explained by intervention by Zeus. (Bolin 1997:135).

v) *Geography*, Strabo (first century BCE).

Bolin comments that Strabo viewed Nineveh as the capital of Assyria, and that it was "much greater" than Babylon and destroyed by the Medes (Bolin 1997:136).

vi) Diodorus of Sicily. This author has a lengthy account of the history of Nineveh, giving a description of the city's immense size: 'And thus Ninus, "was not disappointed in his hope, since a city its equal, in respect to either the length of its circuit or the magnificence of its walls, was never founded by anyone after his time."' Diodorus also mentioned that Nineveh 'was razed to the ground' (Bolin 1997:136).

vii) Dio Chrysostom (first century CE). Here Bolin includes Dio because he refers to the comment of Phocylides that Nineveh was not governed by reason. '. . . a city, no matter its greatness, is not worthy of the name if it is not virtuous' (Bolin 1997:136).

viii) Other authors of the Common Era. Bolin briefly cites four authors who refer to Nineveh in terms of its greatness and its demise:

- Arrian -- '. . . the city of Ninus, which was once a great and rich city.'
- Philostratus -- always uses the adjective 'ancient' in reference to Nineveh
- Lucian -- 'as for Nineveh . . . it is already gone and there is not a trace of it left now; you couldn't even say where it was'
- Aristides -- 'Ninus was captured by the Medes'

'With this brief overview it is clear that for at least seven centuries in Greek literary traditions Nineveh is seen as one of the great cities, if not the greatest city there has ever been. The traditions are also clear that this great city no longer exists' (Bolin 1997:137).

ix) Sardanapallus, Nineveh's mad last king. Scholars generally agree that the phrase in Jonah 3, 'king of Nineveh', who is never named, enhances the fictitious nature of the story. Since Nineveh was not an actual state but a city, it could not have had a king. Other scholars like Alexander (1988:60) have argued that the term could be an accurate designation of the Assyrian monarch since Nineveh was its capital. Bolin is more confident as he identifies the 'king of Nineveh' as Sardanapallus, said by Strabo to be the 'last king of Nineveh' (1995:113). His reputation was that of an eccentric and opulent transvestite who eventually set fire to his palace, destroying himself, his palace staff, his silver and gold and his wardrobe (1997:138).

According to Bolin, the focus in the Greek and Hellenistic literature concerning Nineveh is not on its military and political greatness as the capital of the mighty Assyrian empire, but rather on the magnitude of its opulence. This opulence is seen to



be personified in the person of Sardanapallus. 'These major themes used of Nineveh: its greatness, its lawlessness and its destruction, converge in the Greek traditions of Sardanapallus, Nineveh's last king' (1997:138). 'The excesses of Sardanapallus and Nineveh are not merely consigned to a far distant and fictitious antiquity, but are bound up in the universally recognized fate of the city: its utter destruction' (1997:139).

'This Greek focus on Nineveh as wealthy, powerful and destroyed is different from what is seen as the standard view of the city in the Old Testament, which portrays it as the worst of Israel's enemies and the evil of the Gentile world. With this Greek picture acting as a template, it can be seen how much it helps in reading Jonah' (Bolin 1997:139-140).

### 3.3.2.3 The absoluteness of divine freedom

The problem of the destruction of Nineveh has long been an exegetical difficulty for interpreters of Jonah. If the book has a post-exilic composition, would not the author have been somewhat influenced by the fact that Nineveh, although forgiven by God in the story, was subsequently destroyed? Alexander does not see the difficulty as he posits an early date of composition. The problem is heightened in retrospect as the century separating the forgiveness and destruction does not appear all that significant as time passes. In fact, in a legendary view, the two events merge into one, which is more or less the position taken by Bolin.

Informed by Greek and Hellenistic literary traditions, Jonah's Nineveh was a city renowned for its destruction, not its forgiveness. What is the point of using Nineveh in the story? To show that God has absolute freedom to forgive and then to destroy if he so desires.

a) *The open-endedness of the prophecy.* The prophecy delivered to the inhabitants of Nineveh is said to allow for forgiveness and destruction. Although the word spoken by Jonah appears to be an announcement of destruction, Bolin argues that the author's use of the *Niphal* participle of הפך also allows for the meaning 'to change oneself'. He notes further that in the Old Testament הפך is often used of cities in the sense 'to destroy', but then it is always in the *Qal* (1997:125). It is therefore significant to Bolin that the author of Jonah would use the *Niphal* form with its wider semantic range and not the *Qal* which would be the logical choice to convey the imminent destruction of Nineveh. The wider semantic range of the *Niphal* is said to give the word a tautological nature whereby the oracle remains true whether Nineveh repents or is destroyed

(1997:125). In this story, 'a city slated for destruction is spared,' which makes the author's use of an ambiguity 'more than coincidence' (1997:126).

It should be noted that as far as Jonah was concerned, **יָפֵחַ** meant 'destruction'. The Ninevites must also have understood it this way, for they immediately repent in the hope that 'God may relent and change his mind . . . so that we do not perish' (Jon 3:10). Jonah waits to see what would happen to the city after the declaration of doom is delivered, knowing that if they repented, God would not destroy them. The author tells how God in fact did change his mind and decided not to destroy the city (Jon 3:10). Sasson suggests that the cause of Jonah's anger is that he understands **יָפֵחַ** to mean something different to the way God meant it to be understood (Sasson 1990:268). This 'double entendre' Bolin believes to be intentional, especially in view of the author's choice of a city that at the time of writing, had already been destroyed (Bolin 1997:126). Thus, the oracle is open-ended and 'will be fulfilled regardless of Nineveh's fate' (1997:145).

*b) The repentance of God.* The question of whether God can change his mind is an important theological problem to which the book of Jonah makes a contribution (Walls 1991). Many scholars believe that Jeremiah 18 provides the reader of Jonah with a context for understanding God's change of mind concerning the Ninevites. Bolin however does not agree that Jeremiah serves as a background for Jonah, or that Jonah is dependent on Jeremiah. The concept of divine repentance resulting from human repentance is not unique to Jonah 3 and Jeremiah 18, as it occurs also in Isaiah 38; Jeremiah 5-6 and 42; Ezekiel 18 and 36. Jonah, therefore, draws upon a 'common theme in the Old Testament' (Bolin 1997:142). In an analysis of divine repentance in the Old Testament, Willis (not referred to by Bolin) found that of 36 occurrences, 17 appear in Samuel, Jeremiah and Jonah (1994:156).

Bolin now turns to a number of Old Testament passages where God is said to undergo a change of mind concerning a promised act of destruction, 'followed by or linked with an act of divine retribution'.

*Genesis 6:6:* God's sorrow at the creation of humanity leads to its almost complete annihilation in the flood.

*Exodus 32:* At the urging of Moses, Yahweh repents of his desire to destroy the Israelites after their worship of the golden calf (v. 14). Yet even after Moses requires an internecine slaughter as punishment for the offence, Yahweh sends a



plague (v. 35). [God repented of totally destroying the nation, and sent a plague instead].

*Judges 2:18*: Yahweh repeatedly punishes the Israelites in anger at their apostasy, only to repent and save them before punishing them again. [what about the cyclical nature of the book of Judges?]

*1 Samuel 15:35*: Yahweh repents of his choice of Saul as king when the latter fails to kill the entire population of the Amalakitites. This withdrawal of divine favor from Saul precipitates his madness and the bloody struggle with David.

*2 Samuel 24*: Yahweh incites David to order a census of the people. David then inexplicably begs forgiveness from God, who requires him to choose one of three devastating punishments. David chooses three days of pestilence. Yahweh repents of the pestilence before it reaches Jerusalem (v. 16), but only after it has killed 70,000 Israelites.

*Amos 7:1-9*: Amos is shown visions of marauding locusts and devouring fire. He intercedes for Jacob, whereupon Yahweh repents of these plans. He then shows Amos the vision of the plumbline, signifying the destruction of Israel.

(Bolin 1997:142)

In addition to this, Bolin supports his position with references to the Old Testament where divine repentance is juxtaposed with divine acts of destruction (1 Sam 15:29; Jer 4:28; Ezk 24:14; even though Yahweh is in these places said to never repent). One reference (Num 23:19) concerns divine repentance and blessing; while only four speak of God repenting in isolation of an act of destruction (Bolin 1997:143).

Certainly, these texts all have *something* to do with divine repentance and retribution. But to find some abiding relationship between the repentance of God and a following or liked act of destruction seems forced. Of the six examples he gives (Bolin 1997:142), only one can be said to parallel the situation in Jonah. When God repents of the destruction that he said he would bring upon the Israelites for their apostasy in building and worshipping the golden calf, he does indeed not punish them by exterminating them, but merely sends a plague.

For Bolin, there is no guarantee that divine repentance can be taken seriously, since the 'divine change of mind is most often followed by an act of destruction.' The impression of uncertainty is heightened by the author's choice of a city which is best known because of its destruction (1997:146).

c) *The uncertainty of human repentance.* Closely tied in with the concept of divine forgiveness and repentance is the biblical motif which finds its expression in 'Who knows?' The king of Nineveh decrees that the entire city should repent for "'Who knows? God may relent and change his mind' (Jon 3:9). The question, which has been analyzed by Crenshaw (1986), occurs ten times in the Old Testament, its use (according to Crenshaw), falling into two categories: 1) the possibility of a change for the good; 2) no possibility of a change for the good (i.e. 'no one knows'). Four of Crenshaw's five examples in category one refer to God. Jonah 3:9 is one of them. The others are:

*2 Samuel 12:22* 'While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, "Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me, and the child may live."'

*Psalm 90:11* 'Who considers (knows) the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.' No one knows the extent of God's wrath.

*Joel 2:14* 'Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him.' In Joel, blessing clearly follows the utterance of the phrase.

Bolin argues in his fifth chapter that Joel's use of the phrase is dependent on Jonah (1997:144, 169-172). Therefore, only two of these references are significant. In 2 Samuel, 'the answer to David's question of whether Yahweh will relent and save the child is negative.' The psalmist asks the question of the extent of God's wrath, and the implied answer is that, even after extended suffering, 'no one knows'. Of interest is Limburg's observation that in 2 Samuel, Joel and Jonah the question is asked during a time of fasting. The king of Nineveh 'knows that fasting carries no guarantee that God will save him and his people, but, on the other hand, "Who knows?"' (1993:84). Bolin now interprets the phrase in Jonah 3 accordingly: 'Thus, when the king muses as to whether God will indeed repent and spare the city, the answer is that God will not; Nineveh is doomed' (1997:144).

This conclusion is in keeping with Bolin's contention that in the Old Testament 'the presence of God's forgiveness is most often linked with an act of divine wrath' (1997:145).



At this juncture, Bolin summarizes what he believes to be the author's larger purpose. First, God is absolutely free in the sense that he can forgive and then destroy (or both for the same situation), and his pronouncements are phrased in such a way that 'God is never proven false' (Bolin 1997:146). Second, contrary to the common view that freedom in the book of Jonah means God is free to forgive whomever he chooses (not just Israel, but Gentiles too), and free to show mercy to Nineveh even though they are enemies of Israel, Yahweh's freedom extends beyond the 'human categories of justice and logic' (1997:146-7).

#### 3.3.2.4 Yahweh's indifference towards Nineveh

The fourth chapter of Jonah brings the confrontation between Jonah and Yahweh to a head. The freedom of Yahweh over all of creation has been 'repeatedly stressed' in the foregoing chapters; now the author 'will confront the issue directly in the dispute between Yahweh and his unhappy servant' (Bolin 1997:147). The confrontation arises when Jonah becomes emotional about the change of mind Yahweh has had. It takes the form of two lessons which Yahweh attempts to teach Jonah. First, that human life is 'frail, brief and potentially meaningless'; second, that one is not obliged to care for things one has no investment in (1997:176). Overarching these two lessons is the all-encompassing one -- 'debate with God in the hope of victory or resolution is pointless' (1997:177).

a) *Was Jonah angry or upset?* Bolin disagrees with the view that Jonah is *angry* because God has forgiven the evil, *Gentile* Ninevites. Hauser, for example, sees a pattern between God's change from anger to forgiveness, and Jonah's change from passivity to burning anger (1985:35). The construction of the verb רעע ('to be evil') and its cognate accusative רעה ('evil'), used with חרה ('to burn') is said by Bolin to give rise to this interpretation which he believes is attributable 'more to Julius Wellhausen and the Law-Gospel bias of Christian exegetes than to historical study' (Bolin 1997:150). In 3:10, the Ninevites turn from their רעה, and so does Yahweh; but now it is Jonah who is רעה. The obvious word play together with חרה has led to the view that Jonah is an angry, ethnocentric Israelite. Following Davies (1977:105-110), Bolin argues that in the two other places in the Old Testament where רעע *Qal* occurs without a subject, followed by ל or אל + noun or suffix, the 'subject is always an implied personal pronoun and רעע does not denote wickedness' (Bolin 1997:150). This is also the view of Sasson (1990:5) and Craig (1993:166-167). Accordingly, Bolin translates 4:1 as; 'But this displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved.'

If Jonah was not angry with God for forgiving the wicked Ninevites, what was it that caused his displeasure? In addition to contending that the Hebrew in 4:1 does not allow for the traditional interpretation, Bolin finds that the author has already given 'several indications' that Nineveh is destined for destruction (1997:175-176). Rather, Jonah is unhappy because Yahweh has not kept him informed of his intentions with Nineveh. Whether God spares the city or destroys it, Jonah would like to have known about it beforehand. Bolin finds significance in the fact that there is an 'exact correspondence' between the beginning of the book of Jonah and 2 Kings 14:23-25. When Jonah complains to Yahweh that he had already voiced an opinion 'while I was yet in my own land', he is supposedly referring to the prophecy made during the reign of Jeroboam II. Following Jonah's prophecy, and in spite of the wickedness of the monarch, the nation of Israel receives a blessing from Yahweh in the form of an expanded borderline. 'Thus, in Jon. 4.2 reference is made to a word concerning divine forgiveness made while Jonah was still in Israel, and in 2 Kgs 14.23-25, the only extant text in which Jonah speaks on his own homeland, there is an oracle which highlights Yahweh's temporary forgiveness of a wicked Israelite king'. This link between 2 Kings and Jonah is thought to be a deliberate one whereby the author intends to show that Nineveh's forgiveness, like Israel's, will be temporary. Therefore, Bolin concludes, the correspondence between the two passages 'cannot easily be attributed to coincidence,' but indicates that the author of Jonah draws upon the reference to Jonah in 2 Kings (1997:151).

*b) A demonstration of human frailty.* The first lesson that Yahweh teaches Jonah is that 'created life is frail, brief and potentially meaningless' (Bolin 1997:176). Jonah feels so strongly about being left out of God's reckoning, that he would rather die than go on living. Initially he asks God to take his life (4:3), and a short while after, he repeats the death wish 'it is better for me to die than to live' (4:8). Bolin notes that Sasson has drawn attention to the 'death wish' motif in a second millennium Egyptian text (1997:173). The parallel between Jonah's request for death and that of Elijah is also significant, for there are a number of other details in the Elijah cycle in 1 Kings 17-19 that are echoed in Jonah. These are:

'Jonah sleeps in the ship and Elijah sleeps under a bush; Jonah seeks refuge in a booth and Elijah in a cave; both Jonah and Elijah are shaded by plants, and are asked a question twice by Yahweh; both stories utilize the 40-day time span.'

(Bolin 1997:173)



This use of the Elijah cycle by the author of Jonah as a ‘source and a foil’ is confirmed by Bolin. He further emphasises the use of the death wish motif in Jonah by comparing it with similar motifs found in the traditions of Elijah and Moses. According to Bolin, the wish for death by both Moses and Elijah is indicative of their loss of divinely given authority; Moses was compelled to share his authority with the seventy elders; Elijah’s tenure as prophet ended abruptly. This alteration of status leads these two servants of Yahweh to request that their lives be ended. By refusing to comply, Yahweh not only draws attention to the frailty of human existence, but underlines the absolute authority which he wields over his creation. By Yahweh’s appointment the *qiqayan* lives and dies. The sun and wind are mere tools in his hands, used to bring Jonah to the point where death seems the only solution to his misery. Neither the boat nor the plant fulfills Jonah’s expectations (Elata-Alster & Salmon 1984:22). Jonah unwittingly acknowledges the absolute power of Yahweh, and his ‘unfettered freedom in the exercise of that power’ (Bolin 1997:174-175).

c) *Does Yahweh care about Nineveh?* Yahweh’s final remark to Jonah has to do with the latter’s attitude towards the plant and its untimely demise, and Yahweh’s attitude towards Nineveh and its fate (Bolin 1997:159). According to Bolin, Yahweh’s question ‘Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?’ ‘functions rhetorically, and its implied answer is a firm no’ (Bolin 1997:163). His argument is based on the assumption that Yahweh’s question to Jonah functions as a *קל וחומר*, the first of Rabbi Hillel’s seven *Middoth* (exegetical principles), more commonly known as *a minori ad maius*. It functions by applying analogically a principle from a lesser case to a greater, more important case. ‘Crucial to the force and validity of such an argument is the establishment of correspondence between the two examples under discussion’ (1997:159). First, Bolin argues that *הוֹס* in this context means ‘sorry to lose’ and not ‘pity’, as it is commonly translated (1997:160-161). Bolin disagrees with Sasson’s approach which is to translate *הוֹס* as ‘concern about’ when it refers to inanimate objects, but ‘pity’ when inanimates are in view (Sasson 1990:309-310). Since the correspondence between the plant and Yahweh is important to Bolin’s argument, the second part of the construction needs to correspond with and intensify the first. Just as the plant’s ‘incredibly short lifespan was completed without the care of Jonah, so too has Nineveh grown large apart from Yahweh’s care -- and so too are its days numbered . . . as Yahweh destroyed the one, so too did he deal with the other’ (Bolin 1997:163).

There is a final relationship which Bolin finds in the two parts of the argument. Yahweh informs Jonah that he should not bother with a short-lived senseless object in which he has not invested. Corresponding to and intensifying this, should Yahweh bother with senseless Nineveh over which he has not laboured? This logical yet alarming comparison is also found in Cooper; 'God cares no more about that huge city full of ignoramuses and beasts than he had about the *qîqāyôn* (Cooper 1993:158). 'It is clear that any notions about an extension of divine mercy, or of a new, more profound teaching about Yahweh's love have been left far behind. Any exegesis which finds them here is the result of a petrification of older readings' (Bolin 1997:177).

Bolin bases Yahweh's paradoxical concern and indifference for Nineveh on what he calls the tradition of divine attributes. His discussion is divided into four parts; *Exodus 34, The tradition of divine forgiveness and punishment, the tradition of divine forgiveness, and Jonah and Joel*.

i) Exodus 34. This divine attribute tradition is said to find its fullest expression in Exodus 34:6-7. Moses, on Mt Sinai after the second giving of the Law is allowed to see the glory of Yahweh pass before him. As he passes, Yahweh proclaims:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation.

Against other interpreters who see Jonah 4:2 as having a literary dependence on part of the Exodus passage, Bolin argues that it is more likely that the author borrows from standard formulas, forming 'a patterned cluster of divine attributes' (1997:166). These texts are 'divided between those which mention both Yahweh's forgiveness and punishment of the wicked and those (including Jonah) which contain no reference to punishment' (1997:166).

ii) The tradition of divine forgiveness and punishment. A cycle of stories in Exodus 32-34 tells of divine forgiveness and punishment. In chapter 34, Israel is punished for the act of apostasy, but Yahweh 'does not entirely abandon the idea of entering into a covenant with the people' (Bolin 1997:166). In Numbers 14, after the spies return from Canaan the Israelites complain about Moses' leadership. Moses recites the full divine



attribute formula, but Yahweh nevertheless exacts three forms of punishment on the people. The third Old Testament passage to which Bolin refers is Nahum 1. Here there is a variation of the attribute formula, depicting Yahweh as 'longsuffering and patient, but also powerful and relentless in the pursuit of the guilty' (1997:166-167).

iii) The tradition of forgiveness. In a rehearsal of Israelite history in Nehemiah 9, the wilderness grumbling in Numbers 14 is referred to. While not making a direct reference to the punishment of the guilty, Nehemiah's account makes it clear that the Israelites had suffered much due to the punishment for their offenses. In Psalm 86, 103 and 145 there is no clear reference made to divine punishment of the wicked, although in Psalms 86 and 145, the principle of punishment for the wicked is brought into focus.

iv) Jonah and Joel. Bolin sides with the minority in arguing a case for the dependence of Joel 2:13-14 on Jonah 3:10-4:2. He cites the following reasons:

- 1) Joel contains two biblical traditions that are found in Jonah and uses them in a way which is quite different from their standard interpretations in the Old Testament (including Jonah).
- 2) This irregular reading is not isolated in Joel to these two traditions, as is evidenced by Joel's anomalous variant of the utopian vision found in Isaiah and Micah.
- 3) Joel utilizes an otherwise unattested form of a noun when a well-attested form is readily available. This divergent form is spelled identically to the plural of the proper name 'Jonah'.

(Bolin 1997:172).

To summarize, what does Yahweh intend to do with the inhabitants of Nineveh? Does he forgive them first only to change his mind and destroy them 100 years later? Or did he always intend to destroy them, but let them think they were forgiven for a short while? Does not Jonah's anger show that Yahweh did actually forgive them, something Jonah has trouble accepting?

Bolin argues on exegetical grounds that the particular use of the word **רָעָה** in the Jonah context does not mean Jonah was 'angry' because Yahweh forgave the wicked Ninevites when they deserved to be punished, but that he was 'grieved' because Yahweh had not kept him informed of his intentions with the city. To support this view,

appeal is made to the only other reference to Jonah in the Old Testament, 2 Kings 14. Here Bolin thinks it obvious that the connection between the two is the temporary forgiveness of both Israel and Nineveh. Departing from his contention that Jonah is not dependent on other biblical texts, he makes Jonah draw directly on 2 Kings 14, which is thereby made to serve referentially.

The 'death wish' motif is utilised by the author to demonstrate the frailty of God's creation when seen in comparison to his power. Jonah behaves in similar fashion to Moses and Elijah when it appears their divinely given authority is being stripped away. Because Yahweh has not informed Jonah of his intentions with Nineveh, the prophet feels that he has lost the standing he had previously enjoyed while still in Israel.

Finally, the use of the *a minori ad maius* construction, the argument from the lesser to the greater, is meant to show that God does *not* care for Nineveh. This is further enforced by the use of the 'divine attribute tradition' found in Exodus 34 and other texts. The divine forgiveness and punishment motif of this tradition function paradoxically in Jonah so that Yahweh is not bound to act according to human expectations of divine mercy.

### 3.3.2.5 Literary traditions in Jonah 1 and 2

a) *Chapter 1.* Bolin concludes his first chapter with two broad observations: nothing new is introduced to the reader; human effort is portrayed as futile.

The author of Jonah does not introduce anything new to his readers in that a certain prior knowledge is assumed. The character in the story known as Jonah is identified in 1:1 as the 'son of Amittai'. The only other place in the Hebrew Bible where this is found is in 2 Kings 14, where Jonah is mentioned in connection with a North Israelite prophecy. But is there any relationship between the Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25-27 and the character in the book of Jonah? Jonah and Ezekiel are the only prophetic books to begin with the apocopated *waw*-consecutive imperfect of הִיָּה. Several narrative books (Josh 1:1, Judg 1:1, 1 Sam 1:1, 2 Sam 1:1, Ruth 1:1, Esther 1:1) utilize this introduction 'in a stative sense with an implied subject' (Bolin 1997:74, and note). Similarly, the phrase וַיְהִי דְבַר יְהוָה אֵל and personal name or pronoun is found throughout the Old Testament of persons previously mentioned in the text as the following list shows:

Samuel	1 Samuel 15:10
Nathan	2 Samuel 7:4



Solomon	1 Kings 6:11
Elijah	1 Kings 17:2, 21:17
Isaiah	Isaiah 38:4
Jeremiah	many places
Zechariah	Zechariah 4:8
Shemaiah	2 Chronicles 11:2
Jehu	1 Kings 16:1

(Bolin 1997:74, note)

Therefore, 'since the book of Jonah begins in a manner which presupposes knowledge of the figure of Jonah and, since that figure is previously introduced in 2 Kings, the figure of Jonah in the book which bears his name is based on the prophet Jonah from the notice in 2 Kings 14' (Bolin 1997:75).

Bolin further concludes that the geographical locations of Joppa and Tarshish are logical choices for an Israelite author to have used; the terms 'Hebrew' and 'god of heaven' also constitute normal word usage; and the sea storm type-scene is a 'time-honored' literary convention. By customising this recognizable literary convention, the author casts his story against a familiar backdrop. Apart from Jonah, there are two other biblical sea narratives: Ezekiel 27 and Psalm 107. Bolin says that 'the three texts do not depend upon each other so much as draw upon the standard nautical language of their common culture. Joppa is the seaport of Palestine; "ships of Tarshish" designates any long distance vessel(s); storms are under the command of Yahweh' (Bolin 1997:93). Thus, it would seem that an ancient reader of Jonah would require a certain literary background in order to make any sense of it at all.

A theme which is important to Bolin's thesis is the stark contrast between the almighty power of God, and the futility of human effort. Jonah tries but cannot escape him; the sailors are unable to survive without his intervention. 'By emphasizing human impotence in the face of divine power, the author draws attention to the complete dependence of humans upon God' (Bolin 1997:95). This motif emphasises Yahweh's exercise of absolute freedom as he is not influenced to act in a certain way by a display of human power. All of his creation is portrayed as powerless.

Bolin sets the scene for the remainder of his analysis, where he will show how the author skillfully borrows from both biblical and extra-biblical traditions to construct his story. The book is not dependent on other biblical books, neither does it provide source

material for them. A speculative reconstruction of the history of Israel is effectively removed from play, having no bearing on Bolin's interpretation of Jonah.

*b) Chapter 2.* Scholars are divided over the question as to whether the psalm in chapter two forms part of the original composition, or was added at a later date by a different person. In his discussion of this issue Bolin concludes that 'the psalm of 2:3-10 is original to the book of Jonah on the basis of MSS evidence (1997:118). Whereas other interpreters may find that Jonah borrows from the Psalms, Bolin argues that the borrowings are 'clusters of common images and motifs which Hebrew poets used to describe distress and salvation' (1997:118-9). These similarities should be viewed as 'highly stylized literary language which forms the compositional building blocks of biblical authors'. No direct dependence is evident, but a type of 'literary composition in which certain motifs occur in the same clusters within the larger, differing contexts of several Hebrew poems' (1997:116). Bolin finds that only one exact correlation exists between Jonah 2 and the Psalter, 'all your breakers and waves swept over me' Jonah 2:4b and Psalm 42:8 (1997:112). Against the assumption that there is an irreconcilable tension between the poem and the prose of Jonah, Bolin suggests that a 'coherent reading' can be given which serves as the 'bridge to a concluding interpretation'. 'The psalm can be read as a continuation of the themes set out in Jonah' (1997:119).

Common themes in Jonah's poem and other examples of biblical poetry:

- 1) speaks of trouble and distress in terms of encircling, raging water; 2) has calls to Yahweh out of such distress that are answered; 3) understands Jonah's divine rescue as no less than a return from the grave; 4) acknowledges that the only proper response after such an ordeal is fervent gratitude and renewed piety which separates the faithful Israelite from the idolater who has no hope of Yahweh's mercy.

(Bolin 1997:116).

This does not necessarily show that the author of Jonah used 'sources' in his composition of the psalm, but merely that he wrote within a particular literary tradition (Bolin 1997:117).



### 3.3.3 Concluding remarks

At the outset, Bolin stated that his primary goal was to determine authorial intent, and that this intention was to be equated with meaning (1997:64). How has he treated the book of Jonah so that the purpose of the author becomes clearly evident? Which features of the text are utilised in the construction of the interpretation of the book? Which aspect of the text is taken to be authoritative, and how is this aspect authoritative? To begin with, a summary of Bolin's method will be given, and then further comments will be made in connection with the applicability of his method as a modernist interpretation.

#### 3.3.3.1 Summary of Bolin's method

Bolin sides with recent Jonah scholarship in his contention that the message of Jonah has to do, not with universalism or prophecy but with theodicy. His suggestion that Yahweh's freedom is absolute is supported by certain textual features essential to his argument. First, it needs to be shown that the book was written long after 612 BCE, since Bolin argues that the author's view of legendary Nineveh is that it was 'once great, now destroyed'. Bolin does not commit himself to any discussion of authorship or date, since he believes that insufficient historical controls exist for this to be done conclusively. Yet he assigns a 'relative date' on the basis of the book's 'use of recognizable pre-existing portions of the biblical tradition' (1997:64). This relative date is given as the Hellenistic period since the portrayal of Nineveh in Jonah corresponds closely to Hellenistic traditions of that city (1997:183). But as a dating criterion, Bolin regards this as of secondary importance; yet it is still an audience identification.

More important for Bolin's thesis is that these Hellenistic literary traditions depict Nineveh in legendary fashion as a once great, now fallen city. The historical improbabilities which attend the Nineveh in Jonah are said to correspond closely with Greek and Hellenistic traditions. The Nineveh mentioned in Nahum and Zephaniah is the wicked, long-time enemy of Israel, and bears no resemblance to that in Jonah. Therefore, the extra-biblical tradition concerning Nineveh becomes an important element in the interpretation of Jonah. While Bolin does not wrest Jonah out of its biblical context, it is significant that he insists that any 'borrowing' from biblical texts is not direct dependence of one text upon another, but rather stems from a literary tradition from which biblical authors drew in their compositions. Bolin's position is in keeping with the modern scholarly consensus that the Nineveh in Jonah is a legendary city and not the historical city of the eighth century. Thus the book of Jonah is seen to be the

product of an author familiar with and appreciative of the legendary status of Nineveh depicted in extra-biblical literature.

Given that Nineveh was long destroyed at the time Jonah was composed, what would be the sense in teaching that God forgives those who repent, if Nineveh no longer exists as evidence of this divine forgiveness? Bolin moves on to show that it was never intended that Nineveh should escape the wrath of God, since the divine freedom he argues for is absolute and certainly not limited to logical categories.

The prophecy spoken by Jonah to the inhabitants of Nineveh has an intended double meaning, so that whether God forgives them or destroys them, he is still seen to be truthful. Bolin's exegetical work on this point is based on the use of **הפך** in the Old Testament. He demonstrates that the word may have a wider semantic range than is sometimes acknowledged, but raises no substantial reason for allowing the double meaning in Jonah. The author's selection of Nineveh, a city known for its destruction, is said to heighten the ambiguity in the prophecy (Bolin 1997:126).

To show that God cannot be expected to forgive simply because human beings repent of their wrongdoing, Bolin appeals to the biblical tradition synchronising divine repentance and acts of destruction. Although he does not show convincingly that there is a forgiveness and destruction in Jonah which is typical of the biblical tradition, he does establish that there is a link between forgiveness and punishment. There is no direct reference to the destruction of Nineveh in Jonah at all: Bolin's entire argument up to this point is based solely on the legendary view of Nineveh as a destroyed city, and the possibility that Jonah's author *intended* to convey a dual meaning with the use of **הפך**.

Finally, the concept of repentance in Jonah is said to depend on the biblical motif 'Who knows?' which, according to Bolin, is a further indication that God will not repent and save Nineveh. Instead, the use of the motif is intended to convey the impending doom of the city. Thus it can be seen that Bolin gives much weight to 'biblical and extra-biblical traditions' in his analysis of the meaning of Jonah. The absolute freedom of God in respect of Nineveh's destiny is stressed throughout by the author's constant reference to these traditions (Bolin 1997:145).



### 3.3.3.2 A modernist interpretation?

In arguing that nothing new is introduced to the reader in chapter one, Bolin lays the foundation for his demonstration that the author of Jonah draws on an existing web of both biblical and extra-biblical literary tradition. The introduction of Jonah, the son of Amittai, and the time-honoured sea storm narrative, are presented to the reader in such a way that their knowledge is deemed by Bolin to be a certainty. Similarly, the use of common images and motifs in the Jonah psalm are indicative of the author 'borrowing' from an existing cluster of distress and salvation traditions. 'In the same way that the author drew upon an established narrative motif of the sea storm and made it uniquely Israelite through the choice of port, destination and divinity, so here does the author draw upon the common Israelite practice of poems inserted into prose combined with the standard imagery used for distress, appeal and salvation' (Bolin 1997:119).

Bolin envisages that Jonah's author has 'imitated' other kinds of writing in the utilization of 'well-known biblical and extra-biblical narrative traditions' (1997:53). The interpretation of Jonah can then only take place by giving due attention to the use made of these traditions. A complex web of inter-related texts results so that it is no longer Jonah but a 'new' intertext that is being considered. The references to these traditions take the form of motifs which are utilised by the author to produce a literary pattern which runs throughout the book. It is this aspect of the text which is taken to be authoritative by Bolin. He does not want to understand intention on the basis of either historical reconstruction or literary genre. He sees authorial intention in terms of the literary patterns generated by the intertextual nature of Jonah. His critical tools -- textual criticism, form criticism, and tradition criticism -- are those which probe at the relationship of the author and the text (Lategan 1992). Therefore, it is difficult to see how Bolin's method can avoid making contact with a reconstruction of Israelite history at some points.

How is this literary pattern of motifs taken to be authoritative? The freedom of Yahweh is portrayed in terms of his repentance. He is free to change his mind with regard to the fate of the inhabitants of Nineveh, and free to revert back to his original intention of retribution. The motifs of divine repentance and retribution in Jonah are prominent in Bolin's method. The appeal to these traditions has the function of 'occasioning' the 'divine attribute tradition' of repentance and retribution which, Bolin argues, in Jonah is used in the 'standard manner' (Bolin 1997:177). The divine attribute of repentance and retribution of Exodus 34 would seem to be the revelatory event which is occasioned in Jonah so as to 'authorise' the message of the book. What is being said about

God in Jonah is authoritative not because the words are the words of God, but because the tradition of repentance and retribution are 'appealed' to through the literary patterns of the text.

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## 4 CONCLUSION

### 4.1 Evaluation of the hypothesis

The hypothesis of this study states that the existence of different models of authority allows for a variety of legitimate interpretation of the book of Jonah, on the basis that each of these models presupposes a different aspect of the text which renders the theological construct authoritative. The commentaries for this study were selected, first because they offered a theological interpretation of Jonah; second, on the basis of the model of authority the interpreter appeared to be operating within; and third, on the assumption that the interpretation could be demonstrated to be a legitimate one. A broad definition of legitimate interpretation was given as one that was 'properly grounded in the evidence of the text'. All three commentaries demonstrated a careful reading of the text with due consideration given to other viewpoints.

Each commentary displayed a significantly different method of interpreting Jonah. The analysis of these methods showed that appeal was in fact made to different aspects of the text. In the *scholastic* model, the aspect of the scriptural text which is taken as authoritative is its 'content'. In Alexander's commentary, much space is devoted in the Introduction section attempting to show that the author of Jonah intended his work to be taken as literal history. In fact, even if it could be shown conclusively that there are historical improbabilities in the book, Alexander would still hold to the historical view because he believes that the author *intended* to write history. The arguments used by Alexander to show this were seen to be inconclusive. The appeal to antiquity together with the claim that the introductory formula provides a generic signal for reading Jonah as history, do not make a convincing case. His insistence on the historicity of Jonah can best be explained by his operating within the scholastic model of authority. The early date, the eighth century BCE view of Nineveh (Assyria) as Israel's bitter enemy, and the unity of the book as a whole, are all typical elements of an interpretation committed to upholding Jonah as a reliable, authoritative part of God's Word.

The *sacramental* model takes the 'narrative' aspect of Scripture as authoritative. This places emphasis squarely on the structure and not the content of a biblical book. In Wolff's case, this much was seen to be true. The structure of Jonah as a novella was emphasised almost to the exclusion of all other aspects of the text. Although Wolff discusses various critical issues in his Introductory section, the results of these are not decisive in determining the message of the book. Wolff's identification of Jonah as a novella might seem to be arbitrary, since he is unable to come up with other similar

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works with which to support his view. He readily admits that if Jonah is to be classified as a novella, it would be the first of its literary type in the world. Yet, the structure of Jonah is so closely related to the 'definition' of novella which Wolff provides, that he bases the overall theological message of the book on this alone. This, of course, can be explained by the presence of the sacramental model of authority within which Wolff appears to be operating. The narrative aspect is authoritative. This functions in the church as a witness to revelation. The story of Jonah is authoritative because it provides a link with reality. Thus, an important feature of Wolff's interpretation is the provision of a contemporary reflection on the meaning of the individual sections. The narrative aspect comes to the fore when the historical elements recede. This has the effect of giving Jonah a generic quality which is taken to transcend culture and time.

The *modernist* model of authority does not take either the content or structure of Scripture to be authoritative, but 'literary patterns' of symbols, emblems or motifs. Bolin does not appeal to Jonah as history nor as a particular form of narrative. He studiously avoids entering discussion in these two areas. His thesis is based on a Hellenistic view of Nineveh as a city 'once great, now fallen'. His appeal is to biblical and extra-biblical literary tradition, which he believes the author of Jonah draws upon, and imitates. Recognizing this provides the key for interpreting Jonah. Thus the literary patterns formed by the frequent appeal to traditions is taken to be authoritative. Bolin certainly seems to operate within this model of authority. The symbolical aspect functions authoritatively as it 'occasions' the revelatory event depicted in the 'divine attribute tradition' for a modern audience. A complication with Bolin's proposal is the 'greater' text which is formed by the use of literary traditions. Bolin creates an intertext which, if ignored, will result in the misinterpretation of Jonah. While Bolin wants to interpret Jonah without an appeal to a reconstruction of Israelite history, his method is not all that different from Alexander's, where the 'texts' formed by historical and cultural background also serve to create an intertext.

#### 4.2 A word on author's intention

Author's intention was seen to be important in the theological interpretation of Jonah in all cases. With Alexander it is expected that intentionality will take the form of historical accuracy. Even if the author was mistaken in believing the events to be historical, his intention is all important, and should be respected in interpretation. A problem with this model is the need to view the entire Bible as reliable history. If it could

be shown that the author *intended* to write fiction, would it be possible for an interpreter to see this through scholastic spectacles?

Does Wolff go far enough when he sees author's intention limited to the structure of Jonah? The argument that the classification of genre is vital for identifying intention is well documented in the literature. It is also important not to fall into the intentional fallacy by attempting to read the author's mind. But Wolff finds little in Jonah of historical value. His view is that the author has deliberately downplayed historical details in order to produce a work which will speak theologically to different generations and cultures.

Bolin produces the surprise package. Since he believes that author's intention can be shown without an appeal to either historical or literary aspects of the text, he makes an appeal to the author's imitative use of literary traditions. In doing so, however, he creates an audience in the Hellenistic period, so he ends up with a form of historical reconstruction anyway. Since all three commentators place some (albeit different) emphasis on author's intention in their treatments of Jonah, it seems that this facet of interpretation forms a link in reading the Bible as Scripture. Far from offering the one decisive Word of God, it may function as a control or boundary for legitimate theological interpretation.

#### **4.3 Areas for further research**

This question of legitimacy in theological interpretation would seem to be an issue which needs clarification. This study assumed the legitimacy of three interpretations of Jonah, but it is not entirely clear that this in fact is the case. Alexander, for one, may have evaluated all the textual evidence relevant to the discussion of Jonah as a historical work, but he may not have grounded his interpretation firmly in this evidence. The possibility that a model of authority could slant textual evidence needs to be considered. Bolin too, may be placing far too much emphasis on extra-textual evidence in order to argue his point. If the text contains *no* reference to the destruction of Nineveh, does not his insistence on this external knowledge lead to an illegitimate interpretation? What makes an interpretation legitimate? Additionally, if the specific role of author's intention within each model of authority could be investigated and clarified, the usefulness of the models for biblical exegesis would be enhanced.



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