Fishing for Jonah (anew)

Various approaches to Biblical interpretation

Louis Jonker & Douglas Lawrie
(editors)

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Edited by
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&
Douglas Lawrie

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Study Guides in Religion and Theology

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Conradie, EM et al 1995. *Fishing for Jonah. Various approaches to Biblical interpretation*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 1. Bellville: UWC Publications.

Conradie, EM 2001. *Ecological theology: An indexed bibliography*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 2. Second revised edition. Bellville: University of the Western Cape.

Conradie, EM 1998. *Welcome to Christian theology! An introduction to its theory and practice.* Study Guides in Religion and Theology 3. Bellville: University of the Western Cape. (no longer available)

Conradie, EM & Jonker, LC 2001. *Angling for interpretation. A guide to understand the Bible better.* Study Guides in Religion and Theology 4. Bellville: University of the Western Cape.

Conradie, EM 2001. *Ecological theology: A guide for further research*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 5. Bellville: University of the Western Cape.

Conradie, EM & Fredericks, CE (eds) 2004. *Mapping Systematic Theology in Africa: An indexed bibliography.* Study Guides in Religion and Theology 6. Stellenbosch: SUN Media.

Jonker, LC & Lawrie, DG (eds) 2005. *Fishing for Jonah (anew): Various approaches to biblical interpretation.* Study Guides in Religion and Theology 7. Stellenbosch: SUN Media.

The following further volumes in this series are forthcoming:

Lawrie, DG 2005. *Speaking to good effect: An introduction to the theory and practice of rhetoric.* Study Guides in Religion and Theology 8. Stellenbosch: SUN Media.

Conradie, EM 2005. *Christian identity: An introduction*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 9. Stellenbosch: SUN Media.

The following further volumes in this series are envisaged:

Lawrie, DG. *An introduction to the world of the Old Testament* (2006).

Conradie, EM et al: An introduction to ethical theory (2006).

Preface

Fishing for Jonah (anew) is the culmination of longstanding discussions between the authors of this book on biblical interpretation that began with our first joint project in 1995, *Fishing for Jonah.* That work was a response to our awareness that there is a scarcity of introductions to exegetical methodology in the field of biblical studies, especially on the African continent. With this volume we want to contribute to biblical scholarship in general, but especially to scholarship in our own context.

This project was made possible by the co-operation of a number of our colleagues. We have used, with or without changes, earlier contributions by Ernst Conradie and Roger Arendse, and have also included new sections by Ernst Conradie, Elna Mouton, Franziska Andrag-Meyer and Gerald West. We thank all these colleagues for making their scholarship available for this project. The contributions of each of these colleagues are acknowledged in the Table of Contents below.

We, the editors, took responsibility for writing chapters 1 and 8, namely the introduction and the conclusion to the book. In the conclusion we ask the question "Where does this leave us?" after we have been introduced to the multitude of interpretation strategies. We argue that the best interpretive practice involves a particular attitude towards reading, rather than a narrow adherence to a single methodology. This attitude is one that is constantly alert to the difficulties of interpretation, but is also aware of the full range of knowledge and interpretive approaches that can be brought to bear on our understanding of a biblical text. For this reason, we regard the diversity and complexity of approaches presented in this book as all being integral to the development of a strong reading practice.

Because different authors contributed to this volume, the reader will encounter different styles of writing. In order to preserve the uniqueness of each contribution we intentionally have not ironed out all differences. The editors, however, take responsibility for the project as a whole. Our intention was that the text should be fairly free-flowing, unburdened by footnotes and a host of bibliographical references. We have, however, included a bibliography and reading list at the end to provide the interested reader with the bibliographical details of authors that we refer to, as well as further reading suggestions on the book of Jonah and the specific strategies discussed in the different chapters.

A few practical exercises are included at the end of the book (although not on every strategy we have discussed), to enable the reader to digest some of the content that is discussed in the various chapters.

We want to express our gratitude towards our institutions, the University of Stellenbosch and the University of the Western Cape, which supported us and made financial contributions to this project. Lannie Birch and Fiona Moolla worked hard to correct our grammar and style. They certainly made a huge contribution towards the quality of this book, and we want to thank them for that. Justa Niemand and Wikus van Zyl of AFRICAN SUN MeDIA, who were actively involved in this project, provided us with a professional and efficient publishing service. They too have earned our gratitude.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this book

This book builds on the introduction to biblical interpretation offered in *Angling for Interpretation* (Conradie & Jonker 2001). The aim of the first book was to offer a basic introduction to biblical interpretation. Its argument runs as follows:

When we read the Bible, we often feel that we do not understand what the text says or that we are not sure whether we have understood the text fully and correctly. Among the problems that give rise to this are the following: 1) our lack of background information, 2) the possibility that the text may contain various layers of meaning, 3) the existence of diverse, mutually exclusive interpretations, and 4) the possibility that pervasive ideologies (either our own or those in the text) may colour our interpretation. In our effort to understand the Bible better, we then start to reflect on the complex process of interpretation, thereby engaging in hermeneutics (the systematic study of interpretation).

Angling for Interpretation identifies seven factors that may influence biblical interpretations: 1) the literary features of the text, 2) knowledge of the historical and social background of the text, 3) the tradition of interpretation, 4) the contemporary context, 5) the interpretative strategies chosen by the reader, 6) the rhetorical context, and 7) hidden ideologies that may operate in the text or the reader. It also offers a model of the interpretation process itself. According to this model, the search for the most satisfactory interpretation of a biblical text involves three steps: 1) the articulation of the understanding of the text we already have, 2) the critical testing and revision of this existing interpretation, and 3) the articulation of new, revised interpretation, which also includes the appropriation of the text as meaningful for us.

The aim of this book, *Fishing for Jonah (anew)*, is to explore in more detail the ways in which we may "test and revise" our existing biblical interpretations, drawing on the insights developed in various schools of biblical hermeneutics. Over the centuries, the seven factors identified in *Angling for Interpretation* have been scrutinized in various schools of biblical hermeneutics, leading to distinct approaches to biblical interpretation that often stand in opposition to one another. The different chapters in this book investigate these schools and approaches in more detail. The theoretical assumptions of each approach are briefly discussed (referring to the work of leading scholars in the particular field) and in most cases the theories are illustrated by means of examples taken from the book of Jonah. Since this book deals with approaches developed by specialists, it is aimed primarily at trained readers of the Bible, those who are studying or have studied theology at a tertiary level or who have acquired some background in theological studies.

An envisaged third volume, *Hooked on Hermeneutics* (to appear in 2005), will focus more specifically on theological hermeneutics. The Bible is not read and studied by specialists only; it is read and used all over the world by Christian communities and by individual Christians in their everyday lives. *Hooked on Hermeneutics* asks how such people may read and understand the Bible in a responsible way that draws on the insights of biblical scholarship and that is relevant to Christian praxis. Or, to rephrase the question, what is distinctly Christian about biblical interpretation?

1.2 The spiral of interpretation

Unless we recognize that various specialist approaches to biblical hermeneutics are rooted in the practice of interpreting the Bible in everyday life, "ordinary" readers and "trained" or "specialist" readers of the Bible will increasingly be alienated from one another. Unfortunately, such alienation has already become quite widespread. Christians who are introduced to the work of (critical) Biblical scholarship often find it difficult to recognize the Bible that they are familiar with and therefore experience critical scholarship as a threat to their faith. Biblical scholars, on the other hand, are sometimes scornful of the "unsophisticated" way in which the Bible is read by pastors and "ordinary" believers.

Nevertheless, the totally untrained "ordinary reader" uses, usually unconsciously, certain strategies of interpretation, and the highly learned scholar enters the interpretative process as an "ordinary reader". The well-known notion of a "spiral of interpretation" illustrates this. The spiral of interpretation may be represented as follows:

1. Articulating one's existing pre-understanding

3. The continuous reformulation and revision of earlier interpretations

2. Critical testing of one's existing interpretation
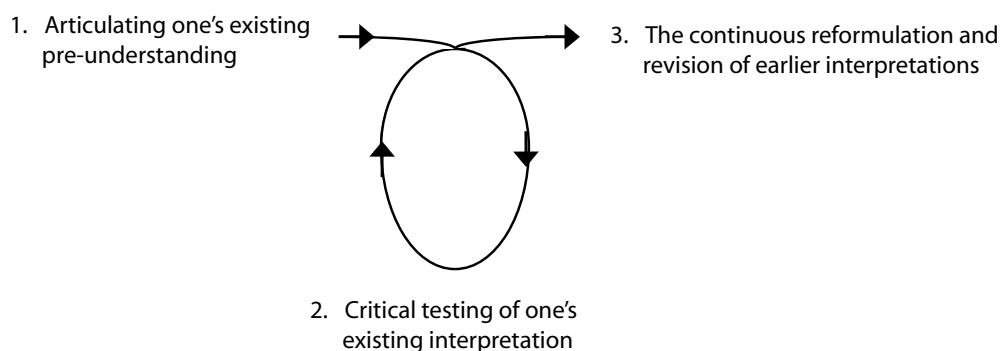
Simple as this model is, it represents a complex process.

1.2.1 We are always already interpreting

It may be possible for a person to say when she picked up a Bible for the first time and started reading it, but it is not possible to say when she started interpreting. Every new interpretation is always based on a prior interpretation; therefore we never approach any text "with a clean slate". We make sense of a "new" text because it is in some ways similar to that of which we have already made sense. For instance, words in the text convey meaning to us because we have already assimilated their meaning in previous acts of interpretation. We have, in brief, a framework of interpretations that enables us to make new interpretations.

When we begin reading the Bible "for the first time", we have in some senses already read it. Perhaps we were told Bible stories by our parents; perhaps we went to Sunday school. At the very least we were socialized in a society permeated with biblical language, imagery and values. Our reading will therefore always bear traces of the tradition of biblical interpretation to which we are heirs.

Although the negative influence of mere tradition on biblical interpretation is often emphasized, the tradition also plays a positive role by providing us with interpretative tools and a framework of meanings. Tradition provides the spectacles without which we would simply not make sense

of any text. One of the fallacies of modernity is that it (sometimes) assumes that we can view anything objectively, without any presuppositions. This assumption often leads to the further assumption that we can, by applying such an objective view, attain knowledge that true in a neutral way, irrespective of its relationship to our lives.

Today most hermeneutical theorists acknowledge that we interpret the world around us primarily to orient ourselves in it. Interpretation is not at the start a means of gaining objective knowledge, but a way of interacting with people and things around us. When we meet obstacles in this process, we try to overcome them by acquiring more knowledge of whatever we are dealing with. Interpretation as a way of relating to our world is thus primary and the search for knowledge secondary.

Before we begin studying the Bible, we have already appropriated it in a positive or negative way. That is, we have responded to it, given it a place in our frame of reference and applied it to our context in some way. Even the rejection of a command in the Bible is a response involving a categorization and a way of acting. In our everyday lives we do not separate an understanding of the message of the Bible from a response to that message. It is when interpretative problems intervene to disturb the flow that we feel the need to suspend appropriation until we checked on our understanding.

When this happens in our reading of the Bible, the first step in the search for better interpretation is to articulate the understanding of the text that we already have. Though this has to be done for the sake of honesty and clarity, it does not imply that the "pre-understanding" we articulate is necessarily adequate. We articulate our provisional understanding precisely in order to test it critically.

1.2.2 We need to test and develop our existing interpretations in order to improve them

We feel a need for critical testing when we doubt whether our existing interpretations are adequate. We have to remember, however, that adequacy in biblical interpretation necessarily remains relative. In the narrower quest for knowledge one may (at least in principle) be able to distinguish truth from falsehood, but when we seek to understand the message of the Bible for today, we cannot reach absolute closure. If our understanding is to include appropriation, a plurality of legitimate interpretations of the Bible has to be accepted. The biblical text itself is complex and layered, but more important is the fact that we respond to the biblical messages in different ways, depending on differing and changing contexts of interpretation.

While interpretations may differ from one another and still be legitimate, not all interpretations are equally adequate. Some interpretations have to be rejected as inadequate and mistaken. Of course, the rejection should not be random and uncritical, hence the need for reasoned criteria. Scholarly debates on interpretation have long centred on the appropriate criteria for critical testing; a section in *Angling for Interpretation* briefly discusses some of the criteria that have been identified in these debates. These criteria cannot, however, be used in a rigid, instrumentalist way to evaluate or "measure" the relative adequacy of any given interpretation. Instead of providing us with set "methods", they set an agenda for a discussion that will never yield final answers.

This volume examines the various approaches to critical testing in greater detail, drawing on the theories and insights of recognized experts in the field. Moreover, it shows that the criteria used in these approaches are themselves debatable and open to interpretation. The theoretical assumptions that underpin the various approaches are often contested amongst biblical scholars.

When the focus is on critical testing, it is easy to forget that critical testing does not stand at the start of the interpretation process. The way in which the Bible is read, used and appropriated, especially in Christian communities, is primary. The task of the specialists who develop critical approaches is the secondary one of testing and developing existing interpretations. Interpretation of the Bible is not a relay race in which the baton is passed from experts in Hebrew and Greek to Old Testament and New Testament scholars, then to Systematic Theologians, then to Practical Theologians, then to pastors, elders and deacons and finally to ordinary Christians. In the context of the Christian tradition, biblical scholarship is rooted in the life of Christian communities, which it assists by testing and developing the corpus of existing interpretations. Obviously this process will sometimes yield new interpretations, but even then the purpose of biblical scholarship is to enrich the existing interpretations of the Bible in Christian communities.

1.2.3 We are constantly reviewing and revising our existing interpretations

Interpretation of the Bible does not begin with critical testing, nor does it end there. There is an ongoing movement from a particular pre-understanding, through the critical testing of the existing interpretation based on this pre-understanding, to the appropriation of a new, revised interpretation. These three "phases" of interpretation form part of a single process. The process of critical testing leads naturally, and often subconsciously, to new interpretations or to new perspectives on old interpretations. This does not mean that all later interpretations will necessarily be "better" than earlier ones, as if interpretation naturally evolved to ever higher forms. In the third phase of the continuing process of interpretation we do indeed revise previous interpretations and thus formulate new ones. This revision (re-vision!) does not, however, inevitably constitute "improvement"; therefore it too has to be subjected to critical testing.

1.3 The structure of *Fishing for Jonah (anew)*

In this volume we have arranged in different exegetical approaches in a roughly chronological order. We start with the approaches that flourished early in the Christian era - in the early church and in Jewish circles (chapter 2). We then indicate briefly how interpreters in the modern era increasingly turned to reason as the ultimate criterion in biblical interpretation (chapter 3). We show how early modern strategies developed into highly formalized methods of interpretation from the eighteenth century onward. Initially historical approaches, involving a study of the context of origin of the biblical texts, predominated (chapter 4). During the first half of the twentieth century, many scholars shifted their attention to texts themselves and studied these as literary works of art (chapter 5). During the second half of the twentieth century, scholars discovered the role of readers in the creation of meaning and started to focus on the reception of texts (chapter 6). Finally, we deal with a number of approaches that adopt a "hermeneutics of suspicion" and offer a critique of specific ideological distortions (chapter 7). The approaches dealt with in chapter 7 are not fully comparable to those dealt with in the other chapters, because they seldom offer a formalized "method" of interpretation. Instead, they seek to criticize prevailing ideologies and offer constructive alternatives. In this process they often make use of theoretical insights and strategies derived from other approaches and disciplines.

Our chronological presentation may be misleading in two ways. We do not wish to imply any qualitative evaluation of the various approaches by our ordering (although each discussion ends with a sub-section entitled "Observations and Evaluation"). In other words, we do not suggest that the history of biblical interpretation follows a line from "weaker, more primitive" approaches to "better, more sophisticated" ones. Nor should the order be seen as absolute.

"Newer" approaches have not completely replaced "older" ones and traces of supposedly modern strategies may be found at an early stage. History is not as neat as scholars would like it to be! Although our chronological order marks distinct shifts in emphasis, it cannot be denied that both complementary and contradictory approaches have co-existed alongside one another in the past and continue to do so.

Moreover, the different approaches discussed in the various chapters of this book are not merely different "methods". As we shall indicate, different interpretative approaches imply different understandings of how texts acquire meaning. We may also say, different approaches look for meaning in different places. We shall review these differences of understanding in Chapter 8.

We have deliberately drawn our illustrations predominantly from the Old Testament book of Jonah. This little book contains both prose narrative and poetry, it has been interpreted in diverse ways over the centuries, it lends itself to creative interpretations, and it is often cited in controversies about the historicity and authority of Scripture. Readers should, however, note that the illustrations of exegetical strategies we draw from it, are often forced or somewhat creative. In some cases, we do not illustrate how a particular approach would influence the interpretation of Jonah, either because the particular approach would yield an interpretation that does not differ significantly from that yielded by other approaches or because the book does not lend itself readily to interpretation by means of this approach. This illustrates two important points to which we shall return in the last chapter. Sometimes different approaches yield the same (or a very similar) interpretation when they are applied to a text. On the other hand, not every approach can be fruitfully applied to every text: approaches differ, because texts differ!

In Chapter 8, we ask ourselves where our exploration has left us. How are we to survive the bewildering variety of interpretative approaches? Or, to be more practical, how do these approaches assist us in our own interpretation of the Bible? We reject the notion that exegetical strategies are objective entities that "deliver meaning" when we impose them mechanically on texts. These strategies, the products of centuries of Bible interpretation, are rather to be seen as formalizations of sensible answers to questions that arise when we read biblical texts. They are our formalized experiences with and intuitions about biblical texts (Barton 1996, 245). Therefore we are not faced with a menu from which we have to select "the best" method of interpretation; instead, the different strategies alert us to the need for a multidimensional approach, an attitude towards interpretation of the Bible that does not systematically exclude from the debate either specific methods or specific interpreters.

Of course, interpreting the Bible is not simply about choosing and applying exegetical strategies. For those Christian communities that take the Bible as their point of departure in the life *coram Deo* (before God) biblical interpretation is always also *theological* interpretation. Theological interpretation involves us in issues of choice and application (or appropriation) at which we can barely hint within the limits of this book. But even our bare hints should be enough to remind readers that biblical interpretation is not a theoretical or technical enterprise divorced from the practice of the Christian life.

CHAPTER 2

Classical strategies of interpretation

2.1 Introduction

The interpretation of the Bible according to defined methods is not a recent approach that began in the modern era; nor could one even argue that it began only after the Bible was written in final form and canonized. Interpretation and re-interpretation were, in fact, part of the driving forces behind the production of biblical texts. As the biblical writings originated over a period of many centuries, older traditions were taken up in the development of the newer literature.

In the early history of the Jewish-Christian tradition, however, a variety of classical methods of interpretation also developed in order to adapt authoritative writings for the contemporary communities of faith. These methods of interpretation developed (as did all later methods) in the context of the epistemological and ontological frames of reference of that era. The methods therefore reflect these frames of reference.

The classical methods of interpretation include the following:

Allegorical interpretation: This approach searches for a "deeper", figurative spiritual meaning underpinning the surface aspects of the text.

Typological interpretation: In this approach certain characters and symbols within the text (especially in the Old Testament) are seen as pre-figurations of events to come. It will only be much later, such as in the New Testament, in our contemporary contexts or even towards the "end of the world", that the full meaning of these pre-figurations becomes apparent.

The Pesher method: This method deciphers secret codes which may be used to send confidential messages. Such messages may be needed, for example, in times of political insecurity. A secret meaning is attributed to specific words and numbers. This method is sometimes extended to discover a secret meaning behind every single aspect of the text.

The rabbinical Midrash methods: The rabbinical *Midrashim* are commentaries which discuss the methods and rules which govern the interpretation of the Jewish law in changing circumstances.

The fourfold meaning of the Scriptures: This approach cannot be described as a formalized strategy of interpretation, but should rather be seen as a theory. This approach perceives four different layers of meaning in a text; namely the literary, allegorical, moral and anagogical meanings of a text. In some respects this theory is closely related to the allegorical approach mentioned above.

Three of these classical methods will now be discussed in greater detail.

2.2 Allegorical interpretation

2.2.1 Background and theory

Allegories, in common with metaphors, similes, idioms, etc, are figures of speech. The best example of a deliberate allegorical interpretation in the Bible is possibly the parable of the sower (Matthew 13). This example may provide a preliminary understanding of the way allegorical interpretation functions. According to the Gospel Jesus tells the story of a man who went out

to sow corn. Some of the seeds fell along the path (where the birds came and ate it), some fell on rocky ground (where the sun burnt the young plants), some fell among thorn bushes (which choked the plants), and finally, some fell in good soil (that produced an abundant harvest).

It is clear from Jesus' exposition of the parable of the sower that each of the elements of the story (the seed, the rocky soil, the thorny soil, the shallow soil, the fertile soil) represents a less tangible idea. Each element has both a literal and a figurative, or symbolic, meaning. One can understand the parable only if one understands each symbolic meaning. The literal features of the parable function as didactic instruments that gradually lead the original audience to a spiritual insight, one that cannot be directly named or described

Allegory may be a literary genre, or it can be used as a strategy of interpretation. Texts deliberately written in the genre of allegory (such as the parable of the sower) are usually also interpreted in an allegorical way. Allegorical interpretation is, however, often used to interpret texts in the Bible not written in the genre of allegory.

Allegory as a strategy for interpretation was developed in the city of Alexandria. Alexandria, situated at the Nile delta, was founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE, and became a prosperous centre for Hellenistic culture, philosophy and trade during the Roman Empire. The philosophy of Plato dominated the world of thought in Alexandria. According to Plato, the fleeting world of the senses, in all its variety and transience, can never provide a point of departure to determine the good and the true. The world of the senses is merely a dim reflection - a shadow - of another, invisible world of ideas which is pure, eternal, perfect, infallible and true. The world of the senses is not the "real" world; it only directs us to the world of ideas.

In Alexandria, the philosophy of Plato eventually also influenced the scholars' approach to the interpretation of texts. The words and sentences in a text, and their literal, overt meanings, can never be regarded as the truth of the text. Each text also has a deeper, "true" significance. The task of allegorical interpretation is to uncover this bedrock of "truth" which lies beneath the surface meaning of the text.

The allegorical approach was soon applied to the interpretation of biblical texts. The Jewish scholar Philo, the church father Origin (185/6-254 AD) and Clemens of Alexandria (?-215 AD) played an important role in this development. In this new approach, God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures was seen as a profound mystery. The Bible portrays this in symbolic language. The objective of interpretation is to perceive this mystery in the text. This is possible only through God's grace, and more specifically through the enlightenment of one's intellect. Only an initiated group of elites is really competent to discern this deeper meaning of Scripture.

The allegorical approach was constantly refined. Origin distinguished, for example, between three levels of meaning based on the distinction between a human being's body, soul and spirit. A text therefore has a literal, or "bodily", meaning, a moral meaning, linked to the human soul, and a pneumatic or allegorical meaning, which addresses the spirit. The true meaning of the text is captured only if one is able to discern the spiritual meaning, through biblical interpretation.

This allegorical approach to the interpretation of texts remained popular throughout the Middle Ages and it is also often used today. The method was later developed further into a theory distinguishing between four different levels of meaning:

※ the literal meaning (which describes what happened);

※ the allegorical meaning (which describes the content of what should be believed);

※ the moral meaning (which describes how one should act from day to day);

⊛ the anagogical meaning (which indicates the goal towards which we should strive).

According to this theory, the word "Jerusalem", for example, indicates: (i) literally, the physical historical city, (ii) allegorically, the Church, (iii) morally, the human soul, and (iv) anagogically, the heavenly city towards which we should strive.

2.2.2 Jonah in the light of an allegorical approach

The book of Jonah can be interpreted allegorically in a rather dramatic way. Each aspect of the story has a particular "hidden" meaning attributed to it. Allegorical interpretations of the book of Jonah are usually based on the following comparisons.

⊛ Jonah is a symbol for Israel (and also for the church). The following similarities are identified in the relationship between Jonah and Israel:

  ⊛ Both Jonah and Israel were called to be a witness to the nations. Jonah was called to Nineveh and Israel was called to be a "light to the nations".

  ⊛ Both Jonah and Israel were often disobedient to this calling.

  ⊛ Both Jonah and Israel were punished for this disobedience. Jonah was thrown overboard a ship and almost died of sunstroke. Israel was punished in the time of the Babylonian exile after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

  ⊛ Both Jonah and Israel were saved by God. The big fish that swallowed Jonah, spat him out onto dry land and God sent him a green plant to protect him from the sun. The people of Israel were liberated from their slavery in Egypt and were often saved from military predicaments during the time of the judges and the kings, and again during their return from exile.

  ⊛ God's grace is greater than both Jonah and Israel imagined.

  ⊛ The meaning of Jonah's name in biblical Hebrew is "dove". The prophet Hosea (a contemporary of the Jonah of 2 Kings 14:25) once said: "Ephraim (Israel) is like a stupid and mindless *yônâ* (dove)" (Hosea 7:11). Both Jonah and Israel are like a dove: stupid and mindless.

⊛ Jonah's name (Jonah-ben-Amitai = son of truth, faithfulness) may be seen as a symbol for rigid Jewish orthodoxy.

⊛ The big fish is a symbol for the Babylonian exile. The fish swallowed Jonah the way king Nebuchadnezzar swallowed the northern kingdom of Israel. Jonah found a refuge in the fish; likewise, a small remnant of the southern kingdom of Judah was saved during the exile.

⊛ The fact that Jonah was spat out by the fish symbolizes the return from exile, and later came to represent the necessity of being born again, to begin a new life in the Spirit.

⊛ The ship to Tarshish is seen as a symbol of the Jewish synagogue or any form of legalistic religion.

⊛ The sailors are a symbol of the priesthood or the Pharisees.

⊛ The wood of the ship is a symbol of the wood of the cross of Jesus Christ.

⊛ The green plant that gave some temporary shade to Jonah is a symbol for the return from exile under Zerubabel. After a while the returned exiles were getting disappointed, because everything did not go according to their expectation of a glorious return.

⊛ The worm that chewed the plant so that it withered and died is a symbol of Christ who liberated us from the strictures of the law.

2.2.3 Observations and evaluation

⚙ A positive aspect of the allegorical method is that it makes the text accessible for people in their own contexts. Notice the way in which each of the specific elements of the allegorical narrative in the book of Jonah refers to an abstract idea that can be easily transferred to the immediate context of later readers. For example, the city of Nineveh does not refer simply to the empirical city (which is geographically far removed from our South African context) or to the enmity between Israel and Assyria (which is historically far removed from our context). The city of Nineveh is brought closer to home by attributing an allegorical meaning to it (e.g. as a symbol for the "distant mission fields", which is often romanticized in some missionary approaches). Allegorical interpretation therefore does provide a strategy to make the message of Jonah relevant to diverse historical contexts. It succeeds in bridging the divide between text and contemporary context.

⚙ Allegorical interpretation is subject to the dangers of elitism. It is only the initiated few who are competent to appreciate the hidden, "deeper" meaning of the text. In the Catholic Middle Ages, this safeguarded the power and doctrinal authority of the church. Ordinary people could comprehend these deeper mysteries only by accepting the doctrinal authority of the church or, by participating in the sacramental ministry of the church.

⚙ Allegorical interpretation is often the product of a hermeneutic embarrassment. It often gains popularity during times when the original meaning and message of the Bible (especially the Old Testament) become unintelligible. It provides a strategy to make the text immediately relevant within the symbolic world of a different context from that of its origin. The deeper meaning of the text therefore provides the necessary escape mechanism from the hermeneutic embarrassment through illustrating the immediate and direct relevance of the text in the contemporary context.

⚙ Sometimes the more literal meaning of a text not only becomes incomprehensible, but also (for particular groups) crude, unacceptable or even repulsive. If one wishes to uphold the authority of the biblical texts, allegorical interpretation provides an excellent tool. Allegory enables one to resolve all these annoying problems. A good example is the allegorical interpretation of the love songs in the Song of Songs, which are apparently erotic. The sexual connotations of these erotic songs are understood allegorically as a description of the covenant between God and Israel or God and the church. This reading affords the text a deeper, more spiritual meaning, and shows how the allegorical approach often leads to a far-reaching spiritualizing of the meaning of biblical texts. This approach emerged from the Platonic conviction that the spiritual meaning is superior to the literal.

⚙ It should be clear that allegorical interpretation can easily lead to far-fetched speculation. Almost anything can be read into the text. A good example is the allegorical expositions of the five stones David picked up to kill Goliath. These five stones may refer allegorically to almost anything (for example, different spiritual virtues, fruit of the Spirit, etc.). The danger of arbitrary selectiveness is therefore looming. An allegorical strategy of interpretation works reasonably well only if there are sufficient similarities between the two entities that are compared (e.g. Jonah and Israel). There is, however, no clear indication in the text of Jonah that the text should be interpreted allegorically (unlike the parable of the sower where an allegorical exposition is provided in the Gospel text).

2.3 Typological interpretation

2.3.1 Background and theory

The strategy of typology is especially used to show how the Old Testament is relevant to an understanding of the New Testament. As it explains the relationship between the Old Testament and the message concerning Jesus Christ, this method of interpretation is sometimes known as "Christological" interpretation.

This approach is based on the idea that the Bible is primarily about the person and work of Jesus Christ, and that the message of the Old Testament should therefore also be concerned with Jesus Christ. However, this is difficult to maintain because it contains no explicit references to Jesus Christ. The typological strategy provides one possible answer to this problem. Some figures in the Old Testament (especially Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Elijah and Jeremiah) are interpreted as "types" of Jesus Christ, or "Christ-like figures". This implies that certain similarities between these figures and the person and work of Jesus Christ are identified. They therefore provide a prophetic shadow image, a pre-figuration of Christ. In this way it is possible to argue that the person of Jesus Christ is also at the centre of the Old Testament. At the same time, these "types" may also help us to appreciate the message concerning Jesus Christ.

These "types" can also function as a pre-figuration of the message about Jesus Christ in terms of the differences between them and Jesus. The contrasts between these figures or "anti-types" and Jesus Christ provide a negative pre-figuration of Jesus. They help us to understand Jesus simply because they are the opposite of who Jesus Christ is. Characters such as Adam, Samson and Jonah are often regarded as examples of these "anti-types".

In Romans 5:12-17, Paul uses a typological interpretation of the figure of Adam, as an "anti-type" of Christ. There is, according to Paul, a possible comparison (*typos*) between Adam and the one who was to come (Romans 5:14). Through his disobedience Adam was the cause of death for the whole of humanity. Jesus Christ is, on the other hand, the origin of a new life for the whole of humanity.

It is also possible to relate many other objects, themes and events in the Old Testament to New Testament data. The New Testament is in each case considered to be the fulfilment of the "true" meaning of the Old Testament. The crossing through the Red Sea symbolizes the baptism in Christ; manna depicts the bread of the Eucharist; the water from the rock (Exodus 17) symbolizes the wine of the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 10:1-4); the ark of Noah refers to the baptism of believers (1 Peter 3:20-21); Isaac carrying the fire-wood for his own sacrifice symbolizes Jesus carrying his own cross; the flood depicts the last judgment; the priests in the Old Testament prefigure Christ's own priesthood (Hebrews 9:24); the temple symbolizes the church (2 Corinthians 6:16) and so forth. The full meanings of these Old Testament events and symbols become clear only when illuminated by the New Testament.

To summarize: a figure in the Old Testament (e.g. Jonah) may function as a shadow image or (anti-) type of a figure in the New Testament (e.g. Jesus). On the one hand, the character of Jonah may help us to understand the work of Jesus - Jonah provides an inverse image of the person of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, our knowledge of the life of Jesus Christ also helps us to understand the true meaning of the book of Jonah. It is, of course, true that, in typological interpretation, Christians cannot read the book of Jonah without remembering what they have read in the New Testament. Their knowledge of Christ then determines their interpretation of Jonah.

2.3.2 Jonah in the light of a typological approach

In typological interpretations of the book of Jonah the following analogies between Jonah and Jesus are usually discussed. These similarities between Jonah and Jesus are indeed quite remarkable:

- Jonah and Jesus came from the same geographical district. The towns of Gath-Hefer and Nazareth are both in Galilee. Within this context the comment about Jesus (reported in the New Testament gospels) "Can a prophet come from Galilee?" becomes significant!

- The captain of the ship says to the rather sleepy Jonah: "Keep watch and pray to your god". Compare this with Jesus' similar command to his disciples in Gethsemane "Keep watch and pray that you will not fall into temptation" (Matthew 26:41).

- The contrast between the sleeping Jonah (1:5) and the sleeping Jesus in a boat during a storm (Mark 4) is also striking. The sea calmed down after Jonah was taken from the ship's hold where he lay asleep, and thrown into the sea by the scared crew members. In contrast, Jesus commands the sea to calm down after he was woken by his scared disciples.

- Jonah is the real "scapegoat" (the lot was cast and it fell on Jonah, because he was guilty of causing the storm). By contrast, Jesus is innocently crucified as scapegoat.

- The sailors argue that it is better that one man, i.e. Jonah, should die instead of the whole crew (1:14). This is the very same argument used by Caiaphas in the plot against Jesus (John 11:50).

- The sailors ask that Jonah's death should not be attributed to them (1:14). The crowd, however, asks Pilate to attribute Jesus' blood to them and their children (Matthew 27:25).

- Jonah receives a crown of seaweed (2:5); Jesus receives a crown of thorns.

- The three days that Jonah spent in the belly of the big fish may be regarded as a pre-figuration of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ over the course of three days. Jesus himself refers to this comparison (Matthew 12:40).

2.3.3 Observations and evaluation

- The dangers related to typological interpretation are similar to those related to allegorical interpretation. The most important problem is that the texts of the Old Testament do not contain any explicit reference to Jesus Christ. This strategy therefore reads a particular message concerning Jesus Christ into the text of the Old Testament. This is obviously dangerous, irresponsible and subject to far-fetched speculation.

- Furthermore, this strategy reflects no interest in the meaning that the story of Jonah had in the historical context in which it was told, and takes insufficient account of this context. It remains important to try to reconstruct this message (at least to some extent) to restrain a far-reaching speculation in the interpretation and application of the book of Jonah in contemporary contexts.

- Despite these dangers, from the point of view of the Christian tradition, it is scarcely possible to do without the typological approach. The German theologian, Gerhard von Rad, led the way towards a new appreciation of typological interpretation. According to Von Rad, there remains a theological continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is, he argues, the same God who was revealed in Jesus Christ who was also present in the historical events narrated in the Old Testament. The witnesses to God described in the Old Testament provide a pre-figuration of the God revealed to us more clearly in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament does remain provisional and incomplete: God's promises of land, rest and cosmic

salvation in the old covenant reach their fulfillment in the new dispensation under the Spirit of Christ.

⊛ Typological interpretation in this form takes the historical character of the revelation of God seriously. Interestingly, it also allows for the role of the Holy Spirit to be expressed in contemporary typological applications. It is, in fact, the same God who was present in the Old Testament, who was revealed in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ and who is still present through the work of the Holy Spirit in our contemporary contexts.

2.4 Rabbinical (*midrash*) interpretation

2.4.1 Background and theory

Long before the New Testament era, the Jewish rabbis had already developed methods to make the Torah (the Law) relevant to ever-changing circumstances.

The Pentateuch, (the first five books of the Old Testament), was more or less completed shortly after the Babylonian exile which ended in 538 BCE. The Law could not, however, make sufficient provision for new questions in changing circumstances. These texts often lost their immediate relevance and the rabbis therefore felt it necessary to extend the stipulations of the Law. These extensions were subject to particular rules to prevent arbitrary applications. Hillel, a rabbi from the time of King Herod the Great, identified seven such rules. These were expanded to thirteen rules by Rabbi Ishmael and still later to thirty-two rules by Rabbi Eliezer. The methods used by these rabbis to explain the consequences of the Law are known as *midrashim* (expositions). These *midrash* methods can be defined as a rabbinical mode of instruction which used scriptural texts as pegs upon which to hang certain moral observations in a fanciful manner.

There were various kinds of rabbinical expansions of the Law. Some expansions contained further stipulations of the Law (for example, of laws pertaining to the Sabbath). Others contained theological arguments. These theological arguments could be supported by a string of texts in which the same key term appears. For example, in Romans 4:1-12, Paul finds references to the justification of circumcision, and treats these as "proofs", simply by referring to Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1 where the same concept of "justification" is mentioned. These texts may be strung together like a string of pearls, and this specific method is therefore also referred to as the "pearls-on-a-string" method. These expansions of the stipulations and implications of the Law were generally known as *halakah*, which means "the rule according to which we should act".

Further expositions of the Law consisted of literature for instruction and for the purpose of preaching. These expositions were known as *haggadah* or "narration(s)". The rabbis had a habit of telling stories to illustrate a point, rather than saying it directly. The rabbis told these stories to explain something, to convey a moral principle or to give religious instruction. The rabbis often argued with one another about some finer theological detail. If someone among them did not understand the particular point of view, the rabbis would explain it by telling a story. If it was still not understood, the rabbi would not explain it but would simply tell another story, and yet another and another (if that still proved necessary).

An old *midrash* on Jonah 1:2, for example, asks the question: "To what can this behaviour of Jonah be compared?" By way of an answer, the commentary tells the following (fictitious) story:

> "... to a king of flesh and blood, whose wife died as she was nursing their son. He looked for a wet nurse to nurse his son, so that he would not die. What did the king's wet nurse do? She left the king's son lying in bed and ran away. When the king saw that she had run away and

had left his son lying in bed, he wrote a letter, commanding that she be captured and thrown into prison, in a place where there were snakes and scorpions. After a few days the king went to the pit where she was imprisoned, and she wept and called to the king from the pit. Then the king was moved to have mercy, and he ordered his servants to pull her out and bring her before him. So it was also with Jonah. When he fled from the Holy One, blessed be He, He put him in the belly of the fish until he cried to the Holy One, blessed be He, and the fish threw him out."

Another ancient *midrash* discusses Jonah's prayer and addresses the problem that one often forgets to pray after a crisis has passed:

"Jonah had been three days in the belly of the fish and had not prayed. Then the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke: 'I have made a roomy place for him in the belly of the fish, so that he does not become anxious, and he is not praying to me. Now I will appoint a pregnant fish that has 365 000 small fish in it so that he will become afraid and pray to me, because I desire the prayers of the righteous.'"

It was, however, important to the rabbis to show that their stories were more or less in accordance with their authoritative scriptures. They therefore often took a particular text as a point of departure and built a whole story around that text. The text itself usually came from a bygone era and its meaning was no longer immediately accessible to the rabbi's contemporary audience. The rabbi's story, however, would illustrate its contemporary relevance.

These stories might have been based on historical events, but might also have been completely fictitious. The parables of Jesus are excellent examples of stories with no historical basis, but which conveyed important messages.

2.4.2 Jonah as a *midrash*

A *midrash* (in this specified sense of the word) is a commentary on a particular text consisting of illustrations, stories and explanations. There are scholars who argue that the book of Jonah itself contains such a story which was once told by a rabbi to make a particular theological point or to illustrate a particular moral value. The story probably took one of two possible texts as its point of departure:

⚙ The text of 2 Kings 14:25 may have served as the basis for the rabbi's story. This text mentions a prophet, Jonah-ben-Amittai, who, many centuries before, had the agreeable duty of telling king Jeroboam II that he would expand Israel's territory. The rabbi then told another story about this prophet, Jonah-ben-Amittai. It is possible that the rabbi based his story on a legend from the oral tradition. It is, however, quite as likely that the rabbi constructed his story freely and imaginatively.

⚙ It is also possible that the rabbi might have used Jeremiah 18:7-9 as a point of departure for his story. In this text Yahweh said: "... if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them ...". According to this argument, the book of Jonah is a commentary on Jeremiah 18:7-9 to explain how far Yahweh's grace could extend - even to the ancient city of Nineveh (already destroyed by 609 BCE).

According to the theory that Jonah was a *midrash* based on either 2 Kings 14:25 or Jeremiah 18:7-9, the historical basis of the story is not at all important. It is, however, extremely important to capture the truth the rabbi tried to convey. If one did not understand this truth, the rabbi would probably have to construct another story to explain the same point.

2.4.3 Observations and evaluation

⚙ Rabbinical interpretation and teaching still form the scriptural basis of modern-day Jewish religion. This is thus an important part of a tradition which has been appreciated and valued through many centuries.

⚙ Rabbinic *midrash* interpretation has generated some of the most creative stories about biblical events or characters. These complex narratives may be used to illustrate a multiplicity of biblical ideas.

⚙ It is often difficult for those interpreters who do not share the reference world of Judaism to gather from the *midrash* what point is being made. To understand a biblical book, such as the book of Jonah, as a *midrash* does not necessarily mean that the point of this *midrash* is also clear. This form of interpretation, therefore, illuminates the genre of the text, more than it does its meaning.

⚙ The *midrashim* often link biblical texts together solely on account of one point of similarity between these texts. This similarity is often not central to the meaning of those texts.

CHAPTER 3

A modern era emerges

3.1 Introduction

During the first more or less four centuries of the Christian era two major schools of interpretation, the Alexandrian and the Antiochean, emerged. The Alexandrian school propagated an allegorical approach, while the Antiochean school was involved with the typological and historical aspects of interpretation (see the previous chapter). Gradually the allegorical approach became predominant. This approach, which remained in vogue for many centuries, was gradually refined to determine the meaning of biblical texts according to a fourfold distinction (as mentioned in the previous chapter). The methods which identified a fourfold meaning in the Scriptures were characteristic of interpretation up until and during the Middle Ages.

The emergence of the European Renaissance and humanism in the fifteenth century, however, brought about major changes. These broad movements in society, because they represented a new appreciation, and consciousness, of history in general, triggered an enormous interest in the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. The classical languages were studied anew and the slogan *ad fontes* ("back to the sources") was increasingly heard. Gradually the demand for exact and controllable research became stronger.

From the sixteenth century significant scientific developments took place, particularly in the field of astronomy. In 1514 the Polish priest, Copernicus, came to the conclusion that the earth is not the centre of the universe with the sun circling around it. In fact, his theory was that it is just the other way round. The earth and all the other heavenly bodies circle around the sun. Because this theory posed a threat to the traditional ecclesiastical understanding of the biblical cosmology (where a flat-surfaced earth was seen to be the centre of God's creation), he initially propagated his theory anonymously. However, this idea was developed further by Galileo Galilei after 1609. Galilei declared that the sun is not even the centre of the universe, but that many other solar systems exist. These ideas brought Galilei into conflict with the church authorities who wanted to adhere to the traditional understanding of the biblical cosmology.

These developments in society also impacted significantly on religion and the understanding of the Bible. The leaders of the Protestant reformation in the sixteenth century shared with humanism an interest in history. Soon historical interpretation of the Bible gained ground over allegorical interpretation. Allegorical interpretation further lost its popularity because it came to be regarded as the institutional church's way of justifying its authority from Scripture. As products of their time, the reformers regarded thorough study of the ancient languages as important, and they held the philological and grammatical aspects of biblical interpretation in high esteem. *Historical-grammatical* exegesis gradually emerged.

Several seventeenth century scholars, such as Bonfrère, Morinus, Cappellus, Grotius, Coccejus, De la Peyrère, Spinoza, Simon, and Clericus, found the inspiration for their research in the various textual, lexicographical and grammatical publications which appeared in the sixteenth century. These publications were made possible by the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the second half of the fifteenth century. The ideas of the Renaissance and the Reformation could then spread quickly over Europe.

The Enlightenment (or "*Aufklärung*", as this period is often called according to the German designation) in the seventeenth century initiated a shift once again. Although the historical aspect remained an important category of interpretation, the increasing emphasis on rational ability necessitated a reorientation. The role of the French philosopher, René Descartes, cannot be overestimated in this phase of history. From 1637 he began to circulate his famous phrase *Cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"). This slogan led to a new appreciation of the intellectual and cognitive abilities of human beings, and fostered a new self-confidence. Descartes distrusted every human method of acquiring knowledge but cognitive and logical understanding; he believed that only logical thought could lead to true knowledge. These ideas were taken up more than a century later by Immanuel Kant when he published his "Critique of pure reason" in 1781. According to Kant, one should distinguish between practical rationality, which would include moral values and ethical norms, and pure rationality, which uses experiments and rational argumentation. The church and religious faith can play a major social role as forms of practical rationality, which serve to keep society intact. However, only pure rationality can lead to true knowledge.

These philosophical directions brought about major changes in the understanding of the Bible. Faith and Scripture were no longer regarded as criteria according to which biblical interpretation could be tested. It was no longer the *critica sacra* (religious precepts)*,* but the *critica profana* (secular ideas) which were regarded as the criteria according to which the Bible should be interpreted. This more critical attitude towards texts brought factors such as their origin, literary form and original purpose into play. This critical attitude constituted the basis of *historical-rationalist* interpretation.

The scholar who brought about the final breach with traditional doctrine was *J.S. Semler* (born in 1725). With his free way of thinking and teaching he brought biblical studies to a decisive moment. He demanded the *Entdogmatisierung* ("getting rid of dogmatic views") of biblical history by means of the principles of the Enlightenment, and advocated the liberation of biblical studies from the papal authority of protestant orthodoxy. He distinguished between the divine contents and human form of the Bible, and used an historical approach which critically judged the biblical concept of history, as well as the idea of the canon. He made a strict distinction between "Word of God" and "Scripture", and as such, between "theology" and "religion".

This new approach towards interpretation soon met with opposition. Various historical grammarians reacted strongly to the notion that the interpretation of Scripture should be subsidiary to the human intellect. As a result they favoured a literal interpretation of the texts which (according to them) described real history. This counter-reaction gave rise to *historical-literal* interpretation which is still prevalent in modern fundamentalism.

Historical-rationalist interpretation developed further into what came to be known as historical-critical exegesis. This development will be described in the following chapter. The developments summarized in this introduction, can now be discussed in greater detail. Although the approaches identified and described here cannot be regarded as well-defined and generally accepted methods, they are distinguished here for didactic purposes.

3.2 Historical-grammatical approach

3.2.1 Background and theory

The Protestant reformation of 1517 took place against the background described above, namely of the European Renaissance and humanism. The Reformation had severe implications for Scriptural

interpretation. Because the reformers shared the humanist interest in history, historical exegesis gained ground at the expense of allegorical interpretation. The reformers regarded allegorical interpretation as the means by which the institutional church sought to control people's ideas on the Bible. The authority of the pope and the church to determine correct interpretation of the Bible was increasingly questioned. Instead, it was proposed that the Bible should be its own norm, and not the church tradition. Hence the slogan *sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres est* ("Holy Scripture is its own interpreter") was formulated. Problematic parts of the Bible had to be explained with reference to other biblical texts. This slogan corresponded to another slogan of the Reformation, namely *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone"). The slogan *sola fide* ("by faith alone"), which was also heard during the Reformation, demanded that every interpretation of the Bible be brought into line with the principles of faith.

As products of their time, the reformers had a keen interest in the philological and grammatical aspects of biblical interpretation. The study of the classical languages was popular. Luther and Calvin (in common with the humanist Desiderius Erasmus) maintained that the Bible had to be studied in the original languages. However, it should also be accessible to ordinary people. This would free them from the papal authority on interpretation. Luther therefore translated the Bible into German.

The fundamental principles of the historical-grammatical approach can be summarized as follows:

- Scripture had to be interpreted historically. It was accepted that the text referred to real events in history.

- As the Bible was regarded as historiography, no particular attention was paid to the variety of literary genres.

- The text had to be interpreted taking into account the context in which it was written. The geography and archaeology of Israel were therefore regarded as important.

- The text was regarded as a unity produced by a single author, and not as a text that resulted from a long process of development. Possible contradictions had to be interpreted in order to conceal them, and texts were harmonized with one another. The historical interest of these interpreters therefore lay mainly in their urge to confirm and to prove the historicity of the text, rather than to question it.

- With regard to the grammatical aspect of this approach, the emphasis was on words as determiners of meaning in sentences, rather than on sentences as a whole. Strong emphasis was placed on the "original" meaning of words (etymology).

- Although biblical texts were read against their contemporary historical background, these scholars were of the opinion that the gap between the context in which the Bible was written, and their own contemporary era was insignificant. The Bible could therefore be seen to have universal meaning which would be true for all ages and situations.

With these principles in mind, we can now interpret the book of Jonah from a historical-grammatical perspective.

3.2.2 Jonah in the light of a historical-grammatical approach

(a) Historicity

Historical-grammarians do not doubt the historicity of the book of Jonah at all. They advance the following arguments:

⚙ The book represents an historical report of the prophet's actions.

⚙ Early Jews, as well as Christians, accept the historicity of the book (cf. Tobit 14:4ff and Josephus, Ant IX, 12:2).

⚙ According to 2 Kings 14:25, we know that Jonah was a historical figure.

⚙ Christ believed that the book of Jonah was historically true and He referred to it. He even compared the three days he had to remain in the grave to the three days Jonah spent inside the fish (cf. Matthew 12:38-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32).

Because the historical veracity of the book of Jonah is never questioned, the episodes with the fish and the wonder-tree are regarded as real incidents, made possible by the Almighty's ability to do wonders. The following quotation from Luther shows that he accepts that the account of events in Jonah is historically accurate:

> "Jonah must have thought these the longest days and nights ever lived under the sun. It must have seemed an interminably long time that he sat there in the dark. Yes, I suppose that he occasionally lay down and stood up. He saw neither sun nor moon and was unable to compute the passage of time. Nor did he know where in the sea he was traveling about with the fish. How often lung and liver must have pained him! How strange his abode must have been among the intestines and the huge ribs!"

Because the story was seen to refer to real events, these could only be understood as miraculous. Consider Luther's commentary again:

> "But this story of the prophet Jonah is so great that it is almost unbelievable, yes it even sounds like a lie, and more full of nonsense than any poet's fable. If it were not in the Bible, I'd consider it a silly lie. Because if one thinks about it, Jonah was three days in the huge belly of the whale, where he could have been digested in three hours and changed into the flesh and blood of the whale. He could have died there a hundred times, under the earth, in the sea, inside the whale. Isn't that living in the midst of death? In comparison with this miracle, the wonder at the Red Sea was nothing."

(b) Authorship

The historical-grammatical approach treats the question of authorship with reference to the name of the book, Jonah. The book is part of the Biblical canon, and of the prophetic literature in particular. According to ancient witnesses, the book should be regarded as one of the books of the Minor Prophets. Each of these books is named after the prophet whose prophecies are described within it, and who is therefore seen as the author of the book. The book of Jonah, therefore, would be seen to have been written by Jonah himself. Unlike the other prophetic books, this book contains stories about the life of the prophet. However, it does also contain his prophecies, which he is seen to have authored.

A further common argument to prove the authorship of Jonah is the reference in 2 Kings 14:25 to the historical figure, Jonah-ben-Amittai from Gath-Hefer, a prophet who lived during the reign of Jeroboam II. This scriptural reference supports the notion that Jonah was a real person in history.

It then follows that the Jonah who was sent to Nineveh was actually the Jonah-ben-Amittai of 2 Kings 14:25. As a prophet he wrote down his experiences.

(c) Date

The dating of the book of Jonah should be determined by considering the above-mentioned reference to the historical figure of Jonah-ben-Amittai in 2 Kings 14:25. As this prophet lived during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (787-747 BCE), it follows that Jonah prophesied during the eighth century BCE (approximately 780 BCE). The book of Jonah was in all probability written during that period.

This date of origin is affirmed by the position of the book in the Hebrew canon. Jonah fits in after Amos and before Obadiah, both prophets of the eighth century BCE.

(d) Historical and geographical context

During the eighth century BCE Assyria was at the height of its power. King Menahem of Israel became subservient to the Assyrian king, according to 2 Kings 15:19, a few years after the reign of Jeroboam II. It can therefore be assumed that Assyria was already a powerful nation at the time of Jeroboam II and Jonah. Various sources indicate that there was frequent contact between Assyria and Palestine.

Nineveh was the last capital of the Assyrian Empire. It was situated on the eastern bank of the River Tigris. The city was destroyed in 612 BCE by the Babylonians. According to Genesis 10:9-11 Nimrod founded the city, and it became the royal seat from approximately 1100 BCE. The name Nineveh probably does not refer to the city alone, but also to the small dependent villages surrounding it. Secular and archaeological evidence bear witness to the description of the city in the book of Jonah.

Instead of going east as Yahweh commanded, Jonah went west to Tarshish. Tarshish refers to the city of Tartessos at the mouth of the Guadalquivir in southwestern Spain. Tarshish, according to Jeremiah 10:9 and Ezekiel 27:12, was a place where silver, tin, iron, and lead were mined. The purpose of this reference probably indicated the westernmost point of the then known world.

(e) Original readers

Jonah writes his book to the people of Israel of the eighth century BCE. They had become accustomed to the fact that Yahweh had elected them from among the nations. As a result, they guarded their identity against other nations. The book intends to prepare Israel for the possibility that heathen nations, who may repent in future, may be accepted within the community of those who share in the blessings and redemption of Yahweh.

(f) Universal relevance

The historical-grammatical approach assumes that Scripture has universal relevance for all ages and situations. Luther's explanation of Jonah 1 illustrates this point clearly:

> "All of this is recorded as a warning for us. From it we glean the lesson first of all that he who will not obey God's will willingly must, in the end, bow to His will unwillingly ... In the second place, we must learn to know God's mercy well and not depend on our works, whether good or bad, but know that sin does not condemn us nor good works save us, but that only God's grace preserves us."

3.2.3 Observations and evaluation

◉ It is clear from the above-mentioned discussion that the reference to Jonah-ben-Amittai in 2 Kings 14:25 forms the basis of many historical-grammatical arguments. This Jonah is identified with the Jonah of the prophetic book. The only link between these scriptural references is that they definitely refer to the same historical person. A whole series of arguments is then based on this uncritical assumption - authorship, dating, readership, and historical background.

◉ The assumption that the book of Jonah and 2 Kings 14:25 refer to the same historical person has its origin in the historical-grammatical notion that the Bible as a whole has a historical basis. This approach is thus insensitive to the literary nature of the book of Jonah. It does not make provision for the possibility that the book could possibly be a story or a parable which makes use of the reader's knowledge of 2 Kings 14:25 in order to create a particular effect.

◉ This approach assumes that the Bible is a historical record, and it thus "forces" all textual information into this framework. No provision is made for the interpretation of symbols or themes, such as those suggested in the episodes with the fish and the wonder tree.

◉ The strength of the historical-grammatical approach is that it brings the category of "history" into play in the interpretation of texts, but its weakness is that this category tends to be applied uncritically.

3.3 Historical-rationalist interpretation

3.3.1 Background and theory

It is questionable whether this phase in the history of biblical interpretation merits an independent description as a distinctive approach. In fact, it was a transitional phase between the historical-grammatical and historical-critical approaches (see next chapter). The purpose of describing it separately here is to demonstrate the impact that the Enlightenment had on the interpretation of Scripture. This description also explains the rise of a counter-reaction in the form of historical-literal interpretation.

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth century had major repercussions for interpretive approaches. It gave rise to the following characteristics of the historical-rationalistic approach:

◉ Although history remained an important category in the interpretation of texts, the emphasis on human reason prompted a reorientation. In their efforts to reconstruct ancient history from the biblical texts, these scholars came to the conclusion that the many contradictions in these texts made them "less suitable" for historical reconstruction.

◉ Contradictions were no longer explained away with reference to other texts, but rather became, themselves, the object of investigation.

◉ The validity of faith as a presupposition in interpretation came to be criticized by those who emphasized the human intellect, and who considered faith a "subjective" rather than rational basis for analysis. According to them Scripture had to be explained from the "objective" position of human rational abilities.

◉ Scripture was no longer regarded as a source to be used in its own exposition.

◉ As a result of this more critical attitude, closer attention was now paid to the origin of texts, their literary form and their original function.

◉ The historical veracity of texts was no longer accepted at face value. A new question emerged:

given all the contradictions and uncertainties within a text, how can we determine what really happened?

For Spinoza, one of the leading figures in seventeenth century biblical interpretation, scriptural interpretation had to be liberated from the oppression of theology. The following quotation illustrates his view:

> "I found nothing taught expressly by scripture which does not agree with our understanding, or which is repugnant thereto, and as I saw that the prophets taught nothing which is not very simple and easily to be grasped by all, and further, that they clothed their teaching in the style, and confirmed it with the reasons, which would most deeply move the mind of the masses to devotion toward God, I became thoroughly convinced that the Bible leaves reason absolutely free ..."

3.3.2 Jonah in the light of a historical-rationalist approach

Some aspects of the book of Jonah automatically raise certain questions. Three of the most prominent questions are discussed here:

(a) The fish episode

If there is one prominent association people (even small children) have with the book of Jonah, it is the episode in which the prophet Jonah is swallowed by a huge fish and, after three days, is spat out on dry land again. Historical-rationalists deny that this event could really have happened. They pose critical questions, such as: "Where do you find evidence of a fish that has a throat big enough to swallow a human adult?" and "How is it possible that a human could stay alive within the bowels of a fish without oxygen, and with gastric juice all around him?"

(b) The huge city of Nineveh

According to Jonah 3:3, Nineveh was a huge city. It took three days just to walk through it. Geographical and archaeological sources, however, fail to provide evidence that Nineveh ever was this vast at any point in its history. There is, furthermore, no historical evidence for the claim that Nineveh's inhabitants radically repented and were converted to Yahweh of Israel.

(c) The wonder-tree

Jonah 4:6-7 refers to a wonder-tree that suddenly appeared, but then vanished overnight as worms devoured it. Historical-rationalist scholars would query where such a tree could be found that was able to grow enough in a few hours to provide shade for Jonah.

With these critical questions in mind, these scholars concluded that the book of Jonah had no value for historical reconstruction. It could reasonably be assumed that these unlikely events in the narrative never actually took place as they are portrayed in the Bible.

3.3.3 Observations and evaluation

- This approach to scriptural interpretation abolished the practice of denying contradictions and uncertainties through harmonizing techniques, and is thus much more "honest" and realistic about the plausibility of Biblical narrative events.

- It follows the principle that presuppositions of faith should not play any role in scriptural interpretation, which suggests that these scholars believe that one can read a text objectively.

Modern hermeneutic studies have indicated, however, that it is impossible to read anything objectively. The reader always interprets from a particular perspective - which may include the perspective of faith. The reaction of the historical-rationalistic approach should alert us to recognize and articulate these presuppositions consciously, but, even with the benefit of human reason, we shall never be without them.

3.4 Historical-literal interpretation

3.4.1 Background and theory

The historical-rationalist developments that have taken place since the Enlightenment did not meet everybody's approval. Some thought the critical questions with regard to the form and content of biblical texts rather inappropriate. The historical-rationalist approach evolved into the historical-critical approach, which will be discussed in the next chapter. In the meantime, however, a critical reaction to this type of thinking emerged, and became known as the historical-literal approach.

This approach has two basic premises:

⚙ The Bible is, after all, a literal account of historical facts.

⚙ As the God-inspired Word the Bible is infallible, and it cannot contain errors or untrue representations.

This response thus proposed a return to a pre-critical point of departure. Although it has much in common with the historical-grammatical approach, it should be noted that there is an important difference in emphasis. The reformers were quite willing to admit that there were "errors" in the Bible. Luther even made critical remarks regarding certain biblical books (such as Kings and James) because they did not show clear Christological traits, that is, references that could be related to the work of Christ. With "historical" the reformers understood that the meaning of a text had to be determined by its historical context. In terms of the historical-literal approach, on the other hand, "historical" not only referred to the historical context of texts, but it was also an indication that everything described in the Bible, such as a snake that could speak in Genesis 3, happened literally. Every other aspect of this approach, such as the emphasis on reading texts in their original languages, and the use of archaeological data, served to support this assumption.

Although the historical-literal approach emerged after the Enlightenment and before the historical-critical approach, it is still practised by many modern scholars. It is particularly popular among fundamentalist scholars. Most of them formulate their opinions in reaction to critical approaches to biblical interpretation.

3.4.2 Jonah in the light of the historical-literal approach

Numerous exegetical studies follow this approach in their analysis of the book of Jonah. The same questions that were used for the discussion of the historical-rationalistic approach serve as examples here. The aim is to determine what happens to the fish, the city of Nineveh and the wonder-tree when they are interpreted according to the historical-literal approach.

(a) The fish episode

When the historical correctness and reliability of the book of Jonah must be proven at all costs, it is imperative to provide arguments that will be able to explain the fish episode satisfactorily. Two groups can be distinguished:

✤ It is asserted that it is indeed possible for a human being to be swallowed by a fish and to survive. Numerous studies are quoted by some writers to show that huge fish exist with big enough gullets to swallow an adult. There are also examples of fishermen's stories that tell of people who were swallowed by fish, and once the fish were caught, were found alive in the bellies. It should, furthermore, be kept in mind that everything is possible for God. One commentator, Freeman, who pursues a historical-literal approach summarizes the point excellently:

"The problem with respect to the fish can be resolved by the observation that according to the text it is said that 'Yahweh prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah' (1:17). The whole argument must turn upon these words, and the question becomes simply: Is God able to prepare providentially a fish that could accommodate a man and keep him alive for as long as seventy-two hours? The answer is obvious."

✤ Another possibility is that the fish episode refers to real events, but that the reference to the huge fish (or even whale) should be regarded as the name of a ship ("Big Fish") which saved Jonah. Another alternative is that it is the name of an inn ("At the sign of the whale") where Jonah had stayed for three days.

(b) The enormous city of Nineveh

Historical-literal exegetes reject the critical notion that there is no evidence that the city of Nineveh was ever so large that it would take three days to cover. Three possible explanations can be mentioned:

✤ Jonah 3:3 does not refer to the diameter of the city, but to its circumference. The sentence in Jonah 3:3 would then mean that it took three days to travel round the city.

✤ The name "Nineveh" does not include only the city, but also the numerous nearby villages that were dependent upon the main city. The reference would then also include villages such as Kuyunjik, Nimrud and Karamles (of which the remains can still be seen today). Then it would naturally take three days to travel through Nineveh.

✤ Three days could also be an indication of the time it takes to visit every single part of the city.

(c) The wonder-tree

Botanists provide evidence of a castor-oil tree that grows luxuriantly in ideal circumstances. On the grounds of this botanical evidence, the wonder-tree episode can be accepted as a historical possibility. There are, furthermore, recorded examples of cases in which these trees were devoured overnight by one particular species of worm. This part of the episode can therefore also be proven.

3.4.3 Observations and evaluation

✤ Although the historical-literal approach arose in reaction to the critical approaches that emerged as a result of the Enlightenment, it fails to escape the presuppositions of the

Enlightenment. The historical-rationalist approach asserts that it is historically impossible that events such as these could ever have taken place. The historical-literal approach aims to prove (albeit by means of rationalization) that the events (also historically) did indeed happen and were thus historically correct and reliable. In both cases historical factuality is used as the only criterion to judge the truth value of texts. The arguments of the historical-literal approach are therefore more dependent on rationalistic presuppositions than it would perhaps like to admit.

⚙ The close correlation drawn by the historical-literal approach between the historical correctness of the book of Jonah and its faith value should be assessed negatively. This correlation suggests that if one does not accept the historical correctness of the book of Jonah, one should also deny that it has faith value or even that it is the Word of God.

CHAPTER 4

Approaches focusing on the production of texts

4.1 Introduction

Under the influence of the principles of the Enlightenment, the historical-rationalist approach developed into a set of formalized methods, known as the historical-critical approaches. Although these historical-critical approaches can clearly be distinguished from one another, they were never meant to be understood as distinct. Rather, they developed in such a fashion that they complemented one another, not ignoring or denying the results of the other approaches. Someone once compared this development to the growth rings of a tree – each subsequent ring still forms part of the same tree trunk.

The historical-critical approaches hold in common the presupposition that (biblical) texts can and should be understood only in the light of the historical context within which they originated (or the "world-behind-the-texts"). A knowledge of the circumstances in which they were produced is essential to understanding them properly. The task of the interpreter is therefore to gather the pieces of historical evidence behind the texts carefully and to fit them all together.

The category of "history" has therefore become the core around which the rings of the tree trunk developed. "History" is, however, understood in more than one way:

⚙ "History" may refer to the historical events which are recounted in biblical texts. One of the central tasks of the interpreter is to determine, as far as possible, whether the texts are accurate accounts of the events of the past, or whether they represent interpretations of the events. (This question is still the central issue in the "minimalist-maximalist" debate in which scholars argue about the value of biblical texts for the reconstruction of the history of Israel).

⚙ "History" can, however, also refer to the process of development of the texts themselves. The task of the interpreter is therefore also to determine how the texts came into being, and what the circumstances were in which they originated and were transmitted. The processes of textual development can to a certain extent be "read off" from the texts themselves by scrutinizing these texts critically.

In order to perform these tasks, the interpreter should proceed according to a set of critical methods. These methods, which are summarized below and will be discussed in this chapter, are called "critical", because they are committed to using unbiased strategies to obtain objective knowledge about the historical process of development of these texts. (In later years scholars have, of course, realized that objective knowledge is almost impossible, and this notion was criticized in further methodological developments. See the next chapters.)

Text-critical studies: As a result of the consistent interest in its philological and grammatical aspects, the ancient manuscripts and translations of the Bible were ardently investigated. Attempts were made to reconstruct the original text on the grounds of the many differences that exist within the manuscripts and translations. Text-critical studies are concerned with the reconstruction of the original text.

Literary-critical approaches (in German "Literarkritik"): Scholars gradually learned that the authors of the biblical texts had made use of earlier sources in their writing. Much attention has been devoted to the reconstruction of these sources, as well as to the allocation of biblical

textual material to these sources. Modern applications of literary-critical approaches are less concerned with the identification of sources, although they still have the objective of determining the smallest literary units in a particular biblical text.

Form-critical approaches: These approaches are particularly interested in the typical literary forms ("Gattungen" in German) of biblical texts. They want to determine further in which religious-historical situations ("Sitz-im-Leben" in German) these literary forms typically functioned.

Tradition-critical approaches: Scholars gradually developed an interest in the theological traditions and transmissions (mostly oral) that form the bases of the sources and smaller literary units that had been determined by form-critical approaches. The point of departure of tradition-critical approaches is therefore that biblical stories developed and were transmitted around certain theological themes.

Redaction-critical approaches: These approaches analyze the processes used by compositors and editors who changed and merged smaller textual units into their final form and composition as biblical books. Whereas the previously mentioned approaches analyze texts from their present form into their smallest constituent parts, redaction-critical approaches work synthetically in the opposite direction – from the smallest constituent parts to the present form.

The historical-critical approaches are, however, not the only approaches interested in the circumstances of production of biblical texts. Some other modern approaches may also include a focus on aspects of the production of the texts. These approaches are formulated and advocated by modern-day scholars who are still of the opinion that knowledge of the processes of textual production can benefit our understanding of biblical texts. A number of these approaches are summarized here, and some of them are discussed later in this chapter.

Canonical criticism: This approach argues that the canonical formation of biblical texts provides clues relevant to their interpretation. Analyzing canon formation reveals theological trends and decisions which allowed texts to be merged and accepted as authoritative in the ancient communities of faith. This approach therefore does not deny the process of textual development, but would rather focus on the canonical end result of this process.

Social reconstructions: A number of studies simply try to reconstruct the socio-historical context within which texts originated. Archaeological material is gathered to gain a picture of the aspects of society at that time (houses, architecture, food, roads, clothing, art, monetary systems, manners and customs, economic circumstances, social classes, laws, etc). These social reconstructions provide the data used in other studies summarized here.

Socio-historical studies: These studies try to understand the broad sweep of change in history. Attempts are made to place the texts within the broader historical world within which they were written. A socio-historical study of the book Jonah would, for instance, pay attention to the various social, political, economic and religious interest groups and relationships of power of that time. The question is what group's interests and positions of power were served by the text. How do these interests fit into the broader historical dynamics of the time?

The sociology of knowledge approach: How does a text fit into the broader world-view of the society within which it originated? The sociology of knowledge is interested in the so-called "social construction of reality" within a particular society. It assumes that the daily experiences, the customs, habits, symbols, values, rules, reconstructed history, religious convictions and the like within a society are organized within a comprehensive unity, called a "symbolic universe". What is accepted as "reality" within the symbolic universe is based on a social construction. The knowledge people acquire within such a symbolic universe only reflects the basic assumptions

of the specific social construction of reality. Children grow up and are socialized within such a symbolic universe. The basic presuppositions of this symbolic world are usually accepted by them and seldom questioned. Its legitimacy is upheld by influential leaders, institutions and organizations. Religion plays an important role in giving absolute validity and universal scope to the symbolic world. A study of the Bible based on the sociology of knowledge approach would look at the implicit presuppositions of the symbolic universe within which the particular text originated.

Cultural-anthropological approaches: In anthropological studies, the internal dynamics of cultures are studied. Certain general cultural features such as kinship systems, rituals, internal rules, economic systems, exclusion mechanisms and relationships of power are studied. There are a number of anthropological models used in such studies:

- A structural-functional model that assumes that cultural values, customs and forms of social organization co-operate to ensure harmony and balance within a particular social system;

- A conflict model that describes the dynamics within a culture in terms of internal tensions and power-struggles;

- A model that looks at the shared symbols of a culture and that studies the symbolic changes caused by social interaction within such a culture.

In social anthropological studies of the Bible these analyses are used to identify the specific cultural presuppositions within a certain book in the Bible.

Socio-rhetorical criticism: Socio-rhetorical criticism was propagated in the last decades by the New Testament scholar, Vernon Robbins. Although this approach also focuses on the production of texts, and is therefore described here, this is not its only concern. Robbins describes texts as thickly textured tapestries, for, like an intricately woven tapestry, a text contains complex patterns and images. Looked at only one way, a text presents a single surface. By changing his or her point of view, however, the interpreter may bring the multiple strands of the text into view. Robbins therefore argues that socio-rhetorical criticism is an approach that focuses on values, convictions, and beliefs both in the texts we read and in the world in which we live. In addition, it moves interactively into the world of the people who wrote the texts and into our present world. In his view, the strands within a Biblical text would weave themselves into an inner texture, an intertexture, social and cultural textures, ideological texture, and sacred texture.

4.2 Historical-critical approaches

4.2.1 History of research

It would be an immense task to provide an extensive description of the history of research in the field of historical-critical study of the Bible. The aim of this discussion will thus only be to give a cursory description of the developments on methodological level. In this section we will focus on the history of research with regard to the Old Testament, although New Testament research has undergone similar developments.

The aims and interests of scholars from previous centuries were often not to formulate an historical-critical methodology *per se*. Instead they were exploring new and better ways to understand biblical history and society. As their sources for this enquiry were biblical texts, they had to develop exegetical methods for the task. The various methods of the historical-critical methodology can thus only be understood against the historical background from which they developed.

In the previous chapter a description was provided of the emergence of the modern era in biblical studies under the influence of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The overview provided here starts at the end of the eighteenth century when the earlier observations with regard to the origin of the biblical texts came to be formalized in hypotheses for the first time.

Eichhorn (born 1752) was the most significant scholar at the turn of the eighteenth century. His work was a synthesis between the rational-moralistic work of Semler and the aesthetic-romantic approach of Herder. In contrast to the orthodox view, he regarded the Old Testament as an independent document of the past. He was the first scholar to utilize the concept "mythos" in his description of ancient history, and the first to speak of "Gattung" (genre) and "Überlieferung" (transmission).

Eichhorn pursued the former source hypothesis ("ältere Urkundenhypothese") which originated from some observations in the Pentateuch made by Witter and Astruc. In 1711, the German minister Witter had published a book in which he maintained that, on the grounds of the use of two different divine names, two different pre-Mosaic sources could be found in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-3:24. Unfortunately his work did not become known until 1924. As a result, the French doctor, Astruc, who published his findings in 1753, came to be regarded as the father of the former source hypothesis. Eichhorn did not read Astruc himself, but he learnt of him through the critical discussion of the former source hypothesis by Michaelis.

In the subsequent years this hypothesis was repeatedly modified. At the end of the eighteenth century an English Catholic theologian, Geddes, proposed his fragment hypothesis ("Fragmentenhypothese"). According to his views no continuous sources were present in the Pentateuch, but it was composed from various fragments by a redactor. This hypothesis appealed to De Wette, but he tried to find a middle course between the former source and fragment hypotheses. In his supplement hypothesis ("Ergänzungshypothese"), he maintained that a basic continuous document had to be assumed, but that this document was then supplemented and extended with various fragments by a redactor. Ewald became an advocate of this hypothesis as well.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth significant research was done in the fields of textual studies, grammar and history (such as that by Kennicott, De Rossi and Gesenius). This was the time of revival for critical exegesis. The aim of exegesis was no longer the intuitive reproduction of the text, but rather a grammatical-historical description thereof.

The nineteenth century produced some of the finest scholars in this field. The first to be mentioned is Reuß (born 1804) who taught in Straßburg. Together with his student, Graf (born 1815), he brought about a new understanding of biblical history. Reuß has the credit for the hypothesis that the prophetic literature is older than the law material, and that the Psalms are younger than both. This understanding of biblical history was later elaborated upon by scholars such as Kuenen and Wellhausen. With reference to Hupfeld's newer source hypothesis ("neuere Urkundenhypothese"), Reuß and Graf affirmed that the priestly source (called P) was the youngest pentateuchal source. This hypothesis was formulated in 1853 in a publication by Hupfeld. According to this hypothesis an elohistic basic source ("Grundschrift" in German) was later supplemented by two independent sources ("Urkunden"), another elohistic and a jahwistic source. These three works were compiled by a redactor. However, this was no haphazard compilation, but was done according to an independent and systematic theological concept. Together with Deuteronomy, four sources were thus distinguished in the Pentateuch: E1 (the basic source), E2 (younger elohistic material), J and D. This newer source hypothesis, together with the historical insights of Reuß and Graf, led Wellhausen to discover the distinctiveness and historical setting of the priestly writings.

Another great scholar of the nineteenth century was the Leiden professor Abraham Kuenen (1828-1891), who tried to explain the theological significance of historical-critical research, not only for scholars, but also for laymen and women. The aim of the critical methods, according to Kuenen, is the discovery and uncovering of the "real history". This "real history" is concealed in and behind the historical construction of the biblical canon. The literary critic and historian should work in close cooperation: Literary criticism is used initially to verify the authenticity of the documents. It should be ascertained whether these documents are composed of independent sources (or pieces thereof). Historical criticism follows after this, and its aim is to verify the relationship between the authenticated source utterances and historical reality. This concept of the critical task had great influence in the decades to come.

The greatest biblical scholar of the nineteenth century was undoubtedly Julius Wellhausen (born 1844). He portrayed the religious development of Israel in his masterpiece Introduction to the history of Israel ("Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels") published for the first time in 1878. According to Wellhausen, this development can be described in terms of three epochs reflected in the Pentateuchal sources JE, D and P, each of which reflected a distinct developmental phase in the religion and cult of Israel. He therefore commenced his monumental work by presenting a description of certain cult elements after the analogy of the three epochs. His description portrayed the development from centralization ("Zentralisierung") to ritualization ("Ritualisierung") and denaturalization ("Denaturierung"). It is evident that Hegel's idealistic philosophy of history played an important role in the formulation of his opinion. The second part of his study he dedicated to the history of traditions. Whereas the first part was mainly concerned with the law material in the Pentateuch, here he gave a description of the historical or narrative part of the Old Testament. The chronistic history (assigned to the P epoch), the books Judges, Samuel and Kings (in its final form assigned to the D epoch), and the narratives of the Hexateuch were treated by Wellhausen in this part. In the third part of his "Prolegomena" he concentrated on the differences between Israel and Judaism. In 1894 Wellhausen published another significant study: "Israelitsche und jüdische Geschichte" (Israelite and Judean history). The main emphasis of this work was on the authenticity of the literary sources and on research into the "true history".

The next prominent scholar who should be discussed is Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932). His great merit was that he defined the literary-historical ("literaturgeschichtliche") and religious-historical ("religionsgeschichtliche") questions more exactly and brought these fields into a harmonious relationship. Gunkel argued that the literary history has less to do with the authors of the texts than with the typical formats or genres ("Gattungen") in which these texts are transmitted. Gunkel consequently argued that every genre had its origin in a particular typical historical context (or "Sitz im Leben"). With this distinction Gunkel introduced a new era in historical-critical research. Various scholars would follow him in the years to come.

Especially relevant to this study is Gunkel's viewpoint on the aims and methods of the interpretation of the Old Testament. He summarizes six exegetical steps: (i) philological explanation of the text; (ii) Text criticism ("Textkritik") which defines a hypothetic "Urtext" (original text); (iii) study of the political history and archaeology; (iv) Literary criticism ("Literarkritik") which traces the original relations in the text; (v) on the basis of the literary criticims, the aesthetic form critical ("formkritische") and literary-historical ("literargeschichtliche") research follows; (vi) theological interpretation. However, with reference to the last point, he warns: (a) The exegete should not be subservient to any form of ecclesiastical practice; (b) The exegete should operate free from any dogmatic presuppositions; (c) The exegete should not expect to find any theological doctrine in the Old Testament; and (d) Any salvation historical way of proceeding should be strongly avoided.

At the beginning of the twentieth century new directions in the field of pentateuchal criticism were explored. New questions were asked on the history of the origin of Old Testament sources, and new theories regarding the dating of the J, E, D and P sources were formulated. Fresh interest arose in the historical setting of the different sources, and an approach which seeks the holistic understanding of the Old Testament canon received renewed attention.

The first half of the twentieth century also witnessed the discovery of some of the most significant archaeological finds. After the discovery of Ugarit, Mari and Qumran, Old Testament research had to deal with the abundant literary material which accentuated the associations Israel had with its geographical context ("Umwelt"), and the human and historical nature of the Old Testament itself.

Various new introductions to the Old Testament were published in these decades. Eißfeldt's "Introduction" (published for the first time in 1934) was the first to concentrate on the smallest utterances and textual units, and described these in their pre-literary stage and in their unique historical settings. Engnell (published in 1945) and other Scandinavian scholars maintained that the Old Testament goes back to an exclusively oral tradition.

The field of pentateuchal criticism also experienced new developments. Volz and Rudolph, for example, altered traditional opinion on the pentateuchal sources by questioning the existence of an independent E source. On a literary-critical level, new answers thus had to be provided. Additionally, Von Rad indicated new directions on a form-critical level. His "The form-critical problem of the Hexateuch" ("Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuchs"), published in 1938, had immense methodological implications. He argued that form-critical research had to be complemented by concentrating on the history of tradition. Von Rad brought about a significant change in the question which had to be asked in exegesis. The aim of historical-critical exegesis should, according to him, be to establish the real life transmission processes which determined the growth and character of the Hexateuch. The objective of his research was not so much to determine the archaic, pre-Israelitic "Urformen" (as was the case in Gunkel's work). Rather, Von Rad asked which articles of faith constitute the Hexateuch in its present form, and how these articles of faith relate to the final form of the text. Von Rad illustrated the implications of such an approach for the description of the "Theology of the Old Testament" in his monumental two-volume work (first published in 1960).

In recent decades the Old Testament scholarly community has witnessed the emergence of sociological and materialistic approaches to exegesis, which will be discussed later in this chapter. In addition, an increasing number of scholars have started applying insights from other scholarly disciplines to Old Testament exegesis. Richter (1971) proposed that exegesis be regarded as a branch of the broader subject of literary science. Koch criticizes Richter, and emphasizes that exegesis has to move beyond the level of sentences and phrases to the level of texts. He therefore advocates the implementation of text-theoretical considerations in Old Testament exegesis. Hardmeier has continued along this line of argumentation since the publication of his dissertation in 1978, including certain insights from communication theory in his work.

Another significant development in historical-critical research is closely linked to the name of Kaiser. He (and Smend) demanded new attention for the neglected field of exegetical proceeding, namely that of redaction history. Smend, in his publication "The origin of the Old Testament" ("Die Entstehung des Alten Testaments") first published in 1978, implements this direction in research.

In 1976 two German scholars published their research which introduced renewed critique on the contemporary views in pentateuchal criticism. The first of these publications, "The so-called Jahwist. Observations and questions on pentateuchal research" ("Der sogenannte Jahwist. Beobachtungen und Fragen zur Pentateuchforschung.") by H.H. Schmid (1976), critically re-evaluates the theories held on the origin of the Jahwist. He maintains that the historical work (usually designated as "Jahwist") with its comprehensive interpretation and redaction of the pentateuchal material, does not originate from the davidic-solomonic era. Even the pre-exilic prophecies cannot be presupposed to be the origin of this work. Rather, it should be placed in the era of the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic tradition building. It should thus be understood against the background of the literary activity of this era.

The second publication worth mentioning in this context is "The problem of the history of transmission of the Pentateuch" ("Das Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch") by R. Rendtorff (1976). He opts to give up the notion of sources in his research. Rendtorff concentrates on larger tradition complexes, which each had its own transmission history. These tradition complexes were then reworked and integrated into a bigger whole by a deuteronomic redaction in the exilic-postexilic era. Pentateuchal sources thus no longer feature in his argument. A scholar of Rendtorff, E. Blum, still continues this line of argumentation in his influential publications on the patriarchal narratives.

Although only a cursory description of the history of historical-critical research could be provided in this section, it should have become clear that the historical-critical methodology had its roots in a long process of development. The methodology, as it is known at present, is the product of a lengthy historical process of refinement and adaptation. The historical-critical methodology consists of various separate methods each of which has its origin in a specific stage of the historical development. It should be clear from the above description that the particular philosophical and theological climate in each phase has had a direct impact on exegetical methodology. The influence of the Enlightenment, Hegel's idealistic view on history and positivism (to mention but a few) are good examples which illustrate the point. However, in the development of the historical-critical methodology, research results constantly had to withstand the test of time, and refinements and adaptations were made accordingly. The developments described here underline the necessity of an ongoing evaluation of research results. Methodological implications should be derived accordingly.

4.2.2 Text-critical studies

(a) Background and theory

The text of the book of Jonah as we find it in our Bible is, of course, a translation of the original Hebrew text. The translation of texts creates a whole series of unique problems. Translation, as such, is already a form of interpretation. In the case of the Bible the problem is even worse, because we do not dispose of the original Hebrew manuscripts any more. Text-critical studies are concerned with this problem.

We no longer possess any of the original manuscripts of the Bible. They were lost centuries ago. The earliest available manuscripts are hand-written copies of even earlier copies. Ancient manuscripts were meticulously copied out by hand in monasteries for many centuries.

Unfortunately, many smaller errors cropped up during this century-long process. Apart from the common errors of writing and hearing, the texts were not provided with vowels, word breaks or sentence breaks. All the letters were thus joined. It would then be difficult, for example, to

determine whether *thmnlps* is supposed to mean "the man leaps" or "the main laps" or even "them nil peas". The meaning of the text had to be derived from the context. The monks who did the copying of the biblical texts often had to do guess work. Furthermore the original meanings of certain ancient Hebrew words were lost over time.

Numerous other errors occurred during the process of copying:

- ❀ Words or lines were inadvertently lost.

- ❀ Words were accidentally repeated.

- ❀ Errors were also made as a result of untidy handwriting. An English example would be when "w" would be written out as "vv" or even "uu". Some Hebrew consonants were similarly confused.

- ❀ Errors of hearing occurred because one monk would read out the texts to a group of writers. An English example would be when the word "die" would be confused with the word "dye". Likewise, the Hebrew prepositions "*'al*" and "*'el*" were often confused.

- ❀ Sometimes a few words were added parenthetically to explain the meaning of a particular word in the text. When this text was copied, these parenthetical words would sometimes be regarded as part of the text.

Because of all these minor errors we possess today a whole variety of manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages which differ from one another on various points. The task of text-critical studies is to reconstruct a text from all these ancient manuscripts which would be as near as possible to the original.

For the purpose of text reconstruction, text critics not only make use of all the available ancient manuscripts, they also use the various ancient translations of the biblical texts. The Old Testament, for example, had been translated from Hebrew into Greek (the so-called Septuagint or LXX) and Syriac (the so-called Peshitta) at a very early stage. These translations, as well as the Latin, Coptic, Aramaic and others, are used in a "reversed" reconstruction process to determine from which Hebrew manuscripts they were translated.

Another important aid in the reconstruction process of biblical texts is the collection of manuscripts that were discovered near the Dead Sea in 1947 (the so-called "Dead Sea" or Qumran Scrolls). Scholars consider them the oldest known Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible. It is therefore not surprising that text critics make extensive use of them today.

(b) Text-critical studies of the book of Jonah

Most modern translations of the book of Jonah are based on the Hebrew text of the *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* which was published by Elliger in 1970. The Hebrew text of Jonah in this particular edition is an unaltered version of an ancient manuscript, the Leningrad Codex (or manuscript). The Leningrad Codex was recorded in 1008 by Aaron ben Moses ben Asher, a famous Tiberian text expert. He was a member of a group of medieval Jewish scholars (called the Masoretes) who edited the entire Old Testament text and provided it with vowels.

Apart from the above-mentioned manuscript, various other ancient manuscripts of the book of Jonah exist, such as the Cairo Codex (895 AD), the Petersburg Codex (916 AD) and the Aleppo Codex (925 AD). An important discovery was made in 1955 when an ancient manuscript was excavated in a small cave at Wadi Marubba'at, near the Dead Sea. This manuscript contained the Hebrew texts of the twelve minor prophets and was copied in about 135 AD. Interestingly, this text deviates only slightly from the best available medieval manuscripts. This proves that the

Hebrew text of Jonah was meticulously transmitted - far better than many other Old Testament books.

There are a few minor differences between these manuscripts. The Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia highlights these by means of text-critical footnotes. A few deserve discussion:

- Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, two very ancient manuscripts of the Greek translation (LXX) of Jonah, exclude the words "why we meet with this disaster" in Jonah 1:8. The Greek translator's eye probably skipped a line in this case, because the Hebrew word "*hemin*" is repeated in these verses. This typical writing error can be illustrated by an English example. Suppose that the following sentences had to be copied out by hand: "I do not know when my husband will find time to work in the garden. What I do know is that he is an excellent gardener." The word "know" is repeated in this short text. When copying, it could easily happen that the writer's eye would "jump" from the first "know" to the second one. The result would then be that the sentence would be correctly copied until the first "know", but it would then continue after the second "know". The resultant sentence would then read: "I do not know that he is an excellent gardener."

- Some scholars are of the opinion that the phrase "He had told them so" in Jonah 1:10 is an explanatory remark which had been included into the text at a later stage. It is possible, but improbable, because the text makes good sense as it is.

(c) Observations and evaluation

The above examples illustrate that text-critical studies do not have a profound effect on the interpretation of the book as a whole. The text-critical remarks concern only a few minor issues. The following can be observed with regard to this method:

- Textual criticism is a very much needed strategy to deal with interpretive problems arising from the lack of original biblical manuscripts. To base our editions and translations of the Bible on diverging copies of manuscripts seems to be a precarious exercise. An attempt at reconstructing (as far as possible) the original texts seems to be unavoidable. Textual criticism provides well-developed tools for this reconstruction process.

- Textual criticism has become a highly technical field of study accessible only to a few specialists. It is therefore often quite difficult for other readers and scholars of the Bible to evaluate the decisions taken by textual critics.

- Some of the decisions and conclusions of textual critics remain highly speculative. In some instances a final answer cannot be provided.

4.2.3 Literary-critical studies

(a) Background and theory

The development of literary-critical approaches is strongly related to the critical attitude associated with the Enlightenment. Earlier the unity of biblical texts had to be maintained at all costs. From the end of the eighteenth century, however, ever more objections were raised against this tendency. It was no longer common practice to try to harmonize inherent tensions in the text. The question was increasingly asked whether the text had its own history of development that reflected various sources and historical periods.

Various theories regarding this development process – from the former source hypothesis, through the fragment and supplement hypothesis, to the newer source hypothesis - were formulated. The development of these hypotheses has been discussed above.

The dating of these presumed sources was (and still is) a very important aspect of the investigation. Historical-critical scholars' primary interest was not the developmental history of the text, but the reconstruction of the religious history of Ancient Israel. As a result, they had to pay particular attention to the dating of sources. One watershed was when the first scholar maintained that the prophetic literature was older than the law material of the Old Testament, and that the Psalms were more recent than both the prophetic and the law material (as has been indicated above). This implied that every biblical text had to be investigated in its original context, not in the context of the events mentioned in the text. For example, if a text had its origin during the Exile, but dealt with events that happened before the Israelites conquered Palestine, the exilic context should be considered in its interpretation.

It was gradually generally accepted that the J and E sources had their origin during the early monarchical period (tenth to eighth century BCE), the D source approximately during the reign of King Josiah (seventh century BCE), and the P source during the Exile (sixth century BCE). A redactor (or redactors) probably combined the sources into one text during the time of Ezra (approximately 400 BCE). The dating of these presumed sources, as well as their extent, remain controversial issues in the historical-critical debate until today. During the last two decades or so many scholars started arguing in favour of a later dating for all the presumed sources.

In modern-day literary criticism the main purpose is normally to determine the smallest literary units in the ancient biblical texts. These smaller units determined by the literary-critical approach serve in turn as the points of departure for form-critical and traditional-critical approaches. Two criteria are prominent in the identification of smaller units in texts: (i) Are there any disturbing repetitions in the texts that cannot be explained in other ways? (ii) Are there any untenable tensions in the texts that cannot be explained in other ways?

(b) Jonah in the light of a literary-critical approach

Two literary-critical problems in the book of Jonah, which reflect the main issues of discussion in the history of research of this book, will be discussed here:

❈ The use of the divine names, Yahweh and ʻElohim

The divine names are clearly distributed in a very definite pattern. From this distribution one could easily assume that two sources had been used to compose the book of Jonah. Compare the following summary ("Yahweh" is normally translated as "Lord", and "ʻElohim" as "God"):

1:1-3:4	Yahweh
3:5-10	ʻElohim
4:1-5	Yahweh
4:6	Yahweh-'Elohim
4:7-9	ʻElohim
4:10-11	Yahweh

It should be noted that the name of Yahweh is never used by a Ninevite. In 3:5-10 they consistently use the name ʻElohim to refer to the God of Israel.

⚙ The psalm of Jonah in chapter 2

Most scholars (unlike the advocates of the above-mentioned sources theory) accept the unity of the book of Jonah. The only controversial part is the so-called psalm of Jonah in 2:2-9. The following arguments are normally forwarded to prove that it was not an original part of the book of Jonah:

⚙ Without the psalm of Jonah, the wider context forms a chiastic structure: 1:17a corresponds to 2:10 (Yahweh as subject), and 1:17b corresponds to 2:1 (Jonah as subject). The insertion of verses 2-9 disturbs this structure.

⚙ The structure of the book of Jonah as a whole is symmetrical. For example, the prayer of the seamen in 1:14 is countered by 4:2. The insertion of the psalm of Jonah also disturbs this overall structure.

⚙ The language of the psalm of Jonah differs radically from that of the remainder of the book of Jonah.

⚙ The psalm of Jonah is a psalm of thanksgiving that is not appropriate to Jonah's distress in the belly of the fish!

⚙ The positive image of Jonah projected by the psalm does not correspond with the image projected in the rest of the book. With the insertion of the psalm of Jonah, the uniform psychological image of the prophet Jonah is disturbed.

On the grounds of these arguments two literary units are often distinguished in the book of Jonah, namely (a) Jonah 1:1-2:1; 2:10-4:11 and (b) Jonah 2:2-9.

(c) Observations and evaluation

⚙ The literary-critical approach was, unfortunately, received rather negatively in some circles. Some applications of this approach have created the impression that it is a "cut-and-paste method" by means of which a text can be composed according to one's own interpretation. Furthermore, the impression was sometimes created that only "old" and "original" textual material was really worthwhile. Other textual material was often labeled as "later addition" ("gloss") or "secondary material". While it is true that some applications of the literary-critical approach might have created this impression, negative assessment of this method is often due to the fact that its literary-critical results are evaluated in isolation, and not in relation to the results of other historical-critical approaches.

⚙ The sources theory often results in circular argumentation. For example, certain characteristics of J material are established from texts that in all probability originated from the J source. When other texts with these characteristics are encountered, they are assigned to the J source. One theory therefore becomes the basis on which another rests.

⚙ Great controversy surrounds the exact dating of the sources. Because the manner in which the time of origin of texts is determined is such an important factor in interpretation, the uncertainty about the dating of certain biblical texts hampers interpretation.

⚙ Scholars also differ on the question of whether the authors of the sources should be regarded merely as collectors and compositors, or as theologians in their own right. The question is thus whether the religious or theological presuppositions of the authors played any role in the collection, composition, ordering and adding of textual material. The nature and identity of the Yahwistic author, in particular, is a contentious issue.

- Although there are certain reservations concerning this approach, it demonstrates the fact that the ancient biblical texts underwent a long history of development, unlike modern texts, which are written by one author at a particular time.

- Another positive aspect of this approach is that it foregrounds the significance of the original circumstances in which the text was created to its interpretation.

4.2.4 Form-critical studies

(a) Background and theory

Form-critical approaches developed out of the literary-critical approach. Where the purpose of the literary-critical approach is to isolate the various smaller units that make up the text, form-critical approaches take the process one step further. Their purpose is to describe the literary forms of the smaller textual units. Furthermore, they aim to relate the history of the biblical literature to the history of the religious movements that were prevalent during the time of origin of these texts. Form-critical scholars make use of two major concepts:

- Literary form or genre ("Gattung")

  This concept refers to the typical literary forms that influence the construction of texts. An obituary in the newspaper, for example, differs markedly from a news report on the same person's death. Each of these literary forms follows certain conventions of construction. In the Old Testament, various such literary forms can be identified. Apart from the more general categories, such as the song, various sub-categories are evident; for example, songs of thanksgiving, songs of praise, and songs of lamentation can be found. Even sub-sub-categories are possible, such as individual lamentation or corporate lamentation.

  A dilemma arose in form-critical studies because of the divergent criteria that have been applied for the identification of various Gattungen. An overwhelming number of names and descriptions of literary forms exist, without uniformity in definition. This scenario gave rise to the reaction in recent years whereby Gattungen are identified and described according to formal grammatical criteria. This ensures that literary forms are investigated within the framework of the grammatical and literary sciences.

- Typical life setting ("Sitz im Leben")

  Form critics maintain that all typical literary forms (the so-called Gattungen) can be traced back to particular religious-historical circumstances or typical life settings in which they were created and functioned. The Sitz im Leben of every genre should be determined. When one reads an obituary, for example, one knows intuitively that the background is the loss of a loved one, and an acknowledgement of their life. In the case of ancient texts, however, it is much more complicated to reconstruct the Sitz im Leben of a particular genre.

(b) Jonah in the light of a form-critical approach

In previous sections mention was made of attempts during the history of interpretation to typify the book of Jonah as allegory, typology, midrash, etc. Today the literary form, or genre of the book remains the major point of discussion in its interpretation.

- Genre

  The literary form of the book of Jonah makes it unique. This is illustrated by the fact that Jonah is the only book among the Minor Prophets written mainly in a narrative style. This

gave rise to the question: is the book of Jonah really a prophecy? Why was the narrative of Jonah included in the prophetic part of the Hebrew canon?

Although the majority of commentators agree that the book of Jonah consists of a variety of literary forms, two main lines of argument can be distinguished:

- The first group argues for the historical basis of the narrative, which is seen to be a version of historical events with a historical figure, Jonah, as the main character. Scholars with this view refer to Jonah-ben-Amittai who is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 to prove that he was the historical figure in the narrative. Advocates of this opinion argue, furthermore, that the narrative refers to a concrete historical and geographical environment. The New Testament reference in Matthew 12:41 is normally adduced to support this argument. Scholars of this opinion argue that Jesus assumed that Jonah really spent three days inside the fish. If there is no historical basis for the Jonah narrative, these scholars argue, the historicity of Jesus' death, funeral and resurrection would also be in question.

- For another group the Jonah narrative does not necessarily refer to historical events. In this case the narrative is regarded as a form of fiction that was employed by an author to convey a particular message in a didactically acceptable manner. Various suggestions are made by this group of scholars as to what sort of literature we encounter in the book of Jonah:

  - a parable
  - a legend
  - an exemplary narrative
  - a novel
  - a verbal cartoon
  - a didactic narrative
  - a fable.

The parables of Jesus do not refer to historical events, but they do convey a particular message. Likewise, the narrative of Jonah does not offer an accurate description of historical events; rather, it is a story told for effect. The author of the narrative relates Jonah's story to that of an ancient character, Jonah-ben-Amittai, who was known to represent a theology of prosperity. The author then narrates an almost incredible story about this character (Jonah) with the aim of surprising the reader.

The identification of the genre is an important factor in the interpretation of the book of Jonah (as the following example will illustrate). If it is regarded as a prophecy, the book probably has a prophetic-universalistic meaning: in this case the book prophesies that salvation is available for nations other than Israel. If it is regarded as a fable (that is, a story with a moral lesson), the story could serve as a moral appeal to obey the call of prophecy. If it is regarded as a didactic narrative, the message could be that Jonah had to learn to understand Yahweh's vision on grace, election and righteousness. If the story is seen to impart wisdom, it could indicate how incomprehensible Yahweh's ways are to mankind. It would then be foolishness to resist the Lord's incomprehensible ways.

The identification of the genre of a biblical text is thus essential to the interpretation of the text's meaning.

⚘ Typical Life Setting

The quest for the Sitz im Leben of the narrative is also an important issue. Although the context in which the narrative originated is unknown to the modern reader, we know from other sources that the book of Jonah was traditionally read at the annual Jewish religious feast, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The story, therefore, is known to have formed part of a ritual context which is concerned with the themes of repentance, confession of sins, forgiveness and reconciliation between God and man. The psalm of Jonah in 2:2-9 resembles other psalms in the biblical book of Psalms, which are associated with cultic contexts. For this reason, we could guess that the psalm of Jonah too, functioned as a part of cultic rituals.

(c) Observations and evaluation

⚘ To read a love poem as an inventory, to interpret a legend as a historical record, or to understand an obituary as a joke, would, of course, be a misreading. Any reader needs a good understanding of the literary form of a text to be able to interpret it adequately. The insight that literary forms provide the reader with an entrance to the world-behind-the-text, that is, the original context of textual production, cannot be overestimated.

⚘ Some genres may not function as records of historical events, but this need not detract from the truth value, significance or authority of the text. If, in the case of the book of Jonah, it is contended that the book did not necessarily reflect a particular historical event, it does not follow that the book should be rejected as worthless (note again, Jesus' parables). In fact, form criticism helps to establish the literary form, the circumstances in which it functioned, and what rhetorical purpose the literary form wishes to achieve with the reader.

⚘ The deeper insight into the original context of the text as a result of Sitz im Leben-studies, allows for the inclusion of the modern context of the reader into the interpretation process. Unfortunately, this is an underdeveloped aspect of form criticism.

4.2.5 Tradition-critical studies

(a) Background and theory

In a sense, historical-critical interpretation moves even further into the past with the tradition-critical approach. Whereas literary criticism identifies the smaller units and sources that compose biblical texts, and form criticism is concerned with the literary forms and the original world (or Sitz im Leben) in which they evolved, the tradition-critical approach focuses on the traditions and transmissions on which the smaller units and sources had been based. Some biblical narratives, for example, were orally transmitted over centuries. In every new set of circumstances they were suitably adjusted until they were finally written down. The following form the premises of this approach:

⚘ According to the tradition-critical approach, the interpreter not only has to determine the smaller units composing the text, or the literary forms and their Sitz im Leben, but also the transmission processes that contributed to the "creation" of the textual material. It is assumed that the biblical texts underwent a long process of development. Different generations appropriated these texts (oral or written) and they were reworked and understood within the framework of new circumstances. These transmission processes were repeated until the texts finally reached a canonical (authoritative) form.

⚘ Tradition-critical scholars believe that these transmission processes were guided in Ancient Israel by certain central statements and themes of faith regarding their history. Gradually

certain narratives (oral or written) were collected around these statements or themes of faith, and these collections of stories were transmitted from generation to generation. As they were transmitted, they were gradually extended, although the central statements and themes of Israel's faith remained the determining factor. Later these narratives were "standardized" and one could refer to them as a particular tradition. The original "authors" of the different sources composing the biblical text strongly relied on these fixed traditions which were generally known when they wrote their works. The following traditions are some of those that are normally distinguished:

- Creation tradition
- Patriarchal tradition
- Exodus tradition
- Sinai tradition
- Desert tradition
- Conquest tradition
- Zion tradition.

- The tradition-critical school of interpretation is further interested to know in which circles these traditions were transmitted. Some textual material, for example, had its origin in priestly circles. The Old Testament material normally associated with the P source in particular, was transmitted in these priestly circles. Other material was transmitted in Levitical circles (for example, the textual material occurring in the book of Deuteronomy). There are indications that certain textual material was transmitted in wisdom and prophetic circles. Tradition-criticism investigates the history and characteristics of these historical circles or groups because this information can improve understanding of the traditions. By means of tradition-criticism one can identify better with the thoughts and interests of these groups. This leads to a better understanding of the motives prevalent when certain traditions were transmitted.

- It is also important to determine in which geographical areas certain traditions were transmitted. In the past scholars have pointed out that Sichem was central to the transmission of covenant traditions, while Jerusalem featured strongly in the transmission of Zion and Davidic traditions. By determining the experiences and memories associated with a particular place, new perspectives can be opened on the transmitted textual material.

- According to the tradition-critical approach, Israel's history as it is reflected in the Bible is much more than simple history: salvation history would be a more accurate description. This means that the historical events were not recounted for their historical value, but to bear witness to Yahweh's great redemptive deeds among His people, Israel. The purpose of the description of history should therefore always be a faith dictum concerning Yahweh's communion with His people.

(b) Jonah in the light of a tradition-critical approach

The three major tradition-critical issues in the book of Jonah are:

- The motif of the miraculous rescue in the fish

  Although this motif (or elements thereof) occurs in various cultures throughout the world, two particular parallels are noteworthy. These are the Heracles narrative from Greek literature and the Babylonian cosmology which features Tiamat. Because of geographical and temporal proximity, it is worthwhile to investigate these parallels.

  - The ancient Greeks narrated the story of Heracles who fought a sea monster, but was

devoured in the process. After three days and three nights he managed to free himself by fighting his way out. Interestingly, the Greeks even specified that it was near the harbour of Jaffa that Heracles was swallowed by the fish. Jaffa is also Jonah's place of departure for Tarshish. This Greek story was well known in Asia Minor and Syria and was definitely also told among the seafaring Phoenicians. The book of Jonah makes use of quite a few maritime terms most probably borrowed from the Phoenicians, and it can thus be assumed that the motif of the fish probably found its way into the Jewish narrative under Phoenician influence.

❀ Some scholars see disguised references to the Babylonian cosmology in the book of Jonah. In these terms the fish would then be a disguised reference to Tiamat, the chaos monster that threatens creation. When Jonah remains in the fish for three days and three nights, it would then refer to the winter time when Tiamat reigned. The swallowing and spitting out by the fish would then represent the annual death and rebirth of the cosmos. It could even allude to the primeval struggle of Marduk, the sun god, with Tiamat. If it is assumed that the book of Jonah dates to the period of the Babylonian exile, this parallel could provide for interesting interpretation. In that case the book of Jonah could be read even as a protest document against the Babylonian religion from a Yahwistic perspective.

❀ We find an interesting variant to the above-mentioned motif in some Jewish documents, for example, the Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (a document from the ninth century). In this version it is not only Jonah who is rescued from the primeval monster; the fish is also rescued from the Leviathan as a result of Jonah's intervention. As in the case of Tiamat, the Leviathan was also regarded as a life-threatening monster. The rabbi recounted that the huge fish told Jonah that the day had arrived that he (the fish) would be devoured by the Leviathan. Jonah then asked the fish to take him to the Leviathan. When Jonah showed the covenant seal of Abraham to the Leviathan, the latter fled. In this way not only Jonah, but also the fish, was saved from destruction. On their subsequent underwater journey, the fish showed Jonah the pillars on which the earth rested (Jonah 2:6), as well as the underworld of destruction (Jonah 2:2). Although this Jewish interpretation did not play any role in the origin of the book of Jonah, this example illustrates how certain motifs can be further developed once the text has come into being.

❀ Possible elements of a creation tradition

An important theme in the psalm of Jonah is that of God as creator, in contrast to the destructive power of the primeval waters. Genesis 1:2 refers to the *tehom*, the unformed and threatening primeval waters which existed before creation. By means of a spoken word God forced back these waters and established His creation. In Jonah 2:5 (2:6 in the Hebrew text) it is the *tehom*, once again, that surrounds and threatens Jonah. The use of this word, as well as the elaboration of this theme, reminds us strongly of the creation tradition which was well known among the people of Israel. This tradition had an unique content in contrast to the Babylonian cosmology within which Tiamat (see how similar this name is with the Hebrew term used in Genesis 1, namely *tehom*) functions as the primeval monster.

These elements in the psalm of Jonah are supplemented by a remark in Jonah 1:9 where Jonah represents himself as someone who serves "the Lord, the God of the heavens, who created the sea and the land". The suspicion that a creation tradition played a role in the book of Jonah is confirmed by this reference.

❀ Possible elements of a Zion tradition

The psalm of Jonah has two references to the holy temple of the Lord: in 2:4 (2:5) and 2:7 (2:8). The holy temple is portrayed here as the place where Yahweh is present and where protection

against the threatening forces of chaos is to be found. This portrayal of the temple also occurs in other Old Testament texts which were probably influenced by the Zion tradition. Psalm 46:2, for example, portrays Zion as a shelter and protection "even if the earth is shaken and the mountains fall into the ocean depths; even if the seas roar and rage, and the hills are shaken by the violence."

(c) Observations and evaluation

- The major contribution of the tradition-critical approach lies in the fact that it removed the form-critical question from the aesthetic-archaic domain to that of the Old Testament faith statements and their transmission history. As such, the interpretation process is extended so that interpreters focus not only on literary forms and their background, but also on the relationship between Israel's faith convictions, and the transmission processes of the material from which the Old Testament is composed.

- Because tradition-criticism delves into the past in order to go back beyond the earliest written form of the text, the speculative element unfortunately increases. Although the identification of oral traditions makes a major contribution in the quest for adequate interpretation, these traditions remain nothing more than theoretical constructions.

- Geographical and temporal proximity are preconditions for the mutual influence found in parallel motifs and traditions. Theories that would attempt to relate a motif from the folklore of Latin-American Indians to Jewish literature, which is very much older, should be rejected at the outset.

4.2.6 Redaction-critical studies

(a) Background and theory

Whereas the literary-critical, form-critical and tradition-critical approaches function analytically, the redaction-critical mode of interpretation has a synthesizing purpose. Although this approach is based upon the previous three methods, it is concerned primarily with the redaction processes that led gradually to the transformation of smaller literary units into greater components, which contributed to the final form and composition of biblical books.

A redaction-critical approach is seriously concerned with the different levels of composition involved in the description of the growing process of biblical texts. A very definite distinction is made between, for example,

- author(s), who are those who wrote texts from scratch;

- compositor(s), who are those who synthesized existing texts to create a larger textual unit; and

- redactor(s), who are those who (in the same way as newspaper editors) rearranged these synthesized materials, added explanatory notes, made small, but significant corrections, placed textual material in other contexts to change their intent, and so forth.

When the evolution of a text is described, the following questions are normally asked: Was this text or text passage written from scratch by an original author, or was it composed from already existing textual material? Is there evidence of material that was added at a later stage as commentary or interpretation and that has become part of the text? What indications do these redactional remarks give of the way in which the text as a whole has grown into its current form?

In this context the introductory questions of dating and authorship are pertinent. Although these aspects could, strictly speaking, also be discussed in terms of other historical-critical methods (such as tradition-criticism), the synthesizing method of redaction-criticism serves as an appropriate framework for discussion. Knowledge of the historical period and circumstances of each of the transmission stadiums (cf. the form-critical and tradition-critical interest in this background), is essential to the dating of a biblical book. However, it is also important to establish the time and circumstances of origin of the final phase of the transmission process, which completes the composition of the book as a whole. The historical, geographic and antiquarian information in the text could be utilized for this purpose.

A discussion on authorship would also fit into the framework of redaction-criticism. The different "levels" of authorship involved in biblical texts (as mentioned above) illustrate something of the complexity of the question of authorship. The purpose of the quest for authorship is therefore not necessarily to identify an author by name (that is very seldom possible, in any case), but rather to elucidate the religious, ideological and social circles within which the author(s) functioned.

(b) Jonah in the light of a redaction-critical approach

A redaction-critical study of the book of Jonah depends wholly on the literary-critical decisions that were made earlier. The number and extent of smaller textual units distinguished earlier, are critical to the redaction process.

The only smaller unit that can with reasonable certainty be regarded as a later addition is the psalm of Jonah in chapter 2:2-9.

It seems that the author or compositor of the book of Jonah had made use of existing Psalm material (probably an individual's song of grace) in his/her narrative as if it were Jonah's prayer. It is difficult to determine at what stage in the development of the narrative the synthesis of textual units took place and what factors determined this synthesis. Allan, in his commentary on the book of Jonah (1976:184), gives the following explanation for the insertion of the psalm:

> "The psalm would normally be recited at the sanctuary before the offering of a sacrifice of thanksgiving. This present psalm fits perfectly into the pattern of the thanksgiving songs extant in the Psalter. The author evidently selected it from the temple repertoire of cultic praise as an apt vehicle for his theme. He exercises in an unusual way every believer's right of re-use, whatever his particular circumstances. But in the setting into which he introduces it the metaphor of drowning becomes literal, and the ex-victim celebrates his deliverance not in the temple but in a fish. The psalm was chosen because of its appropriateness to Jonah's situation."

The dating of the book of Jonah remains controversial; the book did not necessarily originate at the time of the prophet Jonah-ben-Amittai who is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 (approximately 780 BCE); it is an anonymous literary work and was not necessarily written by Jonah (as was previously advocated in some circles); it differs from other prophetic books in that it does not include sayings of a prophet, but rather narratives about a prophet named Jonah; and the author(s) of the book remains unknown to us.

There are indications in the text that the book originated at a later stage than the time of Jonah-ben-Amittai. For some scholars, Jonah 3:3 is an indication that the author had only vague memories of the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BCE. Consequently, the book must have a later dating. The in-depth description of the city's magnitude reflects a tradition that was common in the fourth century BCE. The reference to the King of Nineveh (instead of the King of Assyria) also

indicates that the author was no longer acquainted with the original circumstances. The reflection of certain Persian practices in the book (for example, the reference to domestic animals taking part in mourning ceremonies in 3:8) indicates that the book must have been written some time during the Persian period (middle of the sixth century to the middle of the fourth century BCE). The apparent use of passages from Jeremiah 18 and Joel 2 (both apparently post-exilic) in the last two chapters of the book of Jonah further affirms a possible post-exilic dating. Although care must be taken not to abuse the grammatical argument, various Aramaic loan words in the book also strengthen the argument for a late dating.

If we agree to a late dating, the question still remains: How late can the book be dated? A reference in the apocryphal wisdom book, Jesus Sirach 49:10 (which had already been completed by 200 BCE), unmistakably proves that the book of Jonah already existed in about 200 BCE. After careful consideration of all arguments, it seems that the fifth or fourth century BCE was the most probable period of origin. A more precise dating is at this stage impossible.

Of course one would like to know far more about the background of the book. A part of the problem is, however, that we know fairly little about the post-exilic period and the religious convictions prevalent at the time.

(c) Observations and evaluation

- Redaction-criticism shows the interpretive value of dismantling texts. As an aspect of the historical-critical approach, it aims to explain accurately how the final form of the text came into being out of all the separate parts that had earlier been distinguished.

- The redaction-critical approach is therefore an important part of the historical-critical approach. The final form of the text is the one that has to be interpreted, after all. It is necessary, therefore, to provide satisfactory explanations of the way the text reached its final form.

- A shortcoming of the redaction-critical approach is that its sole purpose is to provide a description of the literary process of development of the text, without adequately taking into account the theological motivation behind the process. In this respect the canonical criticism (see below) makes a useful contribution.

- Although it is difficult to provide final answers with regard to dating and authorship, it is important to determine as accurately as possible the circumstances that prevailed at the time of origin of the book. Once the historical circumstances are known, they avoid an unjustified interpretation of the text.

4.3 Canonical criticism

4.3.1 Background and theory

Although the historical-critical approaches to the interpretation of biblical texts were predominant for the greater part of the twentieth century, criticism has been gradually raised against it over the past thirty to forty years. Some approaches aimed at improving on the flaws of historical-criticism gradually developed, while some totally new approaches saw the light. The canonical-critical approach, closely associated with the American scholar, Brevard S. Childs, represents one of these reactions to historical criticism.

The canonical criticism criticized the historical-critical approach for its neglect of the process and effect of the canonization of biblical writings (particularly of the Old Testament). The process of canonization can be defined as follows:

It was an historical process in Ancient Israel (particularly during the post-exilic period) which involved the collection, selection and ordering of texts that would function normatively as Holy Scripture in the continuing religious community.

The canon (or rather its final phase) reflects a whole series of "theological" decisions that were taken by the early communities of faith. The premise is still that the biblical text underwent various phases of composition and growth, which is why the school of canonical criticism is discussed in this chapter, which deals with approaches focusing on the production of texts. However, the emphasis in canonical criticism is not so much on the historical process as such, but rather on the text which is final product. By giving serious consideration to the final texts produced by the canonization process, the critical function it performed in earlier stages of development is also taken seriously. The canon, which can be seen as the concentration of a whole series of theological decisions expressed in the literature of Ancient Israel, has a normative function for the evaluation of the early stages of the text. This then avoids the problem of the neglect of the unique dynamics of the religious literature of Israel which is associated with historical criticism, as a result of its exaggerated emphasis on history.

4.3.2 Jonah in the light of a canonical-critical approach

The canonical-critical approach addresses the following issues:

❀ The position of the psalm of Jonah (Jonah 2)

The canonical-critical approach accepts that the psalm of Jonah is probably a later addition to the rest of the textual material. However, the purpose of this approach is not only to confirm this fact or to describe the process of textual development, but to establish the particular emphasis placed on the canonical or final form of the book.

The later addition of the psalm of Jonah in chapter 2 brought about a structural change to the book as a whole. Chapter 2 now (in its canonical form) forms a parallel with chapter 4. The interpretation of chapter 4 was therefore drastically affected by this addition. Whereas Jonah's bad temper in chapter 4 was caused (before the insertion of chapter 2) by his anxiety about the fulfillment of his prophecy against Nineveh, a notable difference in interpretation emerges after the addition to the narrative. The newly-formed structural parallelism between chapters 2 and 4 re-orientates the narrative. The issue of divine grace is now incorporated into the story. In chapter 2, Jonah is grateful for God's grace which rescued him by the timely provision of the fish. In chapter 4, on the other hand, Jonah is angry that God's grace (in Jonah's frame of reference meant only for Israel) is extended to the heathen city of Nineveh. The insertion of chapter 2 thus re-orientates the story from a narrative about true or false prophecy to a narrative about the limitlessness of divine grace.

❀ Jonah's relationship to 2 Kings 14:25

The canonical form of the book (in which the prophet Jonah features as the main character) involuntarily recalls the reference to Jonah-ben-Amittai and, as such, ensures that the narrative is not read only against the background of the post-exilic strict orthodox Jewish nationalism. The suggestion is deliberately made by the canonical form that the events happened in the eighth century BCE. This ensures that the message of the book is interpreted in a wider context, namely that it is concerned with the theological relationship between Israel and the nations. The book of Jonah would then serve as a critical-prophetic verdict over Israel - in exactly the same way as other prophetic voices of the Old Testament.

⚙ The inclusion of Jonah among the Minor Prophets

The form of the book of Jonah differs considerably from that of all the other books of the Minor Prophets. Unlike the others, this book is not biographical by nature. Furthermore, apart from the short sermon in Nineveh, the book does not include any of Jonah's prophecies, although the story itself constitutes a prophecy. The authority of this book is vested in its prophetic function, which was "created" by placing it among the books of the Minor Prophets.

⚙ The relationship between Nahum and Jonah

The whole prophecy of Nahum is an oracle of judgment against the city of Nineveh. In its canonical form, these prophecies function as dramatic illustrations of the eschatological triumph of God over His adversaries. Every generation of suffering Jews would be encouraged by this confession.

This canonical-critical interpretation of the book of Nahum illustrates that the focus is not on the city of Nineveh as such, but on Nineveh as a symbol of God's adversaries. This reconfirms the fact that the main concern in the canonical form of the book of Jonah is also not Nineveh, as an historical city, but rather Nineveh as the symbol of God's grace to the nations. It is thus clear that not only the "internal" canonical form of the Old Testament books should be considered, but also the interaction between books.

4.3.3 Observations and evaluation

⚙ The canonical-critical approach to the interpretation of biblical texts has been widely accepted in different scholarly circles. The re-orientation of this approach towards the final form of the text was widely acclaimed as a necessary correction to the excessive emphasis by the historical criticism on the earlier stages of the text.

⚙ It is laudable that this approach includes in the interpretation process the communities of faith within which the text was created, and out of which it developed. Because the final text is regarded as the end product of a series of religious decisions taken by earlier faith communities, the "direction of interpretation" appropriate to a particular text can be uncovered.

⚙ Unfortunately the canonical-critical approach was welcomed by fundamentalists who saw in it a legitimization of a-historical and anti-historical reading and interpretation. However, such an application of this method amounts to a misunderstanding of its true dynamics. It should be clear that this approach functions completely historically, albeit in a different manner from historical criticism. It would therefore be a misconception if this approach is equaled to a text-immanent approach (see the discussion in chapter 5).

4.4 Cultural-anthropological approaches

In recent years there has been a revival in the interest in the world in which biblical texts were produced. However, this interest amounts to more than simply dating the text, identifying the author, analyzing the phases of redaction and reconstructing the political, economic, social, cultural, literary and religious worlds of the historical context. The interest has shifted to the analysis of the interaction between the text and the world within which it was produced.

The insight was developed that one can only understand ancient texts like the Bible against the background of the "discourse" that was current in the particular historical context. One can only come to grips with the nuances of a text if one understands the questions to which the text provided answers, in terms of the debates of the time. One needs an understanding of the

generally accepted views of the time, as some ideas may have been thought of as self-evident and thus not even mentioned (although we are no longer aware of them today). The text is formed within this discourse, in that it either reflected these views, or it may have deliberately set out to make a new contribution to them.

It is important to understand how the text itself was influenced (often at the unconscious level) by contemporary discourses. The text can be understood, even explained, as a product of economic, social, political and religious factors and processes that ultimately reflected the interests of specific groups in the society of that time. The texts might at the same time legitimate these ideological interests. Seen from this perspective, the Bible did not only have an impact on its world; it was itself a product of this world.

There are a number of academic disciplines that study texts like the Bible in this way, understanding them as part of the economic, social, cultural and political dynamics within which they originated. All these methods accept the same premise, namely that people cannot be understood in isolation from the social context within which they live. Sociological approaches generally apply modern sociological methods retrospectively to place, and explain texts in terms of social processes in the context of that time.

These approaches employ methods primarily developed for the analysis of present day contexts. They were only applied to the study of ancient texts at a later stage. These methods can be used to study, on the one hand, the interaction between the text and the present-day readers and, on the other hand, that between the text and the social world within which it originated. Thus both text and present-day context can be studied using the same types of analysis.

It would be possible to apply any one of the above approaches to the interpretation of the book of Jonah. For the purpose of this book, we have restricted ourselves to one example. This is partly because of the paucity of the historical data bearing on the social world within which the book of Jonah originated, and partly because the Marxist and feminist approaches, discussed in chapter 7, overlap with some aspects of the socio-historical approaches.

4.4.1 Background and theory

(a) Social-Scientific criticism

As a discipline for the modern day study of the Bible, social-scientific criticism derives its name from its close relationship to the main branches of the social sciences, namely cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, and political science. These branches relate in different ways to the institutions and functions of human society as well as to the diversity of interpersonal human relations within society. The study of Jonah in this section draws solely on the insights of one branch of the social sciences, namely cultural anthropology.

As a method contributing to the academic study of the Bible, social-scientific criticism is a comparative late-comer. Its historical roots may be traced to the sociological studies of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. In particular, Weber's study entitled "Ancient Judaism near the end of World War 1", introduced the insights of social science directly to the field of biblical studies. Form criticism (see section 4.1.3 above) was, in its original phase, also explicitly understood as a sociological method. For example, in his famous commentary on the book of Genesis, Hermann Gunkel introduced the concept of Sitz im Leben. This concept specified a close connection between the forms of oral tradition behind the written biblical texts in Genesis and their actual setting and function in the life of the earliest religious communities for whom

the stories were first told. Early 20th century socio-historical studies of the Bible became evident in the writings of German biblical scholars such as Adolf Deismann, Ernst Lochmyer, Albrecht Alt, Martin Noth and Ernst Troeltsch, and among North American scholars associated with the Chicago school of interpretation such as Shirley Jackson Case and Shailer Matthews. Yet, the early socio-historical interests of these scholars were largely displaced in later years, partly as a result of their rejection by European neo-orthodoxy in the 1920s and 1930s and partly because of the inherent limitations of sociological and anthropological data on which such research was based at the time.

However, in the last two decades or so, the social sciences have re-surfaced in the field of biblical criticism, albeit in new and innovative ways. Biblical scholars who use the method of social-scientific criticism are no longer satisfied with the older discoveries and insights which other traditional methods of biblical criticism have provided (such as questions of date, authorship, audience, historical background, and the structure, form or redaction of texts). Instead, social-scientific criticism stresses the indispensable significance of analyzing the interaction between the biblical text and the ancient socio-cultural world in which it was first produced.

While no simple explanation for the rise of the social-scientific criticism of the Bible in fact exists, some of the following factors have certainly contributed to its emergence in the field of Biblical studies during the nineteenth century and since:

- The period of the eighteenth century was a period of rapid social change throughout most of European society. Contributing factors included, for example, the onset of the industrial revolution and the rise of the middle class as a decisive force in the political and economic affairs of life. Popular attention became increasingly attuned to social, political and economic problems and their possible redress. More and more academics shifted their interests from social theory to the study of living societies in search of solutions to the escalating and traumatic events that were being experienced.

- Enlightenment philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries asserted the primacy of reason over revelation and faith. What was traditionally accepted in the Bible as virtually unquestionable in terms of form and content and as an authoritative record of the past was now subjected to historical inquiry. This new found freedom intensified scholarly frustration with more traditional techniques of biblical interpretation and their inability to bring the ancient biblical texts to life. Increasingly, biblical research turned towards alternative fields of research in the natural and social sciences.

- The intellectual ferment of the nineteenth century also generated strong interdisciplinary interests. Most influential in this regard were the numerous archaeological discoveries and the increasing availability of extra-biblical data for the study of the Bible. In particular, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 led biblical scholars to ask more concrete social questions regarding their sources. For example, how was the apocalyptic spirit reflected in these scrolls related to that of late-Jewish prophetic and early Christian literature? Here biblical scholars drew increasingly on the social sciences which were already seeking answers to a variety of questions involving social relations.

- Recent decades have produced a renewed and inescapable rise to prominence of a variety of social issues and conflicts in world history. For example, the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960s, and the agenda of oppressed social groups such as women, black people, or marginalized classes in societies across the USA and other contexts of the "Two-Thirds World" (Latin America, Asia, Africa) drew forth new interest in the social and cultural world of biblical history and literature. The result has been a veritable explosion of literature in the field of biblical scholarship.

Before we say more about cultural anthropology as a critical method for the interpretation of the Bible and apply this method to an interpretation of the book of Jonah, we should recognize that the roots of social-scientific criticism are closely aligned to historical-critical or those readings of the Bible that take their point of departure in the world of production of the texts (see 4.1 above). But the question of whether the methods of social-scientific criticism are essentially similar to the earlier historical-critical methods, or whether they are fundamentally different needs to be asked. The answer to this question is both "yes" and "no".

In the first instance we must say "yes". Like historical-critical approaches, social-scientific criticism assumes the strangeness or foreign nature of the biblical world and texts when viewed from the perspective of twentieth century readers or interpreters. This problem is essentially one which confronts modern and post-modern readers of the ancient texts of the Bible. Contemporary readers of the Bible no longer share the time, space, customs, values, worldviews, cultural knowledge, language, social structures and systems, political order, economy, and mobility of its original audience or readers.

But we must also say "no". Social-scientific criticism is different from historical-critical methods in that it insists that biblical texts are not merely historical ideas, but also social and cultural productions. We may sum up some further differences between historical-criticism and social-scientific criticism as follows:

Historical criticism	Social scientific criticism
offers greater focus on the theological and historical ideas of key biblical personalities (for example, Moses, David, Jesus, Paul), events (for example, the exodus, the monarchy, the Jesus movement, the Pauline mission) or institutions (such as the Temple, the church)	focuses more intently on the social and cultural context in which biblical ideas, personalities, events, and institutions arise and to which they constitute a response
emphasizes the historical development of ideas or doctrines (such as the Law, justification by faith)	attends to the social and cultural formation of ideas and doctrines
sees conflict in the realm of explicit ideas (such as that between Israelite and Canaanite religion, or that between Jesus and his opponents)	understands conflict as a reflection of, and a response to, social and cultural factors (such as the socio-economic conditions in Canaan or in first century Palestine)
stresses differences which occur in human societies and the particular changes which take place in each society over time	stresses the typical, repeated patterns of social interaction of a given group of human beings in a specific time and place. It considers social contexts (such as the family, politics, the city, or the countryside), and systems of social values (such as honour-shame, purity-pollution)
tends to conceptualize history in a manner that is implicit, arbitrary and unsystematic	tends to conceive of history in an explicit and systematic manner
is more interested in asking such questions as "when?", "what?", "where?" and "who?" concerning beliefs, doctrines, and experiences.	is more interested in asking questions such as "how?" and "why?" concerning beliefs, doctrines, and experiences.

The above comparison is not only meant to accentuate the distinctiveness of each approach, but also to show how each approach may complement the other. For example, where the historian may have to understand the political and religious history of ancient Israel from the available data (which may be, for example, textual and archaeological), the social scientist will provide a systematic attempt to sift through this data and ask specific questions about the daily life of human beings in that society. These questions would concern their complex interactions, behaviour patterns, values, worldview, socio-political and economic relations and structures.

What is needed, then, is an approach to the Bible which makes possible an imaginative reconstruction of the world inhabited by the original audiences and readers of biblical texts. But more than this, an approach is also needed to help reconstruct the social and cultural structures, processes, and the forces at work in the ancient world in which the biblical texts and ideas originated. Social-scientific criticism is one approach which helps to make both aspects of "historical reconstruction" and "social-cultural reconstruction" possible. And on both these counts, the method of cultural anthropology in particular provides descriptions and explanations of the ancient world of the Bible (the world of Jonah or Jesus, for example) and offers a description of appropriate cultural scenarios for interpreting texts from such a society.

(b) Cultural Anthropology

Culture is that which shapes the way people determine and discover meaning in their lives. Cultural anthropologists who study different cultures usually speak of culture in terms of the customs, language, values, beliefs, economy, political systems, ethos, and worldview of a group of people in a particular time and place. Culture is embodied in symbols (which may take the form of words, images, objects or actions) which represent the life experiences of the particular group of people. These symbols help people within the culture to make sense of their experiences and allow them to communicate meaningfully with one another.

For example, the South African flag has since 1994 become a symbol of a new South Africa and testifies to a new way of life in which the racial discrimination of the old apartheid order can have no place. People within the South African context immediately understand the meaning of the new South African flag, and either accept or reject what it stands for. People from another country may not appreciate the significance of this symbol unless someone takes the time to explain the meaning it has for South Africans. Cultural anthropology performs a similar function. It helps to explain how different cultures work, permitting people from one culture to understand what gives meaning to the lives of other people from another culture.

As an approach to the Bible, the method of cultural anthropology is designed to help contemporary readers to hear and understand the meaning of biblical texts in terms of the cultural contexts in which they were originally proclaimed or written. Our contemporary cultures are usually quite different from the ancient near eastern Mediterranean cultural environment in which the Bible first emerged. For example, contemporary readers of the Bible usually share many of the core cultural values of modern, Western industrial society such as individualism, freedom of choice, progress and competition. However, these cultural values held no meaning for people living in the ancient Mediterranean and pre-industrial society in which the Bible was written. Cultural anthropology has helped biblical scholars to recognize the relevant core-cultural values. These are the values which proponents of the cultural anthropological approach attempt to introduce to the process of biblical interpretation.

A brief contrast between some cultural values of a modern Western society and those of ancient near eastern Mediterranean society illustrates some of the differences which exist between these

two cultural worlds. For example, in contrast to the strong stress on individual freedom in modern Western society, people in the ancient Mediterranean world understood their identity as derived from group participation and conformity. Where modern society usually stresses the unlimited acquisition of economic wealth and goods, ancient society assumed that all goods were in short and limited supply. Where modern society builds on values of "getting ahead" in life even at the expense of others, most people in ancient peasant cultures would have stressed values of honour (see the discussion below) and viewed intense competitiveness as both dishonourable and destructive of the social order. But more of this later!

For the moment, let us try to understand something of how biblical scholars go about using cultural anthropology for the critical study of the Bible. How do they make possible a cross-cultural reading of the Bible? Perhaps the important observation here is how biblical scholars make use of models of socio-cultural analysis which they derive from the discipline of cultural anthropology. The following definition of a "model" will demonstrate the sense in which the term is often used by these biblical scholars:

Models deal with such matters as kinship systems, power relations, rituals, economics, and so on. A model is a simplified description of like events or interactions drawn from the study of many cultures and groups. Models are not a tool to research historical information. Rather, they aid in the process of interpretation. Models help to overcome ethnocentrism by providing a framework different from our own cultural maps with which to organize and assess information. The point of using a model is not to fit facts into an abstract paradigm. Rather, a model serves as a heuristic device to probe and to question, to notice details we might have ignored, and to see connections that explain dynamics and relationships. In short, models of interpretation function as tools of analysis which help to bridge the cultural gap between the world of the Bible and the world of the modern day interpreter. By virtue of their cross-cultural nature, models help to make possible a more truly cross-cultural encounter with the biblical text and its world.

Cultural anthropology provides three main kinds of models for the study of societies or groups. Bruce Malina, a leading biblical scholar in the field of the cultural-anthropological approach to the New Testament, provides an expanded discussion on these three kinds of models.

- Structural-functionalist models focus on the ways in which different societies maintain stability and create a balance when new social forces or elements are introduced into the cultural system. The stress here is on how society preserves the status quo.
- Conflict models seek to understand the dynamics of internal struggles, tensions and conflicts among different parts of a society.
- Symbolic models seek to discern the symbolic meanings that people of a particular society share and how these symbols change within the context of social interactions within a culture.

A particular biblical scholar may have a preference for one or other of these three major types of models. S/he could use a combination of these models when interpreting texts just as easily. The point to realize here is that each set of models will help the modern interpreter to explore the meaning of different elements of the biblical texts within their original cultural context and, hopefully, permit for a better sense of their earliest cultural meanings.

Our study of the book of Jonah will draw on two kinds of symbolic models, namely those of honour-shame and purity-pollution. Both models build on core-cultural values which may prove helpful for understanding the cultural or symbolic world in which the book of Jonah was

originally written and proclaimed. Let us describe some main features of each these two models before we attempt to use them in our analysis of the book of Jonah.

⚙ The model of honour-shame

Honour is a claim to worth that is publicly acknowledged by a broader group or community. To "have honour" or to "be honoured" in a culture is to be publicly acclaimed. The opposite of "honour" is "shame". To "have shame" or to "be shamed" is to be denied worth publicly. Although to "be shamed" is always a negative thing, to "have shame" is always positive, for it means a deep concern about one's honour.

There exist two kinds of honour. The first is called ascribed honour. This is the honour into which a person is born and is passively received rather than something which is obtained. This kind of honour is derived from the social group or family to which the person belongs. The genealogies within the Bible (as in 1 Chronicles 1-10; Matthew 1 and Luke 3) help to affirm the honourable status of a person which is inherited from their honoured ancestors. In this sense, Israel itself could claim honour, because of its special relationship to God established through its covenant with him (Isaiah 43:1-7). Likewise, Israel declared that God was on the side of its people and against those who did not belong to this community (Psalm 44:1-8). Should Israel experience national defeat in battle, for example, this would bring shame upon the nation, indicating that God had abandoned it. In such situations, Israel would experience a crisis of identity and would question either its own integrity before God (Psalm 44:17-22), or God's continuing covenant with Israel (Psalm 44:9-16), or both (Isaiah 59:1-19). Very often prophets pointed out that Israel's shame is caused by Israel's sin which incurs God's displeasure (Isaiah 2:6-3:26; Ezekiel 16:36-54; Hosea 2:10; Nahum 3:5).

The second kind of honour is acquired honour. This is the honour which a person or group in a particular culture achieves or earns by responding to some form of challenge. David, for example, acquires great honour among the people of Israel through his defeat of Goliath, the Philistine leader (1 Samuel 18:7; 29:5; see also 1 Samuel 17). But David also "loses honour" and is shamed when, for example, he is rebuked by Nathan, the prophet of the Lord, for his adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and for his plot to have Uriah killed in battle (2 Samuel 11-12).

⚙ The model of purity-pollution

"Purity" or "holiness" is another core cultural value of the ancient biblical world which has been identified by cultural anthropologists. Especially important in this regard has been the work of British social anthropologist, Mary Douglas. Her writings on the subject have been adapted and widely used for the purposes of a cultural-anthropological interpretation of biblical texts. A basic concept which underscores Douglas's articulation of the purity-pollution system is that of "dirt". "Dirt" is defined "as matter out of place". She illustrates what she means by "dirt" in the following way:

Shoes are not dirty of themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-room table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, it is dirty to place bathroom equipment in the drawing room, to leave clothing lying on chairs, to bring out-door things in-doors or upstairs things downstairs, to wear under-clothing where over-clothing should be, and so on.

The rules which govern how a society defines what is or is not "dirt" constitute the purity-pollution systems of that society. Purity and pollution, therefore, refer to the "boundary systems" or "cultural maps" of places, people, things and times that serve to organize the lives

of the people in a particular society. They define what or who are clean or unclean, holy or unholy, insiders or outsiders within a particular culture.

Within the ancient eastern Mediterranean world, every Israelite or Jew would have been familiar with the following cultural map of places which defined the boundary lines in ascending order of purity or holiness:

- The land of Israel is holier than any other land
- The walled cities of Israel are still more holy
- The space within the walls of Jerusalem is still more holy
- The temple mount is still more holy
- The rampart is still more holy
- The court of the women is still more holy
- The court of the Israelites is still more holy
- The court of the priests is still more holy
- Between the porch and altar is still more holy
- The Holy of Holies is still more holy.

Within this classification system, the Holy of Holies is where God resides on earth and designates the inner and most sacred sanctuary of the Temple. Jews protected this sanctuary, often with their own lives. Significantly, the territory of the gentile (non-Jewish) nations lie completely outside this cultural map of places, and is considered unholy or unclean. Ordinarily, Jews avoided contact with Gentiles because they were considered ritually impure, immoral and idolatrous.

In a similar way, a hierarchy of people organized Jewish life in a descending order of holiness or "purity", as follows:

- The High priest
- Priests
- Levites
- Israelites
- Converts
- Freed slaves
- Disqualified priests
- Temple slaves
- Bastards
- Eunuchs
- Others with physical deformities.

A close relationship exists between the "purity maps" of places and of people. For example, only the high priest is permitted entry into the Holy of Holies, only priests and Levites can enter the court of the priests, and so on. However, Gentiles are excluded from any place within the Israelite scheme of holiness. Gentiles are outsiders because they are considered impure or polluted.

Other cultural maps of purity-pollution also set firm boundaries for Israelites or Jews. There were those whom they could marry, persons whom they were to avoid contact with to prevent being polluted (such as lepers, the corpses of animals or human beings, the demon-possessed), and holy times when they were to refrain from certain behaviours, such as work, in order to prevent defilement (as on Sabbath days or the Passover festival).

In short, then, purity or holiness was a core-cultural value of the ancient Mediterranean society and formed an important basis for the structuring and classifying of everything within that society - people, places, things, and times. Within the ancient Israelite or Jewish society there would have been various groups who would have understood the meaning of purity and pollution in different ways. However, cultural anthropology suggests that they would all have agreed on the importance of the purity-pollution system.

We must now turn to the book of Jonah and attempt to apply some of the insights we have gained from our analysis of the two models of cultural anthropology.

4.4.2 Jonah in the light of cultural anthropology

Little direct information regarding the historical, social and cultural world of the book of Jonah is available to us today. The Old Testament scholar, Norman Gottwald, places Jonah among three independent biblical short stories which include Ruth, Jonah and Esther. These three books constitute a genre of the novella (or "novellette") which appears frequently in the literary history of biblical Israel. These stories typically invoke fairy tales, legends, myth and heroic figures, and are decidedly vague, even disinterested, in precise historical and socio-cultural details. In short, then, the socio-historical setting of Jonah remains problematic. Its location within the archaic setting of Assyrian domination is more closely linked to a literary convention of the writer of Jonah (who attempts to give the story a "classical" appeal) than it is a comment on the actual socio-historical context of the book. Having said this, the accepted view of most biblical scholars that the book of Jonah was written sometime around the sixth to fourth centuries BCE forms the basis of the further analysis.

In the light of the lack of clear socio-historical data which emerges in the story of Jonah, we may well ask whether a cultural anthropological reading is at all possible. Clearly, a detailed socio-historical reconstruction of the book is difficult, even impossible. Yet a cultural-anthropological approach may be useful if we focus deliberately on the narrative world of the text. In other words, we are interested to explore just how valuable cultural anthropology may be as a tool for better appreciating the story-world of Jonah from the perspective of its ancient audience. In order to illustrate this, we shall limit ourselves to the two models described earlier, namely honour-shame and purity-pollution.

⚙ Honour and shame in the book of Jonah

Firstly, then, how may the model of honour-shame illuminate the narrative world of Jonah? Underlying the story of Jonah is the dominant national consciousness and assumption that the Jewish nation, Israel, alone has been chosen by God and has a place of "ascribed honour". The Assyrians and the city of Nineveh, by sharp contrast, are symbolic of "shame" itself which were associated with all Gentile nations. And so the narrative begins with the Lord's word to Jonah: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me" (1:2).

The ascribed honour that the Jewish nation enjoys has world-renown, extending even to Gentile sailors on a ship bound for Tarshish. And so Jonah can claim his own identity in terms of this honour status: "I am a Hebrew ... I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9).

In response, the sailors are described as "even more afraid" when they learn of this (1:10), and are described as praying to the Lord (1:14) and even sacrificing and making vows to the Lord (1:16). Both were customary cultural attempts to earn the honour of the gods and to

avoid their judgement, although the narrative of Jonah indicates that it is their obedience to the Lord's will by throwing Jonah overboard that actually calms the sea and spares their lives (1:15). Later, it is the repentance of the people of Nineveh and their obedience to the Lord's prophet that reverses their status of "shame" and acquires for them an "honoured" state which results in their deliverance rather than judgement from the Lord (3:5-10).

Jonah, however, feels "shamed" before the Gentiles and his own Jewish community because his prophecy of judgement on Nineveh is not fulfilled. His prophetic word is: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4).

Jonah would have felt "honoured" if his word of judgement on Nineveh came true. After all, one common tradition in the ancient world was that a true prophet was recognized when his or her words came true (see Jeremiah 27-28). In view of Nineveh's deliverance, therefore, Jonah felt he had been "shamed", and made the equal of a false prophet. His response is one of extreme displeasure and anger towards the Lord (4:1-4). For him, nothing less than death will free him from this shame he feels (4:3), unless, of course, the city is indeed destroyed. And so Jonah waits and hopes that the city of Nineveh will be destroyed, for this alone, it seems to him, will vindicate his honour as a prophet of the Lord (4:5).

Perhaps it is more significant how a cultural anthropological reading of Jonah allows us to see the manner in which the meaning of "honour" and "shame" is radically redefined and reinterpreted by the narrative within its ancient setting. Even though this system of value was typical of ancient eastern Mediterranean society, its application could not be prejudged when God's grace ("special favour") was at work in the world. True prophetic understanding and mission derived from obedience to God's will and a full acceptance of God's mercy and love for all peoples, including a Gentile nation as notorious as the Assyrians. Jonah's narrative of "honour" and then "shame" would have cautioned the Jewish nation against a too easy presumption on their "ascribed honour" as the only criterion for understanding God's actions of grace and mercy in the world.

⚙ Purity and pollution in the book of Jonah

The second model or system of core cultural values which may be applied briefly to the book of Jonah is that of purity-pollution. The narrative of Jonah makes striking contrasts between places of purity and impurity. For example, "[in] the presence of the Lord" is contrasted to "away from the presence of the Lord" (1:3,10). The "holy temple" (2:4,7), the symbol of God's holiness is contrasted with "the belly of Sheol" (2:2) or "the Pit" (2:6) which are both places which symbolize death and defilement (e.g. Psalm 9:12; 28:1; Job 33:22). In his desperate situation, Jonah wonders if his crossing the boundaries of purity has taken him away from God's holy presence forever. He prays: "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" (2:4).

Jonah is also in contact with persons who defile or make him impure, such as the sailors who worship other gods and are obviously Gentiles who are excluded from the purity system of Jews of the day (2:4-6). This, then, raises questions about the narrative. Why does Jonah put himself in danger of defilement, as a member of a Jewish community with values rooted in a well-defined purity system which would normally have prohibited close contact with non-Jews. What might the story of Jonah be teaching about the meaning of purity in relation to non-Jewish persons within the cultural context in which it was originally written and proclaimed?

From the start, the narrative would have surprised its earliest audience. Notwithstanding the normative values of purity or holiness in the Jewish community, the Lord Himself commands

Jonah to cross the boundaries into the Gentile territory of the Ninevites (1:2)! In our discussion of the values of honour-shame, we already noted how the Ninevites represented all that was culturally outside the strict circles of Jewish nationalism. The critical question again arises of whether or not Jonah will conform to the prescribed behaviour of the orthodox Judaism of his day, rather than risk defilement of contact with Gentiles, even in obedience to God's word, and with an acceptance of God's grace at work in the world of the day? This appears to be the central problem with which the narrative wrestles and confronts its earliest audience.

The narrative appears to be a suggestive response to the critical questions which it raises itself. The challenge is that the one no less than the gracious and merciful God of the Jews redraws the boundary lines of what is pure or impure, clean or unclean, holy or unholy. Even the notorious Ninevites are now embraced within the circle of God's love and forgiveness. In such a situation, ritual acts take a secondary place, and moral behaviour or right actions are more valued by God (3:10). The narrative suggests that Jews of the day should reject the exclusivity of Jewish nationalism which rivalled God for their allegiance within their cultural setting. Through the character of Jonah, the critical challenge posed by the narrative shifts to the broader Jewish community. Will they restrict themselves to a strict and exclusive Jewish nationalism and its prejudices or will they embrace a more open, inclusive approach to the world? The narrative makes a strong case for the latter, even though it hints at a rather ambivalent response within its original context (see 4:1-11).

4.4.3 Observations and Evaluation

Without doubt, cultural anthropology has contributed much to biblical scholarship in recent decades. Despite some of its own limitations, the approach of cultural anthropology has provided exciting new questions, methods and models for reading and interpreting the Bible in the context of its ancient world.

❀ A cultural-anthropological approach helps modern interpreters to explore the world in which the Bible was produced in more creative and critical ways. It helps biblical scholars to reconstruct a fuller picture of the ancient world of the Bible by giving special attention to its cultural situation. Instead of falling easy prey to ethnocentric interpretations of the Bible which impose modern cultural values on the text, readers are encouraged to see afresh how the people of the ancient world could have thought, felt, acted, and communicated.

❀ Cultural-anthropological approaches do not dispense with, but rather complement and deepen the capacity of other approaches to the Bible. For example, traditional theological questions (such as those regarding God, Israel, salvation, and repentance) are rooted more deeply in the socio-cultural contexts of the ancient writers and audiences, rather than treated as abstract "ideas" separated from these contexts. Therefore, cultural anthropology offers a more holistic and situated approach to theological interpretation.

❀ Models drawn from cultural anthropology enable scholars to demonstrate how important and useful a cross-disciplinary approach can be in the interpretation of the Bible. In this way the door opens up for greater conversation and collaboration among exegetes, historians, archaeologists, social scientists, classicists and ultimately the contemporary Bible reader.

❀ Cultural-anthropological readings of biblical texts are at risk of becoming too reductionist. In other words, the meaning of theological beliefs and ideas in a book such as Jonah can too easily be seen as being determined by the socio-cultural systems in which they arose, rather than as integral, and determining, elements of these social systems.

- In its preference for "the world behind the text", cultural-anthropological approaches to the Bible may actually neglect or even ignore the creative meanings which the text itself contains and the meanings which are opened up by readings focusing on the reception of texts. This may be particularly true in the case of Jonah which, as a story, may be more suited to literary than historical or socio-cultural analysis.

- Cultural-anthropological methods and models are often developed and used to make the Bible more intelligible and meaningful to contemporary Western interpreters, especially in societies in North America and Europe. Their heuristic value and utility for non-Western interpreters of the "Two-Thirds World" are less tested in present debates. Consequently, the question may well be raised whether traditional African and rural cultures may not be far closer to the world of the original biblical writers and audiences, and whether they might not provide valuable insights in the process of biblical interpretation.

4.5 Socio-rhetorical criticism

4.5.1 Background and theory

In the summary at the beginning of this chapter it was stated that socio-rhetorical criticism does not focus exclusively on those aspects that concern the production of texts. Rather, this approach involves a multiplicity of view points on texts in order to integrate these insights, and it could just as well have been discussed in chapter 5 (Approaches focusing on the texts themselves) or chapter 6 (Approaches focusing on the reception of texts) of this guide.

The development of this approach by the New Testament scholar Vernon Robbins can be traced back to his reaction against and criticism of the exclusive use of exegetical methods for interpretation. According to Robbins, the result is too limited when biblical texts are interpreted by means of a single method. The "intricately woven tapestry" of texts that contains complex patterns and images cannot be viewed properly from only one angle. Different angles are needed to enable the interpreter to bring the multiple textures of the texts into view. This method reflects the latest development in exegetical scholarship towards holistic or multi-dimensional interpretation. This development will be discussed again in chapter 8 where the current situation in exegetical scholarship will be presented.

The prefix "socio-" in the term "socio-rhetorical" indicates that this approach has the intention of bringing to the interpretation of biblical texts the rich resources of modern anthropology and sociology. As has been indicated in the previous section of this chapter, these resources have been used increasingly for biblical interpretation during the last half of the twentieth century. Socio-rhetorical criticism uses these resources not only for an analysis of the current contexts of textual reception, but also for unravelling the contexts of textual production.

The term "rhetorical" refers to the way language is a means of communication between people. It foregrounds the textual techniques used to present thought, speech, stories, and arguments. In the last decades of the twentieth century biblical scholars have shown an increasing interest in rhetorical approaches to biblical interpretation. (This development will be discussed in chapter 6 again.) Socio-rhetorical criticism is thus interested in studying the ways people use language to construct texts, but also wants to integrate this aspect with an analysis of the ways in which people live in the world (both ancient and contemporary).

Texts, including biblical texts, are approached by socio-rhetorical criticism as though they were "thickly textured tapestries". This metaphor acknowledges the multifaceted nature of texts.

Exegetical strategies are chosen that can highlight these facets or dimensions as clearly as possible. The presupposition is therefore that different interpretative angles are needed in order to bring the multiple textures of the text into view. Socio-rhetorical criticism, as formulated by Robbins, therefore considers five different angles from which to explore multiple textures within texts:

(a) Inner texture

The analysis of the inner texture of texts focuses on the textual structure itself (or "getting inside a text" as Robbins puts it), and could just as well have been discussed in chapter 5. However, because it forms part of socio-rhetorical criticism, it is presented here. Inner texture is the texture of the medium of communication. With written texts, the inner texture especially resides in verbal texture – the texture of the language itself. The interpreter who undertakes this aspect of textual analysis does not deal with "meaning" or "interpretation" as such, but instead develops an intimate knowledge of words, word patterns, voices, structures, devices, and modes in the text. In the analysis the following are normally identified:

- Repetitive texture: The repetition of words or phrases in a text reveals how the text is structured to shape its dominant themes and concerns.

- Progressive texture: This aspect of the text concerns the movements that are created by means of sequences of words and phrases throughout the textual unit.

- Narrative texture: This refers to the way in which the narrative develops and progresses.

- Opening-Middle-Closing texture: This refers to the structuring or staging of a discourse in the text. It normally operates together with the previous three aspects.

- Argumentative texture: The texture of the argument involves the multiple kinds of reasoning present in the in order to establish some effect.

- Sensory-aesthetic texture: This aspect resides in the range of sensory experiences evoked by the text (thought, emotion, sight, sound, touch, smell) and the way in which it does so (through reason, intuition, imagination, humour, etc).

(b) Intertexture

By examining the intertexture of texts the interpreter enters the interactive world of a text. Intertexture is a text's representation of, reference to, and use of phenomena in the "world" outside the text. In other words, the intertexture of a text is the interaction of the language in the text with physical "objects", historical events, texts, customs, values, roles, institutions, and systems. Intertexture, therefore, deals with the production of the texts; it examines the interaction between textual formation and the world in which this formation takes place. However, one should acknowledge that the analysis of the intertexture does not examine the "outside" phenomena itself, but rather the configuration of these phenomena (as Robbins calls it) by the text in a particular language environment. A major goal of intertextural analysis is therefore to ascertain the nature and result of processes of configuration and re-configuration of phenomena in the world outside the text.

Intertextural analysis normally deals with the following aspects of texts:

- Oral-scribal intertexture: This deals with the ways in which texts, either explicitly or implicitly, use other texts. Five basic modes in which texts use other texts are distinguished: recitation, recontextualization, reconfiguration, narrative amplification, and thematic elaboration.

- Cultural intertexture: Texts also have an interactive relation to cultures of various kinds. Cultural knowledge, being "insider knowledge" either learnt by being part of a particular culture or through some kind of interaction with members of it, is reflected in various ways in texts. Such knowledge appears in word and concept patterns and configurations, in values, scripts, codes, systems or myths, either by means of reference (a word or phrase points explicitly to a tradition known to people on the basis of tradition), allusion (statements that presuppose a tradition without directly and explicitly citing it) or echo (subtle and indirect references that evoke, or potentially evoke a concept from cultural tradition).

- Social intertexture: Social knowledge is commonly held by all persons of a region, no matter what their particular cultural location may be. One obtains such knowledge by observing the behaviour and material objects produced by other people. Social knowledge includes the following: social roles or identities, social institutions, social codes and social relationships. Research in social phenomena outside the text therefore sheds important light on the nature of the social intertexture of that text.

- Historical intertexture: This refers to events that have occurred at specific times in specific locations. Because the widely held meaning of the word "historical", which includes social and cultural phenomena, can lead to imprecision, the term is used in socio-rhetorical criticism with specific reference to events, without denying that these events stood in intimate interaction with social, cultural and ideological phenomena.

(c) Social and cultural texture

Robbins warns that social and cultural texture should not be confused with social and cultural *inter*texture. Social and cultural texture concerns the capacities of the text to support social reform, withdrawal, or opposition and to evoke cultural perceptions of dominance, subordinance, difference, or exclusion. Analysis and interpretation of the social and cultural texture of a text explores the range of social orientations and locations in the discourse and the manner in which it relates these orientations and locations to one another. The following distinctions are normally made:

- Specific social topics: These are themes or arguments within the text that may lead to change in social practices, either by challenging and re-creating the social order, or by allowing the reader to withdraw from present society in order to create an alternative social world, or by transforming his or her perceptions of society as a creative response to its challenges.

- Common social and cultural topics: These topics in the discourse deepen the interpreter's understanding of the range of customary practices, central values, modes of relationship and exchange, perceptions about resources for life and well-being, and presuppositions about purity and taboo the text embodies.

- Final cultural categories: These categories cover the range of values and practices described within a text, and the priority it establishes among them. The priority certain people give to notions of what is right, lawful, expedient, honourable, pleasant, easy, feasible, necessary, holy, and so on, produces a particular social and cultural location for them. The result of these locations is the establishment of dominant, subordinate, oppositional, and marginal cultures within any locale or region.

(d) Ideological texture

This texture concerns particular alliances and conflicts the language in a text and the language in an interpretation evoke and nurture. Ideological texture concerns the way the text itself and

interpreters of the text position themselves in relation to other individuals and groups. Ideological texture differs from social and cultural texture by the manner in which it extends beyond social and cultural location into particular ways in which people advance their own interest and well-being through action, emotion, and thought. This can happen on different levels:

⊛ Individual locations: It is necessary to examine the individual locations of both the writers of texts and the readers of texts.

⊛ Relation to groups: The ideological goals of interpreters are often defined by the sort of groups they belong to.

⊛ Modes of intellectual discourse: An interpreter's adoption of a mode of theological, historical, sociological, anthropological, psychological, or literary discourse for commentary is significant, since a mode of intellectual discourse is a particular mode of social production. Each intellectual mode of interaction and exchange has a relation to an ideological field in the contemporary postmodern world in which we live.

⊛ Spheres of ideology: Analysis of the ideological texture of a text would include: (i) Analyzing the social and cultural location of the implied author of the text; (ii) Analyzing the ideology of power in the discourse of the text; (iii) Analyzing the ideology in the mode of intellectual discourse both in the text and in the interpretation of the text.

(e) Sacred texture

This is present where texts address the relationship between humans and the divine. Biblical texts are certainly good examples, although not the only ones, of texts that contain sacred texture. They vary from one another, however, in the kind of sacred texture they possess. Analysis of sacred texture involves systematically probing dynamics across a spectrum of relationships between the human and the divine. Robbins names a few religious categories that can guide the interpreter's search for sacred aspects of a text, such as the ideas of

⊛ Deity;
⊛ Holy persons;
⊛ Spirit beings;
⊛ Divine history;
⊛ Human redemption;
⊛ Human commitment;
⊛ Religious community;
⊛ Ethics.

No specific order of investigation is prescribed in socio-rhetorical criticism. Some people interpreting biblical or other explicitly religious texts may wish to begin by analyzing the sacred texture of a particular text. Another way would be to begin with the inner texture.

For two reasons, socio-rhetorical criticism developed by working outwards from inner texture to intertexture, then social and cultural texture, ideological texture and finally sacred texture. The logic of this development was that: (i) Beginning with the inner texture of a text the practice of "eisegesis" – reading into a text what a person wishes to see there – is avoided; (ii) The analysis of the inner texture is a way of merging newer literary approaches with an emphasis on "exegesis" – that is, the practice of reading "out", or "unpacking" what is in the text. Commentators with a particular interest in the production of texts may wish to start with the intertexture of a text. Interpreters who emphasize a sharp difference between ancient and modern society may wish to begin with the social and cultural texture. Those who have the perception that an ideology

generates every text and every interpretation may even opt to start with the analysis of the ideological texture. The starting point is therefore not crucial, as long as other textures are also involved. The interplay among these textures initiates a dialogue between the multiple ways in which a text can be perceived or in which it may function within the lives of people.

Robbins, in his formulation of this approach, admits that no interpreter will ever use all of the resources of socio-rhetorical criticism in any one interpretation. The purpose is, however, rather to build an environment for interpretation that provides interpreters with a basic, overall view of life as we know it and language as we use it. Within this environment, interpreters can of course decide to work especially energetically on one or two aspects of the text. All the time, however, interpreters must consider their own approach in relation to what other interpreters are doing.

4.5.2 Jonah in the light of socio-rhetorical criticism

Because all five textures distinguished in socio-rhetorical criticism deal with aspects of the book of Jonah which are also illustrated in other chapters, this section will focus only on the intertexture. It has already been indicated above that intertexture is a text's representation of, reference to, and use of phenomena in the "world" outside. The interaction between the language of the text and the world in which that particular text was produced is the focus of an analysis of the intertexture.

(a) Oral-scribal intertexture

When the oral-scribal intertexture of the book of Jonah is investigated, the interpreter has to be on the lookout for those features of the text that indicate that other texts were used in the production of this book. These may be any other texts – canonical or non-canonical. If any such indications are present, the mode of using other texts has to be determined.

In the discussion of literary-critical studies in the section on historical criticism in This chapter, the following arguments have already been advanced in favour of the view that the so-called Jonah psalm in 2:2-9 should be considered to be a later addition:

❀ Without the psalm of Jonah the wider context forms a chiastic structure: 1:17a corresponds to 2:10 (Yahweh as subject), and 1:17b corresponds to 2:1 (Jonah as subject). The insertion of verses 2-9 disturbs this structure.

❀ The structure of the book of Jonah as a whole is symmetrically constructed. One example is the prayer of the seamen in 1:14 that is countered by 4:2. The insertion of the psalm of Jonah also disturbs this overall structure.

❀ The language of the psalm of Jonah differs radically from that of the remainder of the book of Jonah.

❀ The psalm of Jonah is a psalm of thanksgiving which is not appropriate to the context of a distressed Jonah in the belly of the fish!

❀ The positive image of Jonah projected by the psalm does not correspond with the image projected in the rest of the book. With the insertion of the psalm of Jonah, the uniform psychological image of the prophet Jonah is disturbed.

If these arguments are accepted, and the psalm of Jonah is regarded as a later addition, it follows that the earliest version of the book of Jonah did not include this part. The re-composition of the book at a later stage included it, however. The canonical approach discussed above indicates that a further question should then be asked: What particular emphasis was laid in the canonical

(final) form of the book by including the psalm of Jonah? The following canonical-critical view was presented in section 4.3: The later addition of the psalm of Jonah in chapter 2 brought about a structural change to the book as a whole. Chapter 2 now (in its canonical form) forms a parallel with chapter 4. The interpretation of chapter 4 was therefore drastically affected by this addition. Whereas Jonah's bad temper in chapter 4 was originally seen to be caused by his anxiety about the fulfilment of his prophecy against Nineveh, a notable difference in interpretation emerges after the addition to the narrative. The newly-formed structural parallelism between chapters 2 and 4 re-orientates the narrative. The issue of divine grace is now incorporated into the story. In chapter 2 Jonah is grateful for God's grace which rescued him by the timely provision of a fish. In chapter 4, on the other hand, Jonah is angry that God's grace (in Jonah's frame of reference meant only for Israel) is extended to the heathen city of Nineveh. The insertion of chapter 2 thus alters the emphasis of the story from that of a narrative about true or false prophecy to one about the limitlessness of divine grace.

It can no longer be determined whether the psalm of Jonah was an independent psalm that was reformulated for this particular context, or whether it was composed anew at the stage when the canonical form of the book was finalized. Although the psalm shows striking similarities in genre to some of the individual songs of thanksgiving that we find in the biblical book of Psalms, there is no indication that any of the known, canonical, psalms were quoted.

When considering how an outside text was used in the book of Jonah, the above comments have to be taken into account. The fact that the psalm was included only later in the formation of the final book, does not, however, mean that the psalm did not exist earlier. This question has to be left open. However, a canonical-critical analysis produces a reading of the psalm in which it could be described as inverted reconfiguration. The psalm itself may have pre-existed, and may have been used in the book of Jonah in an unchanged, original form. Its mere presence within the book, however, reconfigures it, in that it alters the meaning of the original story significantly.

(b) Cultural intertexture

Cultural understanding is reflected in texts in various ways. Some examples within the book of Jonah would be:

- In 1:4 it is said that the sailors were terrified when the storm broke out, and each one cried out to his own god. The sailors were convinced that this was not an ordinary storm, but that it betrayed a divine reaction to some grave sin. (This remark also could be read as part of the sacred texture of the story.) Their fear is an uneasy feeling that one of the gods is responsible. This alludes to a cultural and religious view that there is some relationship between the physical world and the divine. This relationship seems to be one of punishment and retribution.

- In 1:7 this matter is taken further. Not only did the sailors see a relationship between divine wrath and the storm they were experiencing, but they also were of the opinion that someone specifically had to be blamed for this calamity. To determine who the culprit was, they used the sure method, approved by all, of drawing lots. Of course, it fell on Jonah! Again, the views expressed in this incident, as well as the practice used to resolve the matter, are allusions to cultural customs which are not mentioned explicitly here.

- Many references in chapter 2 (the Jonah psalm) associate the depths of the sea with abandonment, threat, absence of God, and death. These references allude to the tradition of regarding the deep sea as the realm of death and destruction.

- The references to the depths in chapter 2 stand in stark contrast to the realm represented by the Holy Temple (2:4,7). The Holy Temple symbolizes the opposite domain – that of life, abundance, and the presence of God.

- The reaction to the experience of salvation symbolized by the temple is to offer a sacrifice to God. This ritual reflects the view that communication with the deity can be done by means of sacrifices of various kinds, and that different emotions can be expressed in this way (such as thankfulness, penitence, etc.).

- Chapter 3 reflects the cultural customs of expressing grief and repentance. The text says that everyone in Nineveh, after hearing the one-sentence sermon of Jonah, decided to fast and to put on sackcloth. The king even got up from his throne, and he sat down in ashes. These seem to be direct references to Semitic cultural customs that were held at a certain stage of history.

- Another interesting reflection of culture is the reference in 3:7 to the animals participating in mourning practices. In 4:11 it is even stated that Yahweh counts the animals along with the innocent children among those that convince him not to destroy the city. These references vaguely echo a concept from cultural tradition.

(c) Social intertexture

Social identity and social relationships are reflected in the almost artistic way in which contrasts are built into the Jonah narrative. Jonah, the prophet of Yahweh, is starkly contrasted to the sailors on the ship, as well as to the Ninevites. The characterization of Jonah as the Israelite, who is commanded by Yahweh, identifies him (within the context of an Israelite audience) as the protagonist in the story. Jonah embodies the social role of a Yahweh servant. However, by contrasting him with the sailors and the Ninevites, the expectations of the social (and religious) role that Jonah would play, are overturned. Sailors and Ninevites were regarded as heathens. Nothing should be expected from them. Their social role, so the expectations would go, is to be the receivers of condemnation. Also these expectations are overturned. This artistic shaping of the social intertexture results in the conclusions that Yahweh's prophets can also be disobedient, and that Yahweh unexpectedly grants heathens his grace.

(d) Historical intertexture

The first question to be asked regarding the historical intertexture is whether the book of Jonah refers to historical events or not. Biblical scholars who emphasize the literary form of the book (see later in chapter 5) often argue that the story is not in the first place meant to be an accurate account of historical events. It is rather a parable-like story conveying a (theological) truth. It would therefore be inappropriate to ask about the historical events behind the text in the first instance.

However, this does not mean that no historical intertexture can be found in the book of Jonah. A few references in the text fall into this category, but not as descriptions of events. These references give, instead, an indication of the historical circumstances during the time of the story's origin. The reader cannot say, therefore, that the events of the story are historically true, but he or she can derive information about the events of the time from the story.

The following two comments will suffice to give an indication of the historical intertexture:

- In 1:1 it is said that Yahweh spoke to Jonah ben-Amittai. The only other reference to this figure is found in 2 Kings 14:25. This text sets him in the reign of the eighth century King Jeroboam II of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. There Jonah is a nationalistic prophet who forecast the

extension of the frontiers of the Northern Kingdom. It is rather difficult to harmonize the reference in the book of Jonah (in which the city of Nineveh plays such an important role) with the reference in 2 Kings 14 (situated in the eighth century BCE). Although Nineveh was occupied from prehistoric times and rebuilt repeatedly by kings of the Middle Assyrian period, it was only since 705 BCE that the city became the capital. At the time of the Jonah ben-Amittai of 2 Kings 14:25 the city was still unknown, or at least of no symbolic significance. The story of Jonah presupposes, however, that Nineveh was the symbol of foreigners and enemies. Many commentators therefore suggest that the reference to Jonah ben-Amittai in the book of Jonah is not meant to refer to some historical figure, but it rather serves to evoke the element of nationalism, represented by Jonah ben-Amittai, in the story.

❀ In 3:3 it is mentioned that Nineveh was such a great city that it took three days to walk through it. The temporal use of the Hebrew verb *hyh* in this context indicates that the situation came to an end before the time of the author's statement. The author's reference to the size of the city therefore comes from tradition. Nineveh had been so completely destroyed in 612 BCE that in 401 BCE Xenophon walked past the site without noticing it. However, during the last eighty years of its existence it was well-known for its magnificence. Early in the eighth century BCE Sennacherib made it the capital of Assyria. He then embarked on an extensive building program, enlarging and beautifying it. From an inscription of Sennacherib it became clear, however, that the enlarged city had a much smaller diameter than suggested in the book of Jonah. The reference to the city's size therefore seems to be rather an indication of the magnitude of the prophet, and not of the physical dimensions of the former capital.

4.5.3 Observations and evaluation

❀ Socio-rhetorical criticism does not only focus on the production of texts in the interpretation of the Bible. It has been indicated above that this approach is rather an attempt at providing multiple angles for the analysis of texts. This multiple approach should be evaluated positively. Socio-rhetorical criticism reacts against exclusive exegesis where interpretation strategies are applied in an isolated and mono-dimensional fashion. Exclusive approaches ignore the multiple dimensions of interpretative approaches as well as of the biblical texts themselves. Socio-rhetorical criticism is an attempt at avoiding this danger by integrating the insights of different approaches (as has been shown in the socio-rhetorical analysis of the book of Jonah above).

❀ Although socio-rhetorical criticism is not only about analyzing the world in which biblical texts were produced, this aspect nevertheless forms an integral part of this approach. The notion of intertexture enables a thorough account of how this aspect influences the interpretation process.

❀ This approach has the advantage that it does not prescribe an order of analytical steps which should be followed like a recipe. The starting point of the analysis is not so crucial, as long as it interacts with other aspects of socio-rhetorical analysis.

❀ In practising socio-rhetorical criticism, the distinction between social and cultural *inter*texture on the one hand, and social and cultural texture on the other hand, is not always very clear. This distinction demands from the exegete a well-developed knowledge of social-scientific theory and cultural studies.

CHAPTER 5

Approaches focusing on the texts themselves

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Objections to historical criticism

In focusing on the production of texts, historical-critical approaches assumed that a text can be understood only in the light of the historical context within which it originated. The text is merely the medium though which the original intentions of the author, which lie *behind* the text, find expression. These intentions were formed against the background of the author's personal, social and historical circumstances. Having carefully gathered the pieces of historical evidence, the interpreter fits them all together to reach an understanding of the text.

Around 1930 many literary critics started to question this view. They raised the following points of criticism:

⚙ When we deal with texts from the past, we never have access to *all* the information we would need to reconstruct the original contexts in which they were written. The elaborate historical reconstructions upon which historical critics based their interpretations of certain texts were often highly speculative (that is, they depended on guesswork). As a result, different critics reached different conclusions and there was no way of telling who was right.

⚙ Sometimes we do know quite a lot about a particular historical context, say, Shakespeare's England. This may help us to interpret certain passages in Shakespeare's plays; it does not tell us why these plays remain popular while other plays written in England at the same time are nearly completely forgotten. Historical studies do not help us to understand why certain texts remain meaningful to readers over many centuries.

⚙ In everyday life, we seldom need to engage in historical studies before we reach an understanding of a text. Say I receive a letter telling me that I have won a prize in a competition. I tell you about my prize (not the letter) and you ask me how I know. Instead of saying "I have studied the historical context", I will simply say "It says so in this letter. Look for yourself." In other words, I defend my understanding of the text by pointing to the text itself.

Those who heeded these criticisms turned to the text itself, paying attention to its literary features rather than its historical background. By sticking to the text itself, critics tried to eliminate some of the speculations and opposing views typical of historical criticism. Questions such as: "When was a particular psalm written?" "Who wrote it and under what circumstances?" "How was the psalm used and edited?" could be endlessly debated without reaching consensus. But the text of the psalm as it appears in black and white on the page is there for all to see. I can make statements about this text without guessing or inviting disagreement. When I state that a particular word is repeated four times, I can show you the repetitions in the text. Thus the text provides both a fixed starting point and a point to which I always return in my arguments. I do not have to look into the mind of the author (which would be impossible in any case) as long as I look very carefully at every feature of the text.

5.1.2 Autonomous texts and immanent meaning

The turn to the world of the text generally involved certain new presuppositions. Critics who followed this line generally assumed that texts are (to some extent) *autonomous* entities and that meaning is *immanent* in texts:

⚙ Texts are autonomous in that they communicate meaning according to rules of their own. These rules are the rules of language, literary composition, genre, and so on. The meaning of a text is not bound to the intentions of the author. Say I put up a notice announcing a test on Tuesday, although I intended to say that the test would be on Thursday. My mistake does not change the meaning of the text I put on the notice board. Instead, the meaning of the text is determined by the rules of language – in this case by the semantic rule that "Tuesday" and "Thursday" are different days of the week.

⚙ The error of seeking the meaning of a text in the "real intention of the author" is sometimes called *the intentional fallacy.* Those who rejected the intentional fallacy did not mean that the notion of intention plays no role in interpretation. Certainly, students who read my notice should conclude that I intend them to turn up for a test *on Tuesday*. This is the intention *implied in the text*, although it was not my intention as author. Our understanding of a text is based on our knowledge of the rules that govern texts, not on our knowledge of what goes on in the minds of authors.

⚙ Meaning is immanent in texts in that we do not need to refer to events, objects or persons outside the text to understand it. Let us say an author has used a real person she knows as a model for a character in a story. We do not have to know this person to understand the story. We do not even have to know that such a person exists. In the same way we can understand and appreciate a love poem describing a love that never existed or a fantasy that requires us to enter into an imaginary world. Texts are not mirrors that reflect a real world outside them; they create new worlds of meaning. Therefore it does not make sense to look for the meaning of a text somewhere outside the text. If I had to go and check what the circumstances in the real world are or were before I could understand a text, then the text itself would be nearly meaningless.

⚙ Lastly, some critics rejected the idea that the meaning of a text had anything to do with the effect it has upon a specific reader. The meaning of a text is not changed by the reader's reaction to it. One reader may find a poem inspiring and another may find it depressing; one reader may agree with the conclusion the poem reaches and another may disagree. All of this does not tell us what the poem means. The mistake of thinking that my reaction, as a reader, to a text gives the text meaning has been called the *affective fallacy* ("affect" means "feeling").

5.1.3 Meaning as a function of linguistic relationships

What remains once one has eliminated the intentions of the author, the event, objects and persons outside the text and the responses of the reader? What is "the text itself"? A text is a unique linguistic unit, constituted by the relationships of the parts to one another and to the whole. Whereas historical criticism regarded meaning as a function of origin, those who turned to the text itself regarded meaning as a function of the relationships among the parts of a text. To summarize this view:

⚙ A text's meaning is a meaning constituted by its internal linguistic relationships. To get to the meaning of texts one does not have to study the minds of authors and readers (psychology) or events outside the world of the text (history) or social relationships (sociology). One does

have to study the various aspects of language (linguistics). Language holds the key to the understanding of texts.

⊛ In a text, a number of linguistic units are selected and combined in a particular way. The two sentences "The dog bit the man" and "The man bit the dog" employ precisely the same set of words, but they mean different things, because the words are combined in a different way. Here we see clearly that the "shape", *form* or *structure* of the sentence determines the meaning. No wonder that those who focus on the text often call their approach *formalism* or *structuralism.*

⊛ The previous example was a very simple one. In a complex text one can identify a whole range of relationships among elements at different levels. One metaphor qualifies another metaphor, one character develops in interaction with another, and the beginning of the story forms a contrast with the ending. Form or structure is therefore not always something one notices immediately. It requires a *close reading* or a detailed analysis of every single aspect of the text to reach an adequate understanding of it. Every aspect contributes to the whole.

⊛ A text is a unique, meaningful whole. If one takes away or changes one part, the whole would be different. For this reason one cannot really say "The meaning of text A is *this*: …". The "this" would always be a new, different text. The new text would no longer have the unique form that the original had. Critics who analyze the internal structure of the text often openly say that they do not want to interpret or explain the meaning of texts; they want to *describe* texts as meaningful wholes by showing how the parts fit together.

5.1.4 New schools

Though biblical scholars were among the pioneers of historical criticism, the new literary approaches did not have their roots in biblical scholarship. In the Anglo-American world, the new perspective surfaced in the study of English literature, in IA Richards's Practical Criticism and the work of FR Leavis in England and in the New Criticism in America. Russian formalism and structural linguistics provided the starting points for later schools in Europe. These included the Prague Linguistic Circle, French structuralism and semiotics.

The idea that understanding depends upon the relationships among the elements in a system soon found applications outside literary studies. A social system can also be read as "a text" written in a "language". This insight produced the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss, the structural Marxism of Althusser and the psychoanalytical theories of Lacan. In these and other cases theories and analytical techniques developed in literary studies and linguistics were turned to new uses. Typically, the interest shifted from questions of *cause* and *origin* to questions of *relationship* and *function*. In addition, the emphasis shifted from the personal author or originator to impersonal structures.

5.1.5 Influence on the study of the Bible

Biblical scholars of the historical-critical school, recognizing that the Bible is also a work of literature, had always paid some attention to literary aspects of the Bible: grammar, semantics, genre, composition, style, imagery and the like. All of this, however, took second place to what was regarded as the primary task - namely, to reach an historical understanding of the biblical text. The new directions in literary criticism suggested that an adequate understanding of a literary work requires a far closer examination of the literary features of the text. The new questions that literary criticism asked led to new and surprising answers. For instance, Jonah's prayer in the second chapter of the book does not seem to fit well into the context, therefore the majority of

historical scholars regard it as a later addition. But if the intention of the text is to portray Jonah in an ironic way, then the prayer becomes a meaningful part of the whole. In fact, a close study of the structure of the story suggests that something like the prayer is needed at this point.

Since it seemed that the methods of literary analysis had something new to offer biblical scholars, many of them started exploring these new approaches around 1970. Whereas the older generation still considered it necessary to identify and date the different sources, later additions and glosses in a text before interpretation could start, the new generation tended to focus on the text in its final form. Historical questions were either ignored or dealt with very briefly. Instead, they examined the text very carefully, using all the tools of structural analysis and close reading. This led them to the conclusion that many biblical texts are highly artistic compositions, full of irony, tension and ambiguity. Historical criticism had obscured the subtlety and complexity of these texts by insisting that all tensions or difficulties within the text are indications of different sources. A better understanding of the compositional techniques used in biblical times undermined the view that these ancient texts had to be simple and straightforward.

Biblical scholars who wished to follow these new paths had to borrow much from disciplines outside theology: semiotics, linguistics, narratology, the study of folklore and so on. After all, the new approaches were not developed by theologians. At the same time, some literary critics without a background in theology or biblical studies tried their hand at interpreting biblical texts. This led to a fruitful interaction between theological and non-theological disciplines.

The new emphasis on the world of the text showed itself in a variety of different approaches and fields of study. In the following chapters we shall take a closer look at the New Criticism, structuralism and narratology. In the field of biblical studies, the turn to the world of the text also influenced the following areas:

Linguistics and the theory of translation: Older works on the grammar of biblical Hebrew and Greek had to be revised in the light of the new developments in linguistics. In particular, the new theories in semantics (the study of meaning in language) were applied to the study of the languages of the Bible (by Barr and others). Previously, it had often been assumed that every word has a "root meaning", which remains to some extent present whenever the word is used. Modern semantic theory recognizes that the precise meaning of a word can only be determined by looking at its function within a context. This insight greatly influenced the translation of the Bible. One cannot produce an adequate translation of any text by simply translating each individual word in the one language into the corresponding word in the other language. Sometimes words in one language do not have exact equivalents in other languages. Moreover, the function of a word within a particular context has to be taken into account. For instance, the Hebrew word for "arm" is frequently used to mean "strength". In such cases, the translation "arm" would create the false impression that a physical arm is meant. Since adequate translation depends upon one's understanding of how the words, phrases and sentences of a text function within the whole of the particular text, all translation is already interpretation (in an attenuated sense). The theory of translation as an academic discipline attempts to formulate the rules and methods for reaching adequate translations.

Poetics: Poetics is the study of the techniques and rules of composing literary texts (not only poems). The following are typical questions of poetics: What techniques can be used to achieve emphasis? What purposes can repetition in a text serve? What are the typical features of descriptive, narrative and argumentative texts respectively? How would a story be changed by reversing the order of events? Just as grammar examines the rules for constructing correct sentences in a particular language, poetics examines the rules governing the construction of

coherent texts. Although certain rules apply generally (a narrative always has a plot of some sort), each culture and society has its own conventions regarding composition. For instance, different cultural groups may have different views on what "a fitting end to a story" would be. In recent years, a number of scholars (Alter, Berlin, and others) have made a study of the poetics of Old and New Testament texts. In the process they have shown that a better understanding of the literary techniques and conventions of ancient times can be a powerful aid to interpretation.

Semiotics: Semiotics is the study of sign systems and how they signify, or convey meaning. In language, the best-known sign system, the physical signs (sounds or written marks) have meanings attached to them. There are, however, also other sign systems. At one level clothing may serve to keep people warm and to cover (or strategically uncover!) parts of their bodies. But specific items of clothing or combinations of such items usually have further "signifying functions". For instance, a military uniform tells us that the wearer is a soldier in the army of a particular country. The same uniform will also tell us what rank this soldier has within the military hierarchy – if we know what signs to look for. If we do not know the codes that govern this particular sign system, in this case, the differences between different uniforms and the different marks of rank, we would not "understand" the uniform. Meanings are not eternally linked to certain signs; signs gain meaning, lose meaning or change meaning in an ongoing process of semiosis. Clothing that makes one look very fashionable today may make one look very old-fashioned next year. In texts we find an interweaving of signs from a variety of sign systems, each with its own code. Some signs mark the difference between poetry and prose, between literary and non-literary discourse, or between fiction and non-fiction. Others mark the differences between social classes, between insiders and outsiders, or between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For example, Mary Douglas has studied the dietary code in the Old Testament, with its list of "clean" and "unclean" animals, as a sign system.

Genre studies: Biblical scholars of the past studied genres mainly in order to answer historical questions. In German the study of genres was called form history ("Formgeschichte"). Modern genre studies have rather different interests. Although there are divergent theories of genre, there is general agreement that an adequate understanding of a text requires some knowledge of the features that this text has in common with other texts of the same type. For instance, if a modern letter starts with the words "Dear Professor X", it would be a mistake to think that the author likes Professor X. The form of address belongs to the genre. Similarly, it would be wrong to regard a fairy tale as a historical account. To avoid this error, one has to recognize the generic features of fairy tales and those of historical accounts. In the study of the Bible, one has to get to grips with the conventions that governed the different genres in the ancient world. Thus Paul's letters have to be compared with the typical letters of the Hellenistic world in which he lived.

Stylistics: Stylistics is the study of the style of texts, but it has never been easy to define style. Put very simply, style comes into play when (roughly) the same thing can be said in at least two different ways. For instance, one person may tell a story using mainly long, complex sentences. Another person may tell the same story using mainly short, simple sentences. The different choices made by the two people result in different styles. A style can be typical of a specific literary work, of a specific author or of a specific period. In biblical studies, stylistics studies the specific features of certain texts (as opposed to the generic features). A psalm may be a typical lament (it has the typical features of the lament as a genre), but may also have unique stylistic features. Unfortunately, the study of the unique features of a text is also sometimes called *rhetorical criticism* – a term used in a different sense in this book.

5.2 New Criticism and related approaches

5.2.1 Background and theory

The approaches discussed in this section all had their roots in the study of English literature. In the early decades of the twentieth century, some teachers of English literature at universities in England and America started protesting against two trends in literary criticism. On the one hand, many critics concentrated on the historical, social and psychological *background* to literary texts. But, it was said, studies in literary history, for instance, properly belong to the discipline of history; such studies cannot justify the existence of *literary* criticism as a *separate* discipline. On the other hand, loose, vague and badly substantiated statements about literary texts do not constitute an *academic* discipline. Consider the following remarks about a poem:

- The poem reminds one of a luxurious Persian carpet, replete with rich colours and intricate patterns.
- After the tension created by the first lines, the blunt ending leaves the reader with a nagging sense of disappointment.
- The author's lyrical style calls to mind the style of the later Wordsworth.

These statements seem to say important things about the poem, but a closer look reveals that they merely record the personal impressions of the critic. Although the statements seem to state general truths, they contain nothing to convince us that all readers would agree with the particular critic. "One" (in the first example) could simply be "me". Taken in themselves, these statements are not critical, academic statements about a literary text.

Nevertheless, a literary critic may wish to reach such *conclusions* about a text. To do so, the critic does not have to study history or sociology. To discover that the author of the poem owned many Persian carpets and admired Wordsworth would not help. But one can, by paying attention to every detail of the poem itself, reveal the intricate patterns in it. Or, one can show that the ending fails because it is in no way consistent with the rest of the poem. Even the comparison with the later Wordsworth can be valid. In this case, one has to identify the elements of style in the poem and compare them with elements of style in actual poems by Wordsworth. Thus one can make valid critical statements about literary texts by referring to the literary texts themselves. Such statements would not concern the historical origins of the texts or the effect of the texts on the reader; they would be about the literary text *as literary text*.

In America this approach became known as "New Criticism". In 1941 JC Ransom published *The New Criticism*, setting out the aims of the new movement. The writings of the "new critics", Ransom, Tate, Warren, Blackmur and especially Cleanth Brooks, influenced a whole generation of American critics. Even those who did not go along with the New Criticism in all respects took much from it. In England the critical approaches of IA Richards and FR Leavis had much in common with New Criticism. Richards introduced the practice of giving students poems to analyze without providing even the names of the authors. Although Richards did this mainly as an experiment, it became a standard practice at many universities (also in this country). The idea was that additional information would distract students from the poem itself. FR Leavis, together with his wife QD Leavis, edited the influential literary journal *Scrutiny* for many years. Leavis also defended the idea that the key to the interpretation of a literary text lay in a "close reading" of the text itself. The "Practical Criticism" of Richards and Leavis is usually mentioned alongside New Criticism, although there are points of difference. Richards paid much attention to the effect of the text on the reader – some would see him as one of the earliest reader-response critics. Leavis, a

trained historian, recognized the value of historical studies and also emphasized the social effects of literature.

In spite of these and other differences, the following views may be regarded as typical of New Criticism and its relatives:

(a) The poem as poem

New Criticism insisted that the job of literary criticism is to study literature *as literature*. Certainly, some literary texts also express philosophical, theological, moral or social views, but it is not these views that make a text a literary text. To study such aspects of texts may be the task of philosophers, theologians and other specialists. I may or may not agree with the statements made in a poem, but my opinion in this regard is not relevant to my task *as a literary critic*. In a famous essay ("Keats's Sylvan Historian", in *The Well Wrought Urn*. London, 1968), Cleanth Brooks took the final lines of Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* as an example:

"Beauty is truth, - truth beauty, - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Other critics had claimed that these last lines spoiled the whole poem because they express a false belief. Surely some lies can be beautiful and some truths ugly. Brooks argues that the lines are misunderstood if they are taken in isolation, as statement of a general truth. A careful examination of the poem shows that these lines are "dramatically appropriate" as "part of an organic context". Indeed, once the lines have been placed in context, one may argue about the poetic validity "of the poem as a whole in terms of its dramatic wholeness". It would, however, be wrong to let the final statement, taken separately and in a literal sense, "compete with scientific and philosophical generalizations". Poetry has its own logic and its own "truth".

The same can be said about many passages in the Bible. The vision of the kingdom of peace in Isaiah 11 would not make sense to a scientist. Lions cannot eat straw like cattle (verse 7), because their digestive systems would not cope with it. Others would have other objections. If the word of the messianic king slays the wicked (verse 4), what has become of peace? Do we have to share the specific religious belief of the author to affirm the value of this passage? Such questions are not necessarily unimportant, but they are not directly relevant to our understanding of the passage as a work of literature.

New Criticism tended to focus on poetry and for a good reason. The word "poetry" comes from the Greek verb "to make". A poem is not a mirror image of what already exists outside the poem; it is "something that has been made" – something new and unique. The way in which linguistic items (words, sentences, figures of speech, and so on) are selected and combined in the poem as a whole creates a meaningful "world", a vision relatively independent of the outside world. In this sense all literary works, those in prose included, are poems. To study a poem as a poem is to study its "madeness", that is, how the elements in it are *made* to fit together and how these elements *make up* a meaningful whole.

(b) The verbal icon

A literary text, then, is a meaningful unit that can and should be understood in its own right. Its meaning does not depend upon its relationship to the outside world, its context of origin and the context in which it is read. To explain this, some spoke of the literary text as a "verbal icon" (*The Verbal Icon* was the title of a collection of essays by WK Wimsatt).

How does one interpret an icon (a picture or an image)? Say you are looking at a painting depicting Mary with the baby Jesus in her arms. You could say that the frame is falling to pieces or that the picture does not blend very well with the furniture in the room. But this says nothing about the painting – one can always get a new frame or shift the painting to another room. It may be interesting to know that the painter was a drunk or a bachelor, but this also says nothing about the painting. You may notice that the Mary of the painting wears clothes that reflect the fashion of seventeenth century Europe and not that of first century Palestine. Or you may learn that the artist used the face of a well-known person of his own time for his Mary. These last two points would prove that the painting is not an accurate portrait of "the real Mary", but it would not make the painting less valuable as a work of art. Lastly, you do not have to be a Christian to admire the artistic qualities of the painting.

Nevertheless, much remains to be said about the painting. You can discuss the use of colour, noting that the artist sometimes uses complementary colours and at other times contrasting colours. You can talk about the interplay of light and shade, about the relationship between foreground and background, about the texture of the brushwork, and so on. You would certainly want to say something about the way in which the various figures in the painting have been placed in order to achieve a balanced whole. Note that in each case you would be talking about what you see *in the painting itself* and that you would be considering *relationships between elements*. You would not, for instance, talk about one shade of red in isolation, but about this shade of red as it appears against a dark background. Your assessment of the painting as a work of art would be based on a careful description of the elements and aspects of the work in their relationship to one another and to the whole.

If a text is seen as a "verbal icon", a picture in words, the criticism of a text can be handled in the same way. You *describe* what you find in a text as a network of relationships at many different levels. Since you deal only with what is internal (or *intrinsic*) to the text and in that sense present for all to see, speculation is more or less eliminated. Such criticism can claim to be *objective* in a double sense. It deals with the object of criticism (the literary text) and it avoids reference to the subjective feelings or opinions of the critic. The context that matters is not the historical context behind the text, nor the context of the reader, but the context created by the text itself.

(c) Close reading and the unity of form and content

Because the aim of such criticism is to examine each text as a *unique* whole, it is hard to suggest a rigid method or a systematic theory that would apply to all texts in the same way. Early on, this approach avoided elaborate theoretical constructs and complex technical jargon. Some British critics in particular insisted that a "*theory* of literature" could actually get in the way of the *practical* task of taking each text on its own merits. New Criticism also did not pay much attention to literary genre, because a focus on genre implies a focus on features that different texts have in common and not on the uniqueness of the specific text.

The only way to get to grips with the uniqueness of the text is through a *close reading* of the text itself. Although this sounds simple enough, close reading requires a sharp eye for every detail and the ability to relate various details to one another. It is not enough, for instance, to understand the "meaning" of each individual word. One also has to see how the meaning a word would have in isolation is modified (changed) by its place within the whole. In addition, one has to look at the *theme* of the text, its *tone*, its *imagery,* its *dramatic structure,* and so on. If a very serious theme (say, death) is treated in a humorous tone, it changes our view of the theme. Even the metre,

rhythm and sound patterns in a poem have an influence on our understanding of it. "Meaning" does not lie in isolated elements, but in the way in which the elements are combined in the text.

If this is true, one cannot regard the *content* of a text (what is said) and its *form* (how it is said) as separate. A text may be about a certain topic, but what is presented in the text depends on how the topic is addressed, that is, on the formal selection and combination of elements. The content is seen only through the form and never without it. New Criticism claimed that at least great works of literature are *organic wholes*. In other words, such texts are like living creatures, in which each separate system contributes to the whole. In a human person, for instance, one cannot separate the digestive system, the muscular system, the nervous system and the breathing system without killing the person. The following example illustrates how form and content can be linked in a poem:

In E Robinson's poem *Richard Cory*, the main character is a rich, handsome man. All admired him and wished that they were in his place. The poem is written from the perspective of "a person" who worked hard and had little to eat. The last two lines come as a shock:

> And Richard Cory, one calm summer night
> Went home and put a bullet through his head

These two lines stand in contrast to the rest of the poem, which describes all the advantages that Richard Cory had. Why did this man kill himself, while the poor people worked on and "waited for the light"? In fact, the very last line changes one's view of the whole poem. But there is also a contrast within the last lines themselves. We first hear of a "calm summer night" and then of a gunshot. To go home at night suggests rest, but, instead, there is violence. The second last line still follows the metre (the rhythmical pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables) of the rest of the poem, but the last line completely breaks the metrical pattern. Read the line aloud to yourself: it does not even sound like poetry. It is as if the whole poem falls apart through this shocking event. Note also how the choice of word affects the meaning. The poet could have said "made an end to his life". "Put a bullet through his head" sounds much more brutal and shocking. What is *not* said is equally important. We are not told why Richard Cory killed himself. The poem could have explained that rich people have problems of their own, but this is precisely not what the poem does. It shows this point implicitly, to be deduced from the contrast between suicide and the speakers' idealized view of the life of the wealthy, and thus the description of Richard Cory's end is the more shocking. .

This example shows how various elements within a text interact. Sometimes elements at different levels work together: they reinforce, complement or strengthen one another. In other cases different elements stand in contrast to one another: they undermine, contradict or weaken one another. In a very broad way one can say that the pattern of similarities and differences within a text makes it a meaningful whole, one which has both *tension* and *balance*. Close reading looks for these similarities and differences or, to use terms often used in New Criticism, it seeks to *compare and contrast* elements.

When one reads in this way, one discovers the richness of literary texts. A word, for instance, can be *ambiguous.* In the example we use above, the words "calm" and "summer" both suggest that all is well. The word "night" can reinforce this idea if we think of night as a time of peaceful sleep. But "night" can also suggest the time of darkness and the "sleep of death". There is an ambiguity (a double meaning) about the notion of "night". *Irony* also adds to the richness of a text by showing the differences between points of view. In our example, the speaker in the poem wished to be in the place of Richard Cory, but Richard Cory himself did not even wish to live. Lastly, *paradox*

can heighten the tension in a text. A paradox places two apparently opposite elements together in the same setting. For instance, a lover can be said to suffer "sweet pain". New Criticism tended to value texts rich in ambiguity, irony and paradox.

(d) The "heresy of paraphrase" and autotelic texts

If a literary text is a unique organic unity of form and content, it makes little sense to talk about its meaning as something that can be abstracted from the text itself. When people interpret a text, they usually end up with two texts: the original and the interpretation they give of it. The interpretation is supposed to make the meaning of the original text clearer, but it does so by using different terms. It may offer a *paraphrase* of the original, that is, it tries to say the same thing in a different way. We have seen, however, that New Criticism argued that every word, every image and every sound matter. That means that what is said "in a different way" can never be "the same thing".

For this reason many New Critics avoided the term "interpretation" and spoke of the "heresy of paraphrase", that is, the false idea that the meaning of a text can be made clearer by putting the content in some new form. The task of literary criticism, according to Brooks, is not to uncover a hidden meaning in a text but to *describe and evaluate* the text as a meaningful whole. The "meaning of the text" is indeed in the text itself, but not as one part that can be separated from the rest; it is in every aspect of the text. Some even rejected the term "meaning" and quoted the poet Archibald MacLeish, who said (in one of his poems) that a poem should not *mean*; it should *be*. A text that "means" points away from itself to the message (information) it carries or the lesson it teaches. A literary text, however, points to itself. It is like a symbol. A symbol may set you thinking about many things, but those things are not "the meaning of the symbol".

This led to views that are, at least to my mind, extreme. According to many later critics, a literary text (if it is viewed as a literary text) stands completely isolated from anything else in the world. Its origin is irrelevant (the intentional fallacy); its effect is equally irrelevant (the affective fallacy). It is autonomous because it obeys only its own rules, and self-referential because it creates its own world. Meaning is not only immanent in the text itself, but it is the text itself. Lastly, the text has no *purpose* outside itself. It does not "carry" anything (a message or teaching) to a reader. It is autotelic, that is, it is its own purpose (*telos*). You could also say that its only purpose is to be what it is. Note that this view makes a sharp distinction between *literary* texts and all other texts, because other texts obviously do have purposes outside themselves. A textbook, for instance, intends to convey information. But is it really possible to say which texts are literary and which are not?

(e) New Criticism and the interpretation of the Bible

New Criticism did not influence the interpretation of the Bible immediately. After all, most academic interpreters of the Bible were theologians, not literary critics. Although everybody recognized that the Bible contains some literary jewels, it is also true that not all parts of the Bible are "literary" in the sense in which the term was used in New Criticism. Many passages in the Bible clearly intend to teach, persuade, warn, proclaim, and so on. Moreover, since the Bible is a collection of ancient texts, it is hard to ignore historical questions completely.

Even so, biblical interpreters came to see that one could not deal with all aspects of the biblical text without introducing some of the categories of literary criticism. Terms such as irony, ambiguity and tension are obviously useful when one reads passages from the Bible. A biblical story can be a carefully constructed whole in which characterization, dramatic structure, theme and tone are

carefully balanced. When "literary readings of the Bible" became popular, theologians frequently borrowed much from New Criticism, although this was seldom made explicit. Jan Fokkelman's work, for instance, is clearly in the tradition of New Criticism. In general the application of close reading techniques to biblical texts has proved fruitful.

Unfortunately the influence of New Criticism has not always been good. In some cases the methods of New Criticism were applied without taking contextual differences into account. New Criticism dealt with texts as units complete in themselves, *because there was good reason to believe that these texts were written as complete units*. This does not mean that one has to read all texts, even ones that were not composed as units, in this way. One *can* read the book of Genesis as a unit, but close reading may also convince one that this is not the best course to follow. In other cases biblical scholars adopted the more dubious aspects of New Criticism, for instance, the view that a literary text is an autonomous, autotelic entity with practically no connection to the world outside it.

5.2.2 Observations and evaluation

New Criticism is no longer new. Having been too popular for too long (in Britain and America), it is now thoroughly unpopular. Nothing is quite as unfashionable as last year's fashion. This makes it hard to place it in perspective.

It is wise to remember that New Criticism was born as a reaction against *excessive* emphasis on the historical background of texts and *uncritical* expressions of personal opinions about them. At the time, the reaction was probably a healthy one. It reminded interpreters that neither impressive background knowledge nor strong personal views should stand in the way of a careful, detailed reading of the text. The practical task of close reading is, as the "New Critics" showed in their works, not necessarily easy but often highly rewarding. They taught students how to read and how to enjoy reading.

Secondly, the literary criticism of the "New Critics" did not require an elaborate technical terminology. One did not need a doctorate in literary theory to understand what they had to say about some poem. Many of their works of practical criticism, having survived many editions, are still in print – and on the shelves of non-specialists. Although this is not what they primarily intended, they "explained" literary texts to a wide audience who would not otherwise have been very interested.

As a literary *theory* New Criticism had much less to contribute. Some of the views that are regarded as typical of New Criticism have some value, as long as they are not exaggerated. For instance, form and content are indeed closely connected, but they can be separated to some extent. A paraphrase is not always simply "another text". A literary text is in some ways a unique unit, yet in other important ways it may be one example of a general type. As some critics admitted, one cannot always banish background information or the response of the reader completely. One cannot really use the typical terminology of New Criticism without involving the response of the reader. Irony and tension are not "in" a text in the way that words are. Where one reader experiences tension, another may not.

New Criticism presented itself as a way of dealing with literature *as literature* in a critical, academic way. It failed, however, to establish any formal distinction between literary and non-literary texts. This left an impression of snobbery: literary texts, being texts of a higher class, can be recognized only by people of a higher class. Moreover, New Criticism could not explain how the literary perspective relates to other valid perspectives. If a poem is a piece of social criticism, it does it stop being a poem because of that. To take the poem as a whole seriously one has to take the social

criticism in it seriously, even though that directs one to the world outside the poem. "Inside" and "outside" become entangled in such a way that one cannot regard the poem a literature without also regarding it in a number of other ways.

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As a theoretical basis for literary criticism, New Criticism had many failings. However, the fine pieces of practical criticism produced within the movement remind us that our practice is often better than our theories.

5.3 Structuralist approaches

5.3.1 Background and theory

The difference between American New Criticism and British Practical Criticism, on the one hand, and European forms of formalism (of which structuralism is one), on the other hand, partly reflects two academic styles. The typically Anglo-American style is commonsensical and practical, without complicated theory, terminology or method. The European style emphasizes theoretical insight and seeks to apply the theory, with appropriate scientific terminology and method, to practical cases. In the long run, these differences of style had deep implications.

The early Formalist schools in Europe (the Russian Formalists and the Prague structuralists) shared many of the concerns of the New Critics. They too sought ways of analyzing literary texts objectively, without depending on personal impressions. They too wished to study literature *as literature* (and not as history, sociology, etc) and found the key in relations between the various linguistic elements. Indeed, in later structuralism the focus on the formal relationships among the elements was carried to its limit. This became the distinguishing feature of structuralism.

Most interpreters of texts – certainly the New Critics – knew that individual words and sentences have to be placed "in context". Although the word "rose" can be a noun (the flower) or a verb (past tense of "to rise"), the context in which the word appears in a sentence usually tells one which meaning is appropriate. Similarly, one should understand sentences in their context in paragraphs, paragraphs in their context in chapters, and so on. In short, one has to comprehend the part in terms of the whole. This basic insight is taken further and radicalized by structuralists. According to them, the meaning of a sign is fully determined solely by its place in the context of the system of which it is part. *Each sign is part of a system of signs and its meaning is not determined by anything outside the system. It is determined by the internal relationships among the signs within the same system of signs.*

If this is so, one cannot, in interpreting a text, rely on a few loose comparisons and contrasts; one has to examine systematically the entire network of relationships in the text. At the root of this view lies the linguistic theory worked out by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Cours*

de Linguistique Générale ("Course in General Linguistics"). This was first published in 1916, after Saussure's death, but it did not immediately have an influence outside the circle of professional linguists. Later, mainly through the efforts of Roman Jakobson, it became one of the most influential books of the twentieth century. Structuralism cannot be understood without a grasp of Saussure's views. The following discussion draws on the work of Jonathan Culler (1976:18-52).

(a) The arbitrary character of a sign

According to a naive view of language, there is a direct relationship between language and reality. Dogs, rivers and tables, for instance, exist in reality. We have a clear concept or impression (a mental picture, as it were) of what a dog, a river or a table is. Next, this concept is connected to certain material sounds or letters and in this way meaning is conferred on signs. Although the material sounds or letters differ in the different languages, the same basic concepts exist in them all. Having seen a dog, for instance, we form the concept "dog", and then attach to the concept a linguistic sign. The signs differ, being "*dog*" in English, "*hond*" in Afrikaans, "*chien*" in French and "*inja*" in isiXhosa, for instance, but the concept and its relationship to the real species of animal remains the same. This naive view is based on the idea of direct naming: people give names to things existing in reality.

According to Saussure, the sign itself consists of two aspects, namely (1) a signifier (the material aspect, the physical sounds or visible letters) and (2) a signified (the conceptual aspect, the notions at the level of ideas attached to the sign). He further states that there is no intrinsic relationship between a specific signifier and the signified that goes with it. The relationship is arbitrary. On the face of it, this is not a particularly startling view: we have noted that different languages use different words to denote the same concept. There is no reason in logic or in nature why a particular signifier should go with a particular signified. But one has to remember that for Saussure the sign is an inseparable unity of signifier (material aspect) and signified (conceptual aspect). It is not simply the "name" that is arbitrarily attached to a "natural" concept; *the sign itself is arbitrary.*

Thus Saussure questions the direct relationship between reality and signs (signifieds and signifiers). One can compare his view to the naive one in the following way:

- Naïve view: (*Natural categories* intrinsically linked to *concepts in the mind*) → *linguistic "names"* (arbitrarily attached)

- Saussure's view: (*Signs* as arbitrary unity of *material signifiers* and *conceptual signifieds*) → *referents* in the natural world articulated by the signs

Note that the naïve view brackets concepts with the natural categories outside language, while Saussure's view brackets concepts with the material aspect of signs within language. Furthermore, in the naïve view the categories outside language appear first and are subsequently named; in Saussure's view the signs in language come first and make the referents appear by *articulating* the world outside language. Some structuralists and poststructuralists conclude from this that there is no connection between language and the extra-linguistic world, that there is an unbridgeable gap between words and things. Signs refer to concepts within language, not to anything outside language. Critics of this view point out that this is not what Saussure said or suggested. His argument was that the study of language as a system should not take categories outside language as its starting point, because there is no direct and unambiguous relationship between linguistic categories and extra-linguistic ones.

The word "articulate" means, among other things, "to separate into connected sections" or "to express in language". In this case both meanings apply. We can talk about the world only in so far as we have separated it into sections or categories and noted the connections among the categories. In at least some cases it is clear that we have no categories until our language creates them. For instance, we say that a day is made up of 24 hours, each with 60 minutes. But this is an arbitrary way of dividing up the day. We could also have said that a day is made up of 10 "huros", each of 50 "nimutes".

But are days themselves not natural units, determined by the revolving of the earth around its axis? To some extent this is true, but note the following: In our system a day starts just after midnight and runs till the next midnight. According to the system used in the Bible, a day starts at sunset and runs till the next sunset.

But is this view plausible? A brief glance at different languages suggests that the languages use different words, but apply them to the same list of concepts. Saussure is, however, able to give examples to show that no fixed, stable list of concepts exists in all human brains. These are a few of the possible examples:

❂ In British philosophical debates the sentence "The cat is on the mat" has been used as an example of a perfectly clear, unambiguous statement of fact. Strangely enough, this sentence cannot be translated into French without adding a "meaning" that is absent in the English. Because French has no gender-neutral word *cat*, one first has to decide to make the cat either male or female (*le chat* or *la chatte*). In French, there are two signifiers, each with a gender concept attached to it; in English there is one signifier without a specific gender connotation.

❂ The signifier *mouton* in French and the signifier *mutton* in English both have as signified the meat of a sheep. But *mouton* also refers to the animal itself (a second signified), while English uses a different signifier, sheep, for the animal itself.

❂ In English, light blue and dark blue are marked as two shades of the same colour: a qualification is added to the signifier *blue* to distinguish between them. In Russian two completely separate words (signifiers) are used for light blue and dark blue, as if they were two independent colours. But in Welsh a single word (or signifier) denotes both shades of blue and shades of green.

❂ Furthermore, certain words simply do not have any exact equivalent in any other language. Religious concepts, in particular, are nearly impossible to translate, indicating that each religious tradition has its own conceptual world.

Saussure concludes from this that there are no stable signs, fixed in a set of concepts shared by all people. Each language articulates meaning by assigning signifieds to signifiers in a unique and arbitrary way. The connection between a signifier and a signified is entirely coincidental and conventional. It is based on an incidental link between an unlimited stream of signifiers and a similarly undifferentiated stream of possible meanings.

(b) The meaning of signs is defined differentially

If the concept (signified) is internal to the sign, how is the meaning of a sign established? As we have seen, we cannot look outside language (to the referent) to establish the meaning, because the referent itself is established by the sign. According to Saussure, the meaning of a specific sign depends on the differences between this sign and other signs. Saussure used some interesting examples to explain this.

❂ In English, the different meanings of the signifiers *river* and *stream* depend on size: the flow

of water in a river is larger than that in a stream. But the difference between the French *fleuve* and *rivière*, however, is that the one flows into the sea while the other does not. In some other languages this difference may depend on the navigability of a flow of water, or even on the direction or tempo of the flow. This indicates that the meaning of a sign in a specific language can be determined only by the differences between it and the other signs in the same language - not by looking for some or other stable concept (signified).

- In a very simple sign system, that of the traffic light, three coloured lights act as signifiers, each with its signified (meaning). The red light means "stop!", but there is nothing inherent in the colour red that demands this meaning. A red light in front of a house or building in certain areas of a city would indicate an entirely different meaning – that sexual services may be bought there. In the system of traffic lights, red can be given a meaning because of its contrast with the green and amber. It has no *essential* meaning on its own outside the system of differences. In another system of signs the three colours could have different meanings. Meaning, one could conclude, depends on differences within a particular system of signs.

The way in which signs convey meaning not by some or other essence, but by their respective differences also becomes apparent in the following examples:

- How do we recognize the signifier *bed* and connect it to something on which one sleeps? Different people will pronounce it differently. After all, the very fact that one can recognize someone's voice on the telephone implies that individual people pronounce words differently. Similarly, in handwriting we do not all form our letters in the same way. According to Saussure, the form of the signifier is not absolutely fixed; it is also defined in terms differences between signifiers within the same system of signs. We recognize the signifier *bed* (as a place for sleeping) if its sound pattern or written form is sufficiently distinct from that of other signifiers in the system: *bad, led, red, bet, beat, wed*, etc. Note that confusion does arise when the differences are not made clear in speech or in writing. Thus *bed* and *bad* may sound the same when pronounced with the broad accent of the American South. Chinese and Japanese people will confuse *led* and *red*, because their languages make no distinction between *r* and *l*.

- The meaning of the sign "8:30 Cape Town-Bellville train" is not determined by inherent characteristics of this train. In fact, this train's specific carriages differ from day to day. It could also, on occasion, go further than Bellville. Moreover, if it were ten minutes late (or ten minutes early), it would still be identified as the "8:30 Cape Town-Bellville train". It could be called such even if it arrives still later; as long as it is not confused with the "9:30 Cape Town-Bellville train". The meanings of this sign are thus determined by its place in a system (the railway timetable) in which it differs from other signs in the same system.

- The game of chess is played with a limited number of pieces: the kings, queens, bishops, knights, rooks and pawns. The specific physical shapes of the pieces are of no importance and one gets chess sets with all sorts of differently shaped pieces. What is important, however, is that the pieces should not be confused with one another. The rook, for instance, may be in the shape of a tower or of an elephant or of a tank, as long as it can be distinguished from the bishops, knights and other pieces.

This view may also be applied in the interpretation of the book of Jonah.

We do not learn more about the meaning of the sign "the great city of Nineveh" by collecting information about the "physical" city of ancient Nineveh. The link between "the great city of Nineveh" in the text and the empirical city is indirect. Therefore the connection between the sign and the empirical city does not give us a reliable indication of the meaning the sign "Nineveh" as

it appears in this text. Rather, the meaning of "the great city Nineveh" is defined by its similarities to and differences from other signs in the text: the "great wind", the "great storm", the "great fear" of the sailors, and so on. Its meaning also becomes clearer when "Nineveh" is related to other geographical symbols such as the "temple" (in Jerusalem), "Joppa" and "Tarshish". It is especially the contrast between Israel and Nineveh (the symbol of enmity against Israel) that is important in establishing the significance of the sign *Nineveh* in this story.

Saussure concludes that meaning does not reside in the individual sign, but solely in the relationships among signs in the same system. One establishes these relationships by looking at the differences that make it possible to distinguish between the signs. Thus Saussure says that concepts "are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relationship with other terms of the system" (quoted in Culler 1976:26). In the system of language "there are only differences, with no positive terms".

It is fair to say that Saussure's argument at this point is not merely difficult, but, according to many critics, confused and faulty. It is indeed true that the differences between signs in a system make it possible to *convey* meaning. It is not clear that we *acquire* meaning by looking at differences. In the system of chess, the rook is not defined by the shape of the piece, but it is defined (positively) by the way in which it moves according to the rules. You do not learn that by knowing the rules according to which the other pieces move and knowing that the rook move is different. The phrase often used by structuralists, "meaning is differential," is vague and misleading.

(c) Language as a system of signs: langue and parole

In principle, Saussure's argument that individual signs have meaning only within the whole of the sign system is meant to apply to all sign systems: dress codes, transport systems, games such as chess, and so on. The best example of such a sign system is, however, language itself. Although we all use language every day, we cannot really say that we deal with language as *system* every day. We deal with language in the form of individual utterances. Even people who have spoken English all their lives might never have stopped to consider the English language as a complete system of signs.

Saussure deals with this by distinguishing between two aspects of language: *langue* and *parole*. *Parole* is language-in-use, language employed as a medium of communication, and it is the form in which we meet language in conversations and in texts. The typical features of *parole* are that it is employed by individuals and that it appears as an action at a specific time. In instances of *parole,* we recognize someone's individual voice, style of writing or point of view. It is also tied to individual limitations: each person has a restricted vocabulary and a limited competence in using the language. We use *parole* for certain kinds of communication: we ask for or provide information, give advice, express a view, argue, complain, console, and so on. These communications are specific to particular times and particular contexts. "Egypt is in North Africa" states a general truth, but "I am hungry" applies only at certain times.

Langue, on the other hand, is language-as-system, a network of codes, rules and meanings. It is a grammatical system that goes beyond any individual; it is purely formal and does not exist as an entity in time and space. *Langue* belongs to the language community as a whole, although no member of the community ever masters it entirely. One does not "see" or "encounter" *langue*, but it governs one's use of language. *Langue* is what makes it possible for us to understand a sentence in a language we know, although we have never heard that particular sentence before, or to formulate new sentences ourselves. In *parole* people select and combine signs from the system of signs (*langue*).

It might appear as if *parole* has priority over *langue*, because it is the aspect of language we encounter every day. But Saussure argues that every instance of *parole* implies the prior existence of a *langue* (a system of language). In chess the *langue* is constituted by the rules of the game; the *parole* of chess is the moves made in actual games. It should be clear that chess players are interested in playing chess, but one cannot begin to play before one has learned the rules. *Langue* logically comes before *parole;* therefore Saussure insists that the task of linguistics is to study *langue.* The outward manifestations (*parole*) depend on the underlying system (*langue*).

(d) Synchronic and diachronic studies of language as langue

According to Saussure, language as *langue* offers a coherent linguistic system that can be objectified and analyzed as such. But *langue* itself changes over time. If meaning depends on the relationships among signs in a system of signs, how does one deal with the changes in the system itself? Saussure argues that it is possible to make a cross-section of a language at a given moment, thereby capturing the rules and codes as they operate at that moment. The basic characteristics and rules of the system, as well as the functions of the various signs within the system, can then be described.

Saussure describes such an analysis of the linguistic system of signs as it operates at a given moment as a *synchronic* approach. It should be distinguished from a *diachronic* approach, in which historical changes in the system itself are investigated. It is for the very reason that language is used (*parole*) that evolutionary changes take place in the language system (*langue*): these can be investigated diachronically. A diachronic investigation of a game of chess, for instance, would describe the shifts (the influence of each move) in the system of signs (the pieces on the board – not the rules of the game). A synchronic approach would describe the relationship among the pieces on the board at a given moment (and deduce from this that one of the players is in check).

Saussure assigns a certain priority to a synchronic approach when it comes to the study of the meaning of signs. Diachronic studies, for instance etymological studies (studies of the origins of words), seldom offer a clue to the meanings in the present system of signs. If I do not know what the word "werewolf" means, it might help me to know that the first part is from an Old English word for "man", although this information does not replace a current definition. But if I do not know what the word "world" means, I will not be any wiser if someone tells me that it comes from two words that meant "man" ("wer" as in werewolf) and "age". Nor will I be able to use the word "silly" correctly if all I know is that it originally meant "happy" or "blessed" – I must also know the contemporary meaning of "foolish" or "simple". Saussure did not reject diachronic studies completely; he himself wrote on the developments in certain languages. He did maintain that the meanings of signs are determined only by the relationships among different signs in the same system of signs. These relationships have to be studied synchronically.

(e) Semiotics and the adoption of the linguistic model

Saussure himself suggested that all sign systems could be studied according to his linguistic theory and proposed that an academic discipline should be developed to "study the life of signs within society" (quoted in Culler 1976:90). He wishes to call this new discipline semiology, but the name semiotics, previously coined by the American Charles Peirce, was generally adopted in the English-speaking world. Although the various approaches in the field of semiotics cannot be discussed here, two consequences of the extension of Saussure's ideas may be noted:

❁   It became clear that sign systems play an important role in all aspects of our lives, although not

all signs are linguistic signs in the strict sense. For instance, religious traditions have rituals in which certain objects and actions (apart from the words used in the rituals) are meaningful to those who participate. In the Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine should not be taken as mere items of food; they function as signs. Indeed, whenever we say that something is *meaningful* (or significant), we take that something as a sign.

❀ Although language itself (as *langue*) is an overarching sign system that functions in all texts and conversations, it became clear that within the linguistic system there are distinct sub-systems with their own rules. For instance, in a prayer one uses linguistic signs, but the special way in which one uses them is determined also by the "rules" of prayer. In a similar way, cultural rules, rules of politeness and rules regarding specific genres impose themselves on our use of language. It is not enough to know the general rules of, say, the English language when one writes an academic paper. One also has to know the conventions of academic writing, such as the correct ways of referencing and drawing up a bibliography.

Structuralism became a general movement when Saussure's theory of the sign and sign systems was applied to diverse disciplines: anthropology, social theory, sociology, literary criticism, psychology, and so on. Although each discipline had its own "field", it was found that the *linguistic model* could be applied to all these fields. This meant that each field of study was viewed as having a *langue* and various instances of *parole* based on the *langue.* The *langue* is the system of signs, together with the rules and codes governing their use. The instances of *parole* are the manifestations of the underlying system in individual cases. To understand an instance of *parole*, one has to refer to the system that made this particular manifestation possible, although the system is not immediately visible.

Roman Jakobson did much to spread Saussure's views among literary critics and to show how these views could be applied. His views influenced many of the French structuralists (Greimas, Gennette, Barthes, Riffaterre and others). Building on an insight of Saussure, he distinguished between the paradigmatic axis (the axis of selection) and the syntagmatic axis (the axis of combination) in a text. These two axes are related to the rules that make text construction possible. The idea and its implications can be illustrated as follows:

How does one gain an understanding of the sentence "The dog bit the boy"? Clearly, one does not have to see the actual event; the sentence would make sense even if no event of this nature took place. Nor do we refer to "the intention in the mind of the author" – which is out of our reach. We understand the sentence because it is structured (composed) according to rules of selection and combination. These rules allow us to construct innumerable other sentences with the same structure, but they also rule out of court certain constructions.

At the level of *selection* (on the paradigmatic axis) we find that we can substitute for each word in the sentence (or for all of them) another word without changing the structure. For "dog" we could have "cat", "ant", "snake" and so on. For "bit" we could have "licked", "followed", "scared" and so on. The list of words that can be function at a particular place in this sentence is the paradigm. We cannot make sense of "The any (or "big" or "at") bit the boy"; at that point a noun is needed. Moreover, we need something that we perceive as able to bite. "The floor bit the boy" would puzzle us.

The particular word selected at a point (from the paradigm) is pinned down in its meaning in terms of binary oppositions (oppositions of two terms). Thus "boy" has meaning in terms of the oppositions human – non-human, male – female and child – adult.

At the level of combination (on the paradigmatic axis) we find that we can use the same words to create a different sentence: "The boy bit the dog". This sentence has a meaning different from "The dog bit the boy" simply because the words are combined in a different order. But "Boy dog the bit the" is not a possible combination; it is meaningless. Note also the difference between "People are there", "There are people", "Are there people?" and "Are people there?" Again, systematic, rule-bound differences (contrasts) allow us to grasp the meaning of these sentences.

Finally, we may note how other codes intrude on the process of selection and combination. Formally, the sentence "The boy bit his sister" follows the pattern of "The dog bit the boy", but our understanding of the sentence would be partly determined by social and moral rules that mark such behaviour as "bad not good". And in "The boy was bitten by the dog" the emphasis is not quite the same as in "The dog bit the boy".

Of course, the analysis of a text is far more complex than the analysis of a sentence, but Structuralists hoped to discover the rules that govern the composition of larger units as well. Instead of asking what word from what paradigm was selected in a sentence, one can ask what type of plot from what list of possible plots was selected in a story. Or one can ask why the events were combined in a specific order, rather than in another possible order. In Jonah, for instance, one has to ask why there is (specifically) a scene at sea (and not, for instance, the crossing of a desert). And if Jonah fell into a big sleep when he entered the ship, why are we first told about the storm before we are told this? Even simple questions about selection and combination help us to get a grip on a text. Why specifically Jonah, a character who is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible? Why Nineveh and not Damascus?

Structural analysis aims primarily at finding out *how* (according to what rules) texts are constructed as meaningful units; *what* the individual texts mean is often seen as secondary. The question "*how?*" is answered by referring to the network of relationships in the text (*parole*) and the structuring rules that allow certain selections and combinations and disallow others (*langue*). The analysis thus moves at both a surface level and a "deeper" level. At both levels, however, the emphasis falls on relationships, patterns or networks rather than on individual elements. As a result, structuralists often present their conclusions in the form of diagrams, graphs or other schematic representations.

(e) Structural analysis: Surface structure

A specific text is an instance of language as sign system, but it may also be considered a system of signs in its own right. In looking for the meaning of a word in a text it would not do to jump immediately to the sign system of language, because the particular word may have gained a special meaning within the context of this text. One first has to analyze the internal relationships within the system of signs presented by the text. The idea is that a text is never a disorganized collection of words and sentences. The way signs are organized in a text influences the meaning of both the text as a whole and of its individual parts. The question is therefore: how is the meaning of a text expressed in its structure?

To examine the structure of a text is to examine its construction, its *literary composition*. What are the parts and how were they combined? In one form of structural analysis popular among biblical interpreters, texts are broken down into small syntactic units called *cola* or *syntagmemes*. The various relationships between two consecutive *cola* and among bigger groups of *cola* are then analyzed and described. Repetitions of certain prominent words or themes (called *vehicles of structure*) in the text are also noted.

A structural analysis of the text of Jonah 1:1-3, for instance, would look like this:

1. The word Yaweh came to Jonah the son of Amittai:
   - 1.1 Arise,
   - 1.2 Go to the great city of Nineveh
   - 1.3 and preach against it
   - 1.4 because its evil has come up before me
2. But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish (away from Jaweh)
3. Jonah went down to Joppa
4. and he found a ship there going to Tarshish.
5. He paid the ship's fare
6. and he went aboard with the crew to go to Tarshish (away from Jaweh)
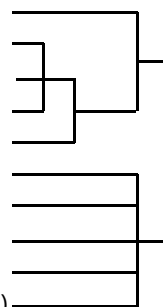
In this example, the following may be noted:

The structure of the whole section depends on the basic contrast between colon 1 as a whole and cola 2-6. The text must be understood in terms of this basic contrast between "go to" and 'flee from". Colon 1.1-1.4 is dependent on colon 1. In colon 1.1-1.3, three equivalent actions are strung together. This is followed by 1.4 which offers the motivation for 1.1-1.3. In cola 2-6, too, a series of equivalent actions are listed.

Such a structural analysis of a text provides the basis on which the meaning of text can be established. The idea is that one can test a particular hypothesis about the meaning of a text by using the empirical data in the text (the different *cola*). Structuralist approaches have pretensions of being *scientific*: they offer a controlled way of understanding a text.

(f) Structuralist approaches: Depth structures in a text

In structuralist approaches, a distinction is sometimes made between the surface structure and the so-called *depth structure* of a text. Most interpreters of the Bible use structural analyses only with regard to the surface structure. When structuralism is accepted as a comprehensive philosophical framework, one has to go beyond that.

Structuralism as a philosophy does not regard sign systems as products of human creativity. Language is not generated by people; people are generated by language structures. Human frameworks of thought and horizons of comprehension are determined by a system of signs of which they themselves form only a part. All human behaviour and experiences are concrete manifestations of and are subconsciously regulated by underlying conventions, ordering principles and social codes or rules. We live and think within the basic contrasts (or "binary oppositions") of our sign systems.

The meaning of signs is determined by other signs in the surface structure, enabling us to make sense of texts. But these relationships among signs are further conditioned at an unconscious level by a set of deeper-lying contrasts, which enable us to make sense of ourselves, our lives and our world. Contrasts between male and female, subject and object, life and death, nature and culture, good and evil, God and human being, friend and enemy, hero and villain would be typical examples. Often these binary oppositions are linked to one another in a complex system, so that, in some cultures, male is to female as culture is to nature and as life is to death. By means of such linkages we order our world and classify our experiences in it.

On the other hand, in our actual lives we cannot simply choose one half of the binary opposition and reject the other half. Our culture is built upon nature and in our lives we have to come to terms with death. Therefore texts – and particularly those texts to which we attach particular importance, such as sacred texts and myths – pay great attention to both ordering themes and ideas into opposites and mediating between opposites. Often important texts deal – sometimes at a hidden level - with the "great opposites" and with the transformation of the structures of opposition which make transition possible. The following examples should make the point clear:

The joining of male and female sexually (in intercourse) and socially (in marriage) and the passing from death to life (birth) and from life to death (dying) are perennial themes in texts and are marked by special rituals in practically all religious traditions. The rejection and exclusion of evil and the atonement (expiation, purging) that brings about reconciliation and re-integration is another typical theme in literature and religion. Less obviously mediation between opposites is involved in cooking: nature (the raw) is transformed into culture (the cooked). Indeed, in some cultures cooking is a ritual with religious undertones and the fire in the hearth (the mediator) is regarded as sacred.

The depth structure often manifests itself at the surface (for instance, in a text) in a coded form. For instance, life and death may be represented through symbols in a text that does not mention life and death at all. The depth structure cannot, therefore, be directly deduced from the data provided by the surface of the text; it is rather to be found in the ordering principles which are presupposed in the text, but are not always directly expressed in it.

The following example may make the distinction between surface structure and depth structure even clearer: imagine a woman in a beautiful party dress with all the accessories. We may consider all the items of clothing as a structured whole, noting how each item fits with the other items. For instance, her scarf, beautiful in itself, may clash with the dress, or her handbag, not particularly fancy, may go perfectly with the outfit. In this analysis we consider each item in its relationship to the outfit as a whole and assign meaning to it on that basis.

Having decided that her outfit as a whole fits together beautifully, we place her in a social setting, say, at an important horse race. Her clothing now marks her as a wealthy spectator who is there to show off her fashionable attire. It distinguishes her from the jockeys in their uniforms, the waiters who serve the drinks, the stable hands, and so on. We have now considered her outfit as significant from another perspective: it follows a particular dress code as opposed to other dress codes that may be found at the same event. If, in this setting, she were to serve drinks or rub down the horses in such an outfit it would be found strange indeed. In this case we have viewed her outfit as an instance of *parole* based on an underlying *langue* (the sign system of clothing as a whole).

Finally, we place her in an African jungle where, with the help of a half-naked local tribesman, she is trying to escape from a gang of poachers. Obviously her flimsy dress (already torn!) and high-heeled shoes are out of place, but this may not be the main point. We are probably in a story that stages the opposition culture-nature (and possible also life-death and male-female). Her "culture" has become a liability and the wealth represented by her clothes is useless in this setting. We can already suspect that the tribesman will become a mediator, helping her to find a new perspective on the opposition culture-nature. It does not matter that the story is likely to be popular melodrama. The same binary oppositions operate in high literature, although they are packaged in a more sophisticated way. Here we are not considering her outfit "in itself" or as one dress code among others, but as vehicle of the depth structure of the text.

5.3.2 Jonah in the light of a structural-analytical approach

In structural-analytical approaches, the emphasis falls especially on the literary structure and composition of texts. Since the book of Jonah is a highly artistic composition, one could expect it to show an array of intricate structuring devices. It is not possible to pay attention to all of them here or to go into all the technical distinctions of a structural approach. The following examples should be sufficient:

(a) The composition of the whole

One possible analysis of the total structure can be represented as follows:

Part A	Part B
1:1-3 The calling of Jonah	3:1-3 The calling of Jonah
1:4-16 Jonah and the pagans (the crew) on the ship	3:4-4:5 Jonah and the pagans (the Ninevites) in the city
2:1-11 Jonah and God outside the boat	4:6-11 Jonah and God outside the city

(b) Elements common to parts A and B

There are a number of striking parallels between the two main parts of the book of Jonah:

❃ Each part starts with Jonah's calling (1:1 and 3:1). The two commissions differ slightly: Jonah is ordered in 1:2 to preach "against" Nineveh, while in 3:2 he is ordered to preach only "to" Nineveh. In chapter three there is also no mention of Nineveh's wickedness.

❃ Jonah reacts in 1:3 by fleeing, but in 3:3 by obeying.

❃ A storm strikes the pagans at sea, and a "storm" strikes the city of Nineveh after Jonah's message. The theme of wind is repeated: the windstorm at sea in chapter 1 and the desert wind that scorches Jonah in chapter 4.

❃ Jonah gives a (somewhat unwilling) "testimony" in both 1:9 and 3:4.

❃ Jonah's own comfort is more important to him than the plight of the pagans: he goes to sleep in the hold of the ship (1:5), and he builds himself a little shelter against the hot sun while waiting to see what is going to happen to Nineveh (4:5). While Jonah is "sitting" comfortably in the shade, the king of Nineveh is also "sitting" - in sackcloth and ashes.

❃ The subjects (the sailors and the people of Nineveh) act independently from (and in anticipation of) the rulers (the ship's captain and the king of Nineveh).

❃ The pagans "cast" things off, the sailors "cast" off the ship's cargo, the king climbs down from his throne and "casts" off his cloak. Yahweh also "casts" a storm upon the sea (1:4 literally in the Hebrew). Jonah asks the sailors to "cast" him into the sea, which they proceed to do.

❃ Both the captain and the king hope that God should consider them so that they would not die (1:6, 3:9). In both cases there is a formula of uncertainty (perhaps; who knows?)

❃ The pagans' reactions are surprisingly positive each time. In chapter 1 the pagan sailors, amazingly, come to believe in Yahweh. This serves as an overture to chapter 3 in which the

impossible, the quite unthinkable (at least for any loyal Jew), in fact happens: Nineveh as a whole comes to repentance.

❀ The pagans' final reaction includes, in both parts, three kinds of activity through which they serve Yahweh (compare 1:16 and 3:5f):

    ❀ religious actions: prayers;

    ❀ ritual actions: the offering of sacrifices/fasting and mourning;

    ❀ ethical actions: innocent blood should not be spilt (1:14); there should be remorse about the blood that has already been spilt (3:8). In contrast to this, Jonah calls for blood vengeance (4:2).

❀ All three of these elements are important: in Israel's history the third element had been neglected all too often.

❀ In both parts the pagans are saved because the storm subsides (1:15), and because the anger of Yahweh against Nineveh subsides (3:10).

❀ In both parts a change in location takes place: from a situation where Jonah is in the midst of pagans to a more private dialogue between God and Jonah.

❀ In each part Jonah is in terrible distress: he ends up in a stormy sea, and he is burnt by a scorching sun and a desert wind.

❀ Jonah is in the belly of the fish for three days (1:17) and passes through Nineveh in three days (this being implied in 3:3).

❀ Two "didactic miracles" take place: Jonah is saved by a fish and by a miraculous plant.

❀ Jonah chooses or prefers to die (1:12, 4:3, 8, and 9).

❀ In the first part Jonah does not get what he deserves; in the second part Nineveh, the wicked city, does not get what it deserves. Both cases illustrate God's mercy.

❀ Both parts end with a question the reader would have wanted to ask: what is Jonah going to do now?

❀ The first and last verses of the book as a whole are also symmetrical: chapter 1:1 is about the judgment that Nineveh deserves; chapter 4:11 is about Yahweh's mercy for Nineveh.

(c) The composition of the parts (including concentric structures)

❀ Chapter 1:4-16

❀ This section has a most interesting concentric structure. It can be sketched as follows:

A) Narrative: storm arises and theme of fear (4-5a)
   B) Prayers of sailors (5a): each to his own god
      C) Narrative: sailors in the storm (5b-6a)
         D) Words of the captain (6b): the cause of the storm
            E) Words of sailors (7a)
               F) Narrative (7b): the lot falls on Jonah
                  G) Words of sailors (8): question to Jonah
                     H) Jonah's confession
                  G) Words of sailors (10a-b): Jonah's reaction
               F) Narrative (10c): Why the lot fell on Jonah
            E) Words of sailors (11)
         D) Words of Jonah (12): I am the cause of the storm
      C) Narrative: sailors in the storm (13)
   B) Prayers of sailors (14): all pray to Yahweh
A) Narrative: storm subsides and theme of fear (15-16a)

The concentric elements show interesting parallels:

A) The two sections of narrative indicate the beginning and the end of the storm. The wind is "cast" on the sea and Jonah is "cast" into the sea. The outer edges of the concentric structure deal with the interaction between Yahweh and the sailors, in which Jonah is not involved.

B) The prayers of the sailors are at first addressed to their own gods, but later to Yahweh.

C) During the storm the sailors try to save themselves by technical means.

D) It is not clear whether some form of parallel between the words of the captain and the words of Jonah can be identified.

E-G) In the two sets of the sailors' utterances, their fear continues to grow.

This schematic representation makes it clear that Jonah and his "confession of faith" are the focus of this section. In Jonah's confession it is striking that he first emphasizes his ethnic ties ("A Hebrew am I") and only then proceeds to say who his God is ("I serve Yahweh, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land"). This tends to confirm the view that Jonah was a Jewish nationalist for whom his people were more important than either the sailors or the people of Nineveh (enemies of Israel). Note too the irony in his confession of faith: how can you say that God created the sea when you are trying to escape from this God by sea?

- Chapter 1:17-2:10

- Jonah's "psalm" has three stanzas. In the first two stanzas (2:2-4 and 2:5-7), four themes are repeated, namely:

  - Jonah's prayer to Yahweh,

  - Jonah's plight as a drowning man: rivers, waters and the primal deep engulf him,

  - Jonah's separation from God and his falling prey to the realm of death,

  - Jonah's remembrance of God and the temple in the midst of his distress.

- The third stanza links up with the following themes from the end of chapter 1:

  - The relationship between the pagans and God,

  - The offering of sacrifices to Yahweh,

- ❖ The making of vows to Yahweh.

❖ Jonah's abhorrence of the denial of Yahweh by pagans is ironic - especially since the reader is already aware of what happened at the end of chapter one.

❖ The following further parallels can be identified in chapters 1 and 2:

  - ❖ Crisis (the storm, Jonah in the sea),

  - ❖ Prayer (the pagans and Jonah pray to their gods/ God?),

  - ❖ Salvation (the storm subsides and Jonah is spewed out by the fish),

  - ❖ Vows, sacrifices and prayers are offered to Yahweh.

❖ c) Other concentric structures

❖ Scholars have also identified other concentric structures in Jonah. For instance, 3:4 to 4:5 may be concentrically structured. The section begins when Jonah enters the city and ends when he leaves it. The king's implicit "confession of guilt" (3:7-9) constitutes the centre. This invites comparison with Jonah's confession in 1:9.

❖ A concentric structure can also be identified in 4:2-11. The section begins with Jonah's words (4:2-3) and ends with Yahweh's words (4:10-11). Yahweh's action (4:7-8a) stands at the centre. The interplay of words and actions (and Jonah's changing moods) is prominent in this section. Readers are invited to work out the details of these two concentric structures for themselves.

A more complex analysis of chapters 3 and 4 would look like this (with the focus on the dialogical nature of chapter 4):

Verse	Agent	Act	Theme
3:4	Jonah	acts	Jonah entered the city
		said	God will destroy Nineveh
3:5	Nineveh	reacts	Believes in God
		reacts	Fasts and mourns
3:6	King	acts	Fasts and mourns
3:7		proclaims	Humans and animals #
3:8		proclaims	Fasting, mourning, praying
3:9		thinks	Will God change mind?
		thinks	Remorse instead of anger?
3:10	God	reacts	Does change mind
		reacts	Remorse instead of disaster
			God's mercy on Nineveh
4:1	Jonah	reacts	Jonah's anger
4:2	Jonah	prays to God	Jonah and his people
	Jonah	prays to God	His flight to Tarshish
	Jonah	prays to God	God's grace
4:3	Jonah	prays to God	Jonah's death wish
4:4	God	asks Jonah	Is Jonah's anger justified?
4:5	Jonah	reacts	Leaves the city
	Jonah	reacts	Builds booth (shelter)
	Jonah	reacts	Nineveh's future = ?
4:6	God	acts	Plant for Jonah's anger *
	Jonah	reacts	Joy over plant *
4:7	God	acts	Sends worm, plant dies *
4:8			Sends wind
	Jonah	reacts	Jonah wishes to die
4:9	God	asks Jonah	Is Jonah's anger justified?
	Jonah	answers	Anger over plant* justified
			Jonah wishes to die
4:10	God	asks Jonah	Mercy of Jonah on plant *
4:11	God	asks Jonah	Mercy of God on Nineveh
			Nineveh's people and animals #
???	Jonah	reacts	?????????????????

Note how contrasts such as those between Jonah's anger and God's mercy, and between life and death, function in this structure. Note too how certain themes keep cropping up: the plant (*) and the people and animals of Nineveh (#), for instance.

(d) Some vehicles of structure

The following themes occur repeatedly in the book as a whole:

❈ *Life and death*: God saves the lives of the sailors, and of Jonah, and of the Ninevites. The sailors and the king pray to their gods/God that their lives might be spared. Jonah prefers to die: in the ship, in the city, under the tree/plant (that dies itself). Compare Moses and Elijah's requests to die (Numbers 11:15, 1 Kings 19:4).

❈ *Prayers*: There are many prayers: those of the sailors, that of Jonah in the fish, those of the Ninevites, that of Jonah in the city, that of Jonah outside the city. It is interesting to compare the notions about god, God and Yahweh expressed in the respective prayers. The sailors, for instance, pray "each to his god" in 1:5, but in 1:14 they pray to Yahweh. The Ninevites also pray to God and "this god" reacts to their prayers.

❈ *Sacrifices*: The sailors "sacrifice" their cargo to the sea (to save themselves and Jonah), Jonah is thrown overboard as a "sin offering", the sailors sacrifice to God after the storm has subsided, in the fish Jonah promises sacrifices to God (2:9), and the Ninevites bring sacrifices to God.

❈ *Fear*: The sailors fear the storm in 1:5, Jonah says that he "fears" Yahweh, the sailors fear when they hear this, and when the storm is finally stilled they are filled with a great fear of Yahweh.

❈ *Anger/evil*: (in Hebrew the same word can denote both): In 1:1 we hear that the evil of the city of Nineveh (the city of violence and cruelty) has angered Yahweh. A storm rages at sea (1:4), the sailors ask Jonah why this evil (disaster) has struck them and the raging storm finally subsides. The king of Nineveh wonders whether God might not perhaps cease being angry (3:9); Nineveh repents of its evil ways. God sees that Nineveh has turned away from its evil ways (3:10), therefore God too turns around and averts the evil (the disaster) that had been intended for Nineveh. In 4:1 Jonah is angry when God spares Nineveh, Israel's archenemies, but he rejoices at the miraculous plant. Twice Yahweh asks Jonah whether he has any reason to be angry – initially, because the city had been spared (4:4) and later, because the plant had withered (4:9). In both cases Jonah avers that his anger is justified (again in 4:9). It is as if the evil/anger of Nineveh had rubbed off on Jonah.

❈ *Grace and mercy*: God shows grace to the sailors, to Jonah, to the people of Nineveh, and to their animals. Compare, too, the grace of the sailors to Jonah when they try their level best to save him. Jonah shows an extraordinarily great concern for the miraculous plant (4:10), but a lack of mercy for the people of Nineveh. Jonah's problem is precisely that Yahweh is too gracious and merciful to each and everybody (4:2). On the other hand there is an element of judgment that strikes at least the possessions of the sailors and the miraculous plant.

❈ *God's power*: Although the word "power" is never explicitly used in the book of Jonah, the image of God's power is constantly held up to view: God has the power to send a storm at sea and to let it abate; to create heaven and earth, sea and dry land (1:9); to use a great fish, a miraculous plant and a tiny worm as instruments; and to instill a sense of awe in both groups of pagans.

(e) Outline of a depth structure in the book of Jonah

One does not speculate about the depth structure in Jonah to get a better understanding of the unique message of the book, but to identify the structures and structural transformations it shares with many ostensibly very different texts. At the foundation of this book one encounters contrasts or binary oppositions that underlie many different narratives. Humans, being products of rule-bound systems based on these binary oppositions, have to give come to terms with these oppositions. They can do so in many ways, but – because of the systematic rules – not in any way.

Many interpreters have concluded that the opposition "Israelite-heathen" is the central theme of the book. Some have added that the problem of dealing with foreign nations became particularly acute in the post-exilic period, when Israel had lost its political independence and had to submit itself to the superior power of heathen rulers. But the binary opposition "insider-outsider" is not bound to an historical context. It can apply (as it does here) to one national and religious identity as opposed to other national and religious identities; it can also apply to personal identity as opposed to the "outside" forces of society. In virtually all cases the "insider" position is considered precious because it confers identity, yet some accommodation with the "outside" is a practical necessity.

The "insider" position is treasured because it is associated with life and goodness, while "outside" is the threatening sphere of evil and death. Thus in the book of Jonah "Israel" is the side of life, of goodness and of true religion, while "Nineveh" is the side of death, evil and opposition to Yahweh. Yet there is a dark side to "insider identity" that can be described by the binary opposition between "relationships" and "isolation". When Jonah insists too strongly on rejecting contact with outsiders, he becomes progressively more isolated – from Yahweh, from Israel and from himself (in the deep sleep). In the second half of the book, something similar happens: Jonah, having isolated himself from Nineveh, rejects Yahweh and chooses death (the ultimate isolation).

Both these binary oppositions ("insider-outsider" and "relationship-isolation") are related to a third one, namely that between "justification" and "guilt". "Justification" (or vindication) maintains life, identity and relationship: the justified person has a legitimate place in the community. "Guilt" leads to exclusion from relationships (the casting out of the sinner), loss of identity and death. Nineveh's guilt should lead to its exclusion and destruction (1:2; 3:4). But Jonah's guilt (his disobedience) should also lead to his death, and therefore he is cast into the depths of the sea. In the second half Jonah again rebels against Yahweh and judges for himself that death is all that is left to him. His own individual identity (his "word" in 4:2) cannot sustain him in his isolation from Nineveh, his people and Yahweh.

Throughout the book the *word* of Yahweh mediates between the opposites. The book starts and ends with Yahweh's words. Nineveh is saved when its people believe the word that came from Yahweh (4:5). This word, however, calls for a response. When Jonah flees without a word, Yahweh commands a storm and a monstrous fish, which we expect will bring him certain death. But when Jonah prays in the belly of the fish (thereby entering into relationship again), Yahweh's command turns the instrument of death into a vehicle of salvation. When Jonah responds positively to Yahweh's command in chapter 3, Jonah's word of destruction also becomes (indirectly) a word of salvation.

New relationships are established by means of the word. One could also say that his word provides the means of judging questions of guilt and justification, death and life, outside and inside. Those who respond to Yahweh's word (as the sailors and the people in Nineveh did and as Jonah did

in chapter 2) are led back into the world of relationships, of justified action and life. Identity then becomes redefined as religious identity, which is defined in terms of how they respond to Yahweh's word.

The point of this analysis only becomes clear when we see how it enables comparisons with other transformations of the same structural components. We may note (very briefly) how the Indian religious philosophy of Advaita Vedanta deals with the same problematic. In this system the question of identity is posed more broadly: who am I in relation to everything outside me? Why is it that the more I act, the more my acts (in as much as they are mine) tie me to a world of exclusive categories and potential enmity, competition and conflict? Here physical death is not the main problem; the enemy is the spiritual death of being tied to a cycle of rebirths (*samsara*) which always leads me back to my isolated position in the world of "things". My actions (*karma*), good or bad, cannot allow me to break free, because (being my actions alone) they confirm my isolation.

The answer is found (in most forms of Advaita Vedanta) in a deliberate withdrawal from action in the world and an ascetic self-isolation. This reaches its climax in deep meditation, in which I reach the state of *samadhi* (literally, "being with yourself"). But it is precisely in this state that I realize that my true self (*Atman*) is identical with the impersonal Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*). Since *Brahman* is not a distinct thing or person, but everything, my identity with Brahman is my identity with everything. I recognize that the world of separate entities is an illusion (*maya*) created by my ignorance (*avidya*). The mediator here is true existential knowledge (*vidya*), which allows me to experience myself as one with the cosmic whole.

Those who adopt structuralism as a philosophy would argue that the book of Jonah and Advaita Vedanta represent two different but equivalent ways of dealing with certain binary oppositions that structure our lives. Being the product of these structuring oppositions, we cannot but deal with them in some way, but there is no reason to prefer one way to another.

5.3.3 Observations and evaluation

* Many early structuralists were on the left of the political spectrum. In their view one of the merits of structuralism was that it exposed various forms of elitism by showing that "high" and "low" texts, "advanced" and "primitive" cultures, are all *constructions* based on the same structural rules. The privileged position accorded to certain texts, cultural practices or ways of behaving is not based on inherent or naturally given superiority. These texts, practices and ways of behaving are simply some of the many possible ways of expressing meaning according to the underlying rules of sign systems. Other expressions would be equally meaningful. In particular, structuralist theory undermined the notion of specially "gifted" authors or interpreters whose "insights" place them beyond the common mass. All authors obey the same rules of selection and combination; all trained (rather than gifted) interpreters can analyze their writings.

* Ironically, in the field of biblical interpretation structuralist approaches were eagerly adopted by *conservative* interpreters, some of whom paid little attention to the theoretical grounding of structuralism. Using the tools of structural analysis, such interpreters were able to write highly technical articles and commentaries on biblical texts, while avoiding awkward historical-critical questions. Sometimes the new perspective brought to light things that had previously been overlooked. Sometimes, however, the impression was created that the presence of different voices in the text, the contexts in which these voices spoke and the different ideologies

they expressed could be ignored, as long as one could find some "structure" in the text and represent it by means of a diagram.

⚙ The greatest value of the structuralist approach is that it forces one to deal *systematically* with *every* aspect of the text. Instead of focusing on a particularly artistic metaphor here and a striking contrast there, structural analysis seeks to account for all the different literary components in a text. This highly disciplined approach can also produce an appreciation of and interest in the artistic composition of a text (as it does in the case of Jonah). This does not yet clarify the meaning of a text for any particular audience. Moreover, the task of revealing fully all the rules by which a text was composed is enormous, even if the text is brief. After many pages of analysis of a short passage, one still wonders whether all aspects have been covered.

⚙ Structuralist approaches claimed that it is possible to determine how a text makes meaning in a systematic and controlled (scientific) way. In this respect structuralism was a positivistic enterprise. This claim to scientific precision was, however, undermined by the implausibility of some of the conclusions they reached and by disagreements among structuralists themselves. Clearly the different contexts of readers also influence analysis. An interesting example of this is the influence of structuralism itself. Structuralists usually discover some neat structure in

a text because (on account of their presuppositions) they *want* to find such a structure. As a result, the findings often appear somewhat forced.

⚙ The technical distinctions and terminology employed in structuralist approaches render them obscure to all but a small circle of adepts. Had structuralists agreed to a single standard terminology, this problem would not have been fatal: in practice each structuralist developed her or his own terminology. It is no wonder, therefore, that the results of structuralist studies are often ignored or regarded as irrelevant in other circles.

⚙ Structuralism was a brief fashion. It flourished in the early 1960's, but by the end of the decade it was already losing its appeal. This makes it easy to overlook its lasting influence. Much of what structuralism taught us is now accepted as self-evident, even by those who do not call themselves structuralists. For instance, instead of taking a particular passage in a text as a chance product of nature or a unique reflection of the author's mind, we now ask ourselves what rules of selection and combination operate in the passage and how the particular selections and combinations influence the meaning. The particularly valuable contribution of structuralist ideas to the study of narratives will be examined in the next section.

5.4 Narrative approaches

5.4.1 Background and theory

Since the 1930's there has been a growing reaction within secular literary studies against the excessive emphasis on the historical aspects of the interpretation of texts. (This development has already been discussed in the introduction to chapter 5 above.) Increasingly the idea was propagated that a literary work is a work of art and should be appreciated as such. The assumption that the author's intention is decisive in the interpretation event was shelved. The historical circumstances within which the text originated, and more particularly the specific circumstances of the author, need not be taken into account in the understanding of the text. Once the literary work has been completed, it assumes a life of its own. This assumption of the independence of the literary work as a work of art started pushing the interest in the world of production of texts into the background.

In due course this view started influencing the interpretation of biblical texts as well. Although a thoroughly literary interest in biblical texts has emerged as an articulated position only during the last thirty years or so, the appreciation of the literary qualities of the Bible goes back a long way. Though initially some attention was given to certain literary aspects of the Bible in a sporadic and random way, an increasing number of voices started calling for the recognition of the Bible as literature.

The interest in the literary qualities of the Bible is not confined to one level only as these manifest themselves at various levels (see the discussion above in section 5.1). Some interpreters, for instance, focus on the semiotic-structural components of a literary work. Others emphasize the stylistic and aesthetic aspects, yet others certain narrative aspects in the text. The common factor in all these approaches is the importance attached to the literary aspects of biblical texts: the text itself is the point of departure for the discovery of the meaning of the text. In this discussion the focus falls on the approaches that try to reach a better understanding of the narrative literature of the Bible. A "narrative approach" (sometimes called a narratological approach) thus entails a sensitivity to the the presentation and development of the story itself. In a certain sense one could say that, whereas the structuralists focused their attention on the linguistic structures in texts, narrative analyses are also looking at structures, but then at the level of story-telling. In the discussion of the book of Jonah in the light of a narrative approach, some attention will also be given to certain elements of style that can play a role in this type of interpretation.

It is important to note that up to now narrative approaches have not been methodologically circumscribed or defined with great precision. There is no "standardized" narrative approach. This can be ascribed partly to the relative newness of this approach to textual interpretation, and partly to the particular nature of this type of approach.

The following narrative aspects are usually considered in this approach:

(a) Plot/story line

Some literary critics (in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the term) are of the opinion that this is the most important aspect of narrative texts. For any narrative to be a narrative, it has to have a story line or plot. Without this it would not be considered a narrative.

In his description of narratives, Aristotle tried to indicate that there is such a thing as a story line or plot. His definition of plot was that it referred to the ordered succession of events in the narrative. In other words, in any narrative one can, by definition, identify certain moments that together form an ordered unit. Aristotle had already broadly distinguished between the beginning, the middle and the end of the narrative.

In more modern theories these distinctions have been considerably refined, and include significant moments of the plot such as introduction, inciting moment, working out/complication, climax, turning point, descending action, denouement and conclusion. Nor do all these moments necessarily have to occur in all narratives. Analysis of the plot/story line helps the interpreter in two important ways. Firstly, it enables the interpreter of narratives to get a grip on the line of tension in the narrative. Secondly, and closely connected to this, it provides a way of identifying the changes the narrative wishes to bring about, whether these are changes in knowledge (that is, by the end of the story the reader knows more), changes in values (which concern the development of the characters' values and also the values of the reader) or changes in situation (those concerning the events recounted in the narrative).
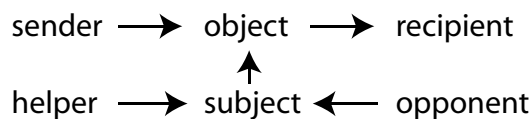
(b) Characters

A narrative normally features characters. The plot emerges precisely when characters are described in their relationships to themselves, to other characters and to events. Biblical narratives are no exception. One has to be forewarned, however, that biblical narratives show far less interest in the psychological aspects of characters than modern narratives do. In biblical narratives the characters serve the story line; they are seldom employed in the narrative for the purpose of fixing the attention on the characters themselves.

Not all characters necessarily function in the same way in a narrative and therefore a distinction between different types of characters is commonly made. There are different versions of this distinction. Some simply distinguish between "*round*" characters (characters that are described in some detail, that undergo development during the narrative, of whom more than one dimension is revealed to the readers) and "*flat*" characters (characters that act in a purely functional way in the narrative, that do not undergo character development, of whom little is said). A variation on this bipartite distinction is the tripartite model that distinguishes between "*fully-fledged characters*", "*types*" and "*agents*". The "fully-fledged" character is a complex one, of whom the narrative shows a number of traits and qualities. The "type" is described only in terms of one feature of her character, one that is of particular importance to the story line. The "agent" is little more than a function of the plot; nothing is actually recounted about a character of this type.

A yet more refined model of distinguishing between character types in narratives is the *actant model*. This model developed from Russian formalism and particularly Vladimir Propp's analysis of a number of Russian folktales. It is applied especially in structuralist approaches to narratives. According to this model, certain thematic roles may be distinguished in a narrative. For instance, in all stories we find somebody (a sender or subject) who wants to establish something (an object) with respect to someone else (a recipient). In this process there are often other characters who function on the side of the sender (helpers) in the attempt to achieve the goal. On the other hand, there are also often characters who wish to prevent the sender from achieving the goal (opponents). These various roles may be taken by different characters, but one character may take more than one role.

Using the well-known story of "Little Red Riding Hood", the model can be explicated as follows. The mother acts as the sender/subject sending the nice food (object) to the grandmother (recipient). Little Red Riding Hood (helper) has to carry out the task, but along the way she is led astray by the wolf (opponent). Ultimately the forester (another helper) comes to save the day. Thus the roles relate to one another in the following way:

$$\text{sender} \longrightarrow \text{object} \longrightarrow \text{recipient}$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$\text{helper} \longrightarrow \text{subject} \longleftarrow \text{opponent}$$

This model not only offers the possibility of distinguishing the thematic roles of the characters; it also attempts to establish a link between character types and story line. By discussing these thematic roles within a narrative, one has already said much about its structure.

(c) The role of the narrator

Modern literary theories often distinguish between i) the real author, ii) the implied author, iii) the narrator, iv) the narrative, v) the narrator's audience, the narratee, vi) the implied reader, and vii) the real reader. The following diagram explicates these distinctions:
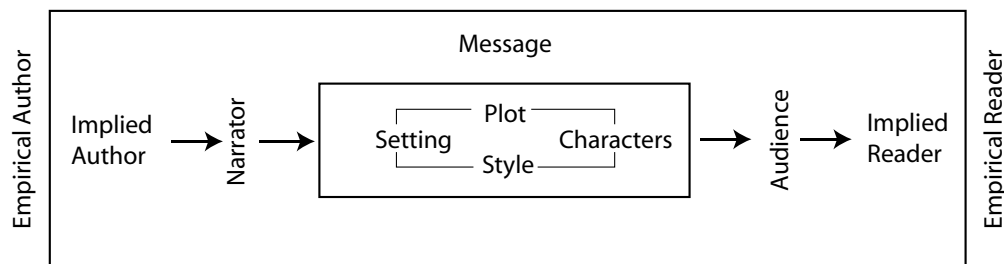
Before we look at the role of the narrator, a brief explanation of the distinctions between the real and implied author and the real and implied reader is in order.

⚙ The real and the implied author

The real author of a narrative is the person responsible for its origin. When a real author creates a narrative, she projects something of her own world onto the text. The real author is indeed outside the text, yet there is something of the author present within the text, so that one constantly becomes aware of the imprint or "voice" of the author as one is reading. This projection of the real author, the implied author, is not, however, identical to the real author. The values, norms, interests and world-view of the implied author as reflected in the narrative do not necessarily coincide with the values, norms, interests and world-view of the real author. It is possible, for instance, that someone should write a novel in which homosexuality is sympathetically portrayed although the real author may, in fact, be quite opposed to it.

Thus the implied author does not refer to the real author (who can be known only through historical reconstruction of the world behind the text). Rather, the implied author is a literary construction made by the present-day reader on the basis of the narrative itself. To rephrase: an historical approach is interested in the real author (behind the text), while a literary approach focuses on the implied author - using only the data provided by the text itself.

⚙ The real and the implied reader

The same distinction applies with regard to the real (empirical) reader and the implied reader. The real reader (today, or in the past) is the reader who physically takes up the book and reads it.

Each narrative includes an invitation to readers to share an experience, to imagine and construct a state of affairs, to get in touch with certain values, feelings, decisions and views of life. The author cannot, of course, control who is going to read the narrative. The narrative may be intended for an audience quite different from the one that ends up actually reading it. A text may indicate in numerous ways for what readers it was intended and what reactions are expected from the readers. In these ways the envisaged readers of a text are "written into" the text, just as the author is "written into" the text. In other words, the implied author assumes an ideal, implied reader, who is not necessarily identical to the empirical reader.

It is possible to build up an image of the readers for whom the text was actually meant. This "implied reader" can be inferred from by interpreting the text itself.

Although these distinctions may help to interpret the intended effects of a text, there are many scholars who believe that they are not necessarily of much use when it comes to the interpretation of ancient texts such as the Bible. As there is little historical evidence bearing on the majority of biblical texts, the search for the real author is often regarded as speculative. In such cases the analysis of the real author and the implied author may coincide more or less fully. The distinction between the narrator and the implied author is also often suspended - especially where the narrative does not indicate a specific narrator.

❈ The narrator and the audience

In spite of these differences of opinion, there is agreement about the importance of the role of the narrator for the understanding of narratives. What is a narrator?

The narrator is more than simply someone who tells a story to a particular audience. It is rather a speaker who appeals to an ideal audience to react to certain aspects of the narrative in a certain way. The narrator is not necessarily someone of flesh and blood; it is the voice that controls the narrative. The role of the narrator can be illustrated by means of the metaphor of the film. The narrator is the eye of the camera that determines what information will be passed on to the audience. At times it provides a close-up, at other times a survey. At times the events are followed closely and in detail; at other times certain events are deliberately passed over and thus kept from the audience.

Sometimes one of the (main) characters in the narrative is the narrator. The story is then told from the perspective of that character (in the first person). The narrator, however, does not necessarily have to be explicitly portrayed in every narrative. In fact, this happens very seldom in the narratives of the Bible. This does not mean that the narrator does not play a role in such narratives: whenever a story is told, the role of a narrator is presupposed.

Obviously the narrator is not identical to the real author. For instance, when somebody writes the script for a film, it seldom happens that this person acts as narrator in the film (except perhaps in documentaries). Often one of the characters is employed for this purpose, but often there is no explicit narrator. Although the narrator is a creation of the real author, it is the narrator, and not the real author, who expresses the narrative.

A narrative may occasionally include a reference to the person or persons (audience) to whom the story is told. This recipient of the narrative, the narratee, does not necessarily have to have any relation to the implied reader for whom the narrative is really intended. A story that is purportedly told by an old man to his six-year-old-grandchild is not necessarily aimed at younger readers.

The example of Luke 15:11-32 (the story of the prodigal son) can illustrate the point. The audience of the story, or narratee, is the Pharisees and the scribes that came to listen to Jesus (15:1). The original story was clearly intended for them in the sense that they were supposed to recognize themselves in the position of the older brother. This audience is not, however, the "implied reader" of "Luke's" (the implied author's) text. The voice of "Luke" uses the parable of the prodigal son to communicate something to another audience of readers of the time (perhaps that of readers in Rome?). The real author (the historical person Luke, without the quotation marks) had no inkling of the fact that real, empirical readers in the twentieth century would read this same story and discover other implications in it.

The diagram above with its parallel distinctions between empirical author and reader, implied author and reader and narrator and narratee should now be clearer.

❀ The attributes of the narrator

Many narrators may exhibit the attributes of omniscience and omnipresence:

A narrator may be present in two places simultaneously and recount what happened at both. In this sense the narrator is "omnipresent". A narrator also has access to all characters and their thought processes, thus the narrator is "omniscient" as well. The narrator can present the information selectively to the audience in accordance with the story line and the intended effect of the narrative.

This does not mean that these attributes belong to certain people of flesh and blood. The narratives themselves present an image of the narrator. After all, we know intuitively that it would be irrelevant to ask at some point during the story "How does the narrator know this?" A good example is the creation story in Genesis 1, where the narrator even has access to God's thought processes. The narrator says repeatedly that God saw that everything was good. It does not occur to any of us to ask: "how does the narrator know what God was thinking?" We accept intuitively that narrators possess this type of insight.

In addition, the narrator is in a position to manipulate the reader:

The attributes of "omniscience" and "omnipresence" and the role of the "camera eye" view that the narrator occupies enable the narrator to manipulate the reader. There are various techniques of narration by means of which the reader may be led to react in specific ways. A narrator might, for instance, choose to reveal certain events/ information to the reader, while some of the characters in the story do not have access to the same information.

A typical example would be if the reader were to know that there are certain dangers lurking along the road followed by a traveller (a character in the narrative), while the character carries on in blissful ignorance. The reader, better informed than the character, would react with fear and increased tension. A splendid example of this from the Old Testament occurs in the Ehud/Eglon narrative in Judges 3. Although the readers are already aware that king Eglon lies murdered behind the closed doors, the guards do not know this yet. They suspect that the king is defecating in the cool room and are loath to disturb him at such a time! In the meantime, Ehud makes good his escape.

In other cases the narrator may choose to give the reader less information than the characters have. The reader cannot then understand the events or the actions of the characters. For instance, early on in the Ehud/Eglon narrative (Judges 3:16) it is not clear to the reader why Ehud makes himself a double-edged sword and why he straps it to his right side. This technique arouses the reader's curiosity and invites the reader to read on.

A narrative approach to the interpretation of biblical texts teaches the reader to be sensitive to the role of the narrator. By discovering the "presence" of the narrator in narratives and by learning to spot the techniques the narrator uses, the reader is able to gain a good indication of the response a particular narrative is intended to evoke.

(d) Narrative time

The aspect of narrative time is of crucial importance for the understanding of narratives. The story does not tell only of events that take place in time (whether they are historical events or not), but also arranges the events in the story in a specific temporal order. This arrangement of

events does not necessarily correlate with the chronological order of the events that make up the story. Therefore it is possible to distinguish between narrated time and narrative time.

⚙ Narrated time and narrative time

Narrated time is the actual duration of the events recounted in a narrative. Narrative time, on the other hand, is the quantity of "telling time" expended on the particular events. Narrated time is thus measured in years, months, hours and minutes, whereas narrative time is measured rather in terms of the number of words or sentences that an event takes up in the narrative.

For instance: say the event recounted in a narrative is a journey by train from Cape Town to Johannesburg. In reality this event would take quite a number of hours. The narrated time refers to the number of hours needed for the completion of the journey and for possible delays along the way. A narrator may elect to describe this event in exhaustive detail, thus taking up quite considerable narrative time. A narrator may, however, prefer to refer only briefly to the whole journey from Cape Town to Johannesburg; even a single sentence embedded in the broader narrative could suffice. In this case the narrative time is considerably shorter.

By being sensitive to the relation between narrated time and narrative time, the reader has a sense of the shifts in emphasis that the narrator introduces into the narrative.

⚙ Changes in chronological order

It is also possible for the narrator to achieve certain effects by making changes in the chronological order of the events.

A narrator may sometimes choose to defer the recounting of certain events (that is, to narrate them chronologically later than they occur). This technique is called *analepsis*. On the other hand, she may also choose to recount certain events before their chronological occurrence, that is, *proleptically*. A third possibility is to "sidestep" certain events by leaving them out of the narrative. This can be done deliberately in order to create the possibility of ambiguous meaning or to serve an ironic purpose (*paralipsis*).

An example from the Jonah narrative can elucidate this: why did Jonah flee to Tarshish? Since his motivation is not given initially, a possibility is opened up for the reader to form his own opinion. This opinion is later contrasted with the real motivation when a motivation is given further on in the narrative. The "side-stepping" of information may, however, also be the result of a lack of information about, or interest in, certain events (*elipsis*).

⚙ The frequency of narration

The frequency of narration, closely connected to the order of the narration of events, is another important narrative aspect to be taken into account in the interpretation of biblical narratives.

In this regard there are various possibilities, such as: (i) something occurs once and is recounted more than once; (ii) something occurs more than once, but is recounted once only; and (iii) something is recounted the same number of times that it occurs. A narrative approach would want to account for the motive for, and effect of, the variations in frequency. This is of importance in determining what the narrator is trying to achieve with the narrative.

(e) Point of view

Point of view has occasioned heated debate in the literature about narrative theory. Point of view (or perspective or focalization) concerns the question: "who sees?" or "whose perspective is now, at this stage of the narrative, being presented?" Once more the image of the eye of the camera

explains the point: when the narrator selects what she or he wants the reader of the story to "see", not only the choice of events is important. A further choice is made, namely through whose eyes the selected events will be viewed. The gospels provide a further example to illustrate the perspective of the narrator. The story of Jesus would have been dramatically different had it been told from the perspective of the Pharisees.

Although the theoretical literature provides several models for the classification of narrative points of view, the following will suffice here (for the purpose of analyzing biblical narratives):

⚘ A narrator may elect to recount events from his own perspective: this is the most common form. Unless the contrary is indicated by means of literary techniques, we may always assume that we are dealing with the narrator's point of view in a narrative. Thus in most cases the narrator's values and norms apply in the evaluation of events.

⚘ The next possibility is that the narrator is telling the story from the point of view of one of the characters. In the narrative text various techniques of focalization may be employed to indicate a shift from the narrator's point of view to the character's point of view (or *vice versa*).

⚘ A last possibility is that the narrator may present the events from the point of view of the reader of the narrative. This possibility is seldom utilized in biblical narratives.

This broad description of narrative theory offers techniques that can be used to read the book of Jonah as a narrative as well. The story of Jonah can, at the same time, illustrate the value of a narrative approach.

### 5.4.2 Jonah in the light of a narrative approach

Although the narrative elements of a story such as Jonah's never function in isolation, but rather in an integrated way, these elements are, for the sake of clarity, discussed separately in this section.

(a) Narrative plot

In the discussion of the structuralist approach, it has already been pointed out that the book of Jonah exhibits two well-defined parts, namely 1:1-2:10 and 3:1-4:11. The distinction between the two halves is clearly established in the introduction to chapter 3 of the book of Jonah: "The word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second time." The repetition of the commission (parallel to 1:1 where Yahweh's commission to Jonah is given for the first time) serves as a stylistic criterion that indicates the start of a new episode. The distinction between the halves is further determined by dramatic criteria. There is a change of place (no longer on the sea or in the fish, but on dry land; no longer on the way to Tarshish, but on the way to Nineveh) and of action (no longer disobedience, but obedience).

Within each of these two larger episodes one can further distinguish two scenes. In the first episode, these are 1:1-16 (Jonah on his way to Tarshish and the storm at sea) and 1:17-2:10 (Jonah praying in the belly of the fish). The second episode has two comparable scenes, namely 3:1-10 (Jonah preaches in Nineveh and God pardons Nineveh) and 4:1-11 (God talks to Jonah about his anger after mercy is shown to Nineveh).

The hypothesis that Jonah was a staunch Jewish nationalist who did not want to go to Nineveh because he knew that God would offer grace to the hated Ninevites as well, leads to interesting results for the analysis of the narrative plot. The story line of the narrative can be represented by the following diagram:
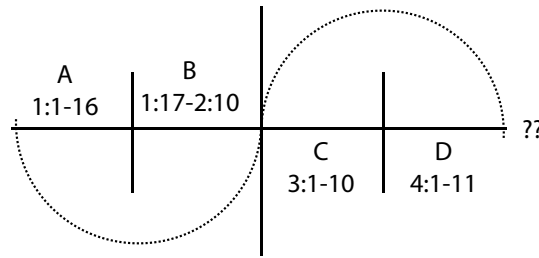
⚙ Quadrant A: 1:1-16

In this section the "descent" theme features very prominently. Jonah descends to Joppa, descends into the ship, descends into the hold of the ship and lies down to sleep, is thrown overboard and descends into the depths of the sea (associated with the realm of death). It is possible to argue that the repetition of the Hebrew word "go down, descend" is purely coincidental and simply indicates physical actions. Yet many interpreters have seen this repetition as a technique to suggest a spiritual dimension. This suspicion is strengthened by the contrast between Jonah's relationship with the true God and the sailors' relationship with their gods. Jonah confesses that he is a Hebrew who worships the true God - the God who is in control of heaven and earth, of the sea and the dry land - but he himself admits that he is fleeing from this God. In the end the sailors are the ones to pray to the true God, to offer a sacrifice and to make vows.

⚙ Quadrant B: 1:17-2:10

In this section the "descent" theme is continued at first when Jonah is swallowed by the fish. Indeed, in the first part of Jonah's prayer he emphasizes that he has descended to the very foundations of the earth, to the realm of death itself. The second part of the prayer, however, brings about a reversal. It is now Jonah's prayer that reached God in the holy temple; he is the one who sings a song of praise, offers a sacrifice, and makes a vow to Yahweh. The end of the scene continues this "upswing" - the fish spews Jonah out onto the dry land. (This is by no means the only possible interpretation of Jonah's prayer. Some are of the opinion that it is a selfish prayer that indicates no change of heart. In the interest of the model, we follow the previous interpretation here.)

⚙ Quadrant C: 3:1-3:10

The new episode starts with a continuation of the "upswing": Jonah obeys God in that he departs for Nineveh. Jonah's sermon, which takes up only a few words, announces judgement and the destruction of the pagans. This short sermon, however, brings about a great reaction. The king even issues a decree to encourage his subjects to conversion and repentance to the true God. On the basis of the Ninevites' repentance, God decides against the disaster that was in store for them (which formed the content of Jonah's sermon!).

⚙ Quadrant D: 4:1-11

This scene brings a return of the "descent" theme. Jonah's reaction to Yahweh's gracious sparing of Nineveh (4:2) makes it clear that his nationalistic concept of God leaves no room for grace shown to pagans. This reproach of Jonah's casts him into a deep emotional and spiritual crisis. The "downward" movement ends, while Jonah disappears like a phantom. The narrative does not pander to the reader's curiosity by saying what happened to Jonah.

This description of the story line in the Jonah narrative can be further correlated with the finer distinctions between the moments of the plot often found in the theoretical literature. The story begins with the inciting events, namely Yahweh's commission to Jonah (1:1-2). Initially the events follow a negative course (1:3-16), but then a positive reversal takes place (1:17-2:10). This change of course is followed by a real turning point in the narrative, namely that the disobedient Jonah now becomes obedient (3:1-4). The climax of the narrative is reached when Nineveh repents and Yahweh shows them mercy (3:5-10). This is followed by descending action in that the climax of God's grace is negatively evaluated by Jonah (4:1-8). The denouement takes place when Yahweh, in rebuking Jonah, places Yahweh's grace in perspective (4:9-11). The narrative lacks a conclusion.

Clearly this story line intends to bring about certain changes in knowledge in the implied reader. There is progression, especially with regard to who, and how, God really is. The implied reader's image of God changes from one of a God whose deeds are manifest in destructive fire, thunder or lightning, wind or storm to one of a God who is gracious, a God who has sympathy with all nations (and even with the cattle of Nineveh), a God who accepts their repentance lovingly. Such a message would have been highly relevant to an audience of staunch Jewish nationalists who wanted to claim God for Israel alone.

(b) Characterization

The main characters in the narrative are Yahweh and Jonah. One would be justified in calling both of them "round" or "fully fledged" characters. Jonah undergoes dramatic development in the course of the narrative, but ultimately ends up as a pathetic figure once more. Jonah is characterized mainly by means of the dialogues in which he engages and his internal conversation (the prayer of 2:1-10). In both the dialogues and the action, Jonah is contrasted with the other characters - the sailors and the Ninevites.

God is characterized mainly by means of the contrast between Jonah's view of God and the way in which God is revealed to the Ninevites. This contrast also represents the change in information that the narrative intends to bring about in the implied reader.

The pagans (the sailors and the Ninevites) complete the classic pattern of three main characters. As individual characters, however, they play less important roles than the other main characters. These characters are introduced mainly in the interest of the story line, but also in the interest of the characterization of the main characters.

The actant model for the classification of characters can be utilized productively for the analysis of the Jonah narrative. It is, however, striking that the characters in this narrative often fill several roles simultaneously, or change roles in the course of the narrative. Yahweh, for instance, is both sender and subject. The sailors, originally opponents, first become helpers and finally recipients. Jonah is an opponent, but also becomes a helper (partially at least). The diagram of the actant model above can be expanded as follows to describe the roles of the characters:

Yahweh's purpose
to be recognised
as a sovereign God

(Sailors)
(Ninevites)
Jonah

Yahweh

sender → object → recipient
↑
helper → subject ← opponent

Sailors
(Jonah)

Yahweh
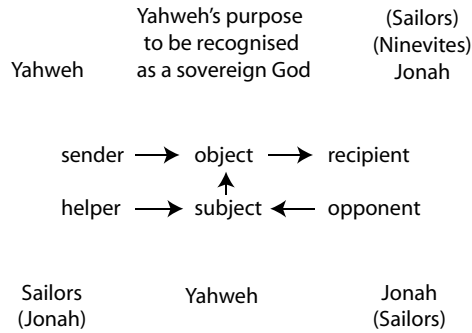
Jonah
(Sailors)

This description makes it clear that there is actually a reversal of social roles in the book of Jonah. The sailors (pagans and foreigners) act, contrary to all expectations, as helpers of Yahweh; that is, they further Yahweh's purpose. Jonah (a prophet), however, does not act as a helper but, contrary to expectations, as an opponent of Yahweh.

Although the terms "antagonist" and "protagonist" are not used in the actant model, it would be correct to say that in this story Jonah acts primarily as antagonist, while Yahweh represents the protagonist of the narrative.

(c) The role of the narrator and changes in point of view

The narrator of the Jonah narrative plays an important role in deciding what information will be available to the reader at what stage of the narration. In fact, certain transitions are made by withholding certain information. For instance, after Jonah has received Yahweh's commission for the first time, nothing is said of his internal struggle about it. All that is said is that he prepared to flee to Tarshish. Only at a later stage (when questioned by the sailors) does he admit that he is fleeing from the living God. A further example is the transition between Jonah's sojourn in the fish and the second commission by Yahweh. Surely Jonah would have had to enquire about his whereabouts before he would have been able to plan his journey to Nineveh? Yet all we read is that he prepared and went to Nineveh. Thus the narrator presents both Jonah's original disobedience and his later obedience to the reader without wasting words.

The narrator also controls the "camera eye" through which the scenes are presented. By manipulating scenes in this way, the narrator creates certain contrasts. One moment the narrator focuses on the great storm and the panic-stricken sailors calling out "each to his god"; the next we get a close-up of the prophet Jonah asleep in the hold of the ship.

For the most part the story is told from the point of view of the narrator. At three crucial points, however, the focus shifts to the point of view of specific characters. These points are marked by the three prayers in the narrative. In 1:14 the sailors' inner feelings are revealed in the words of their prayer. This prayer contains, somewhat ironically, a confession of Yahweh's freedom to decide what is best and to act accordingly. The perspective of Jonah's inner experience dominates chapter 2 (Jonah's prayer in the fish). Note that the omniscient narrator knows what Jonah said even inside the fish. Jonah's prayer in 4:2-3 is also given from Jonah's point of view. This point of view contrasts with the one reflected in chapter 2.

The narrator allows the narrative to end abruptly in chapter 4. Once again, certain information is withheld: the reader does not find out what became of Jonah or how his knowledge of God

changed. The narrator lets the narrative end in direct speech, Yahweh being the speaker. The reader is spurred on to serious reflection. God remains free to show care and mercy at will to any person or persons. In this way the purpose of the narrative (see the "object" in the actant model above) is finally brought to the centre of the reader's attention.

(d) Time and changes in tempo

The tempo of the Jonah narrative is frequently accelerated or decelerated. Acceleration is achieved mainly by making the narrative time shorter than the narrated time. Jonah's journeys to Joppa and Nineveh are very briefly mentioned. Only the barest minimum of information is given. Similarly, the storm at sea and the conversion of Nineveh are described without going into much detail. The acceleration of tempo creates a dramatic effect.

Occasionally, however, the tempo is decelerated. This is achieved mainly through dialogue. There are long dialogues involving Jonah and the ship's captain or sailors and between Jonah and Yahweh. In one case Jonah engages in a monologue (the prayer of 2:1-10).

The purpose of these decelerations of the tempo, even stoppages in the flow, is to emphasize what is really important from the point of view of the narrator. The dialogues that have this delaying effect play an important role in characterizing Jonah (see the discussion above), but serve also to bring about the change in the knowledge of God to which the reader is led. The emphasis falls on who God is, how God acts towards people and how different people react to God's actions.

(e) Other elements of style

Certain other elements of style contribute to the strengthening of the effect of the narrative. A few of these are discussed below.

❀ Hyperbole

Though adjectives are most sparingly used in biblical Hebrew, nearly everything in the Jonah narrative is called "great": the great city of Nineveh, a great wind, a great storm, a great fear on the part of the sailors, a great fish, an enormously great city (in the Hebrew it says that it was a great city "for God" or "by God's standards"), a great reaction on the part of the Ninevites, a great anger on the part of Jonah, followed by a great joy about the miraculous plant. Some interpreters believe that this excessive emphasis on greatness should contribute to making the reader realize that this is a story, a type of parable, and not a true historical account.

In contrast to this, Jonah appears small and small-minded. This aspect is emphasized in the scene in which Jonah sits under the plant. The Hebrew word for this plant, variously translated as "gourd" or "castor-oil plant", is probably a diminutive. After Yahweh had reacted by showing great mercy to the Ninevites, Jonah sits nursing his little grudge under his little plant.

❀ Irony

Ironic representations abound in the Jonah narrative. These representations make it possible to obtain more information about the characters, especially Jonah, by means of comparisons and contrasts. Irony is also used to reverse some of the conventions of biblical narratives. The reader expects that a prophet would normally react to a command of Yahweh's with obedience. In this case, when Yahweh commands Jonah to get up and go, Jonah gets up and goes - in the opposite direction! This irony is further expressed by means of several contrasts in the narrative.

During the storm an ironic situation prevails on the ship: the sailors all pray to their various gods while Jonah lies asleep in the hold. Here, instead of a situation in which the prophet prays to Yahweh, we find heathen sailors at prayer. Later in chapter 1, the sailors are the ones who confess that Yahweh is free to act at will, while the prophet opposes this freedom of will by fleeing to Tarshish. Jonah prefers even to be cast overboard rather than to pray to Yahweh that the storm might be stilled. It is not Jonah, the prophet of Yahweh, who takes the religious initiative; instead the captain of the ship has to plead with Jonah to pray to his god that the storm might be stilled. Jonah makes no effort to save the sailors; instead they try to save him. They plead with Yahweh not to let them kill an innocent man. Finally, at his own request, they do cast Jonah overboard and the sea becomes calm. Thus pagans receive confirmation that it is indeed the prophet of Yahweh who is the guilty party.

The last chapter is marked by Jonah's impatience with Nineveh. He cannot understand how God can show mercy to the city instead of destroying it. In stark contrast to Jonah's impatience, God's patience with Nineveh is emphasized. Jonah asks Yahweh to let him die rather than face shame. God's answer is to provide the shade of a plant. To give one more indication of God's freedom, God sends a worm to gnaw at the plant the following morning, so that it withers. Once more Jonah reacts with impatience and anger. Yahweh responds with the question of whether Yahweh is not free to care for Nineveh. This question remains in the air, since the narrative ends here.

The ironic contrast between Jonah and the sailors, and Jonah and God, leads the reader to discover the theme of the narrative, namely God's freedom to show mercy to pagans as well.

5.4.3 Observations and evaluation

❁ Since a large portion of the Bible (especially of the Old Testament) consists of narrative texts, the flowering of the narrative approach has had positive results for its interpretation. This approach takes the literary character of these texts seriously and tries to do justice to it in the interpretation. In the case of Jonah, it also implies the possibility of appreciating the outstanding narrative qualities of this book.

❁ Although modern literary theories can be utilized to good effect, it is worth remembering that the Bible comprises ancient texts that often followed different literary conventions. Modern theories must therefore be adapted to accommodate the unique character of these texts. It would be a mistake to "impose" any modern theory on these ancient texts without further investigation.

❁ When a narrative approach is employed, the presupposition is that the world of the text is not necessarily the world of physical reality. A narrative creates its own reality. This means that the content of narratives is not necessarily regarded as historical or factual. This does not in any way negate the religious dimension of the narratives. The spiritual value is not bound up with the factual correctness or historical accuracy of the narrative, but with the testimony of faith in God that they embody. In practice this means that it does not really matter whether Jonah existed or whether there were really fish so big that they could swallow people whole. The spiritual appeal depends on what the narrative wishes to achieve with regard to the implied reader, namely a testimony of faith in the freedom of God to show grace beyond the limits of Israel, even to Nineveh. Narrative approaches help us not to pose the wrong questions to the narrative genre - something that often happens when the interpreter insists on identifying the spiritual value of the biblical text with its historical accuracy.

❀ In some narrative studies of the Bible the primary interest is the literary qualities of the texts, without incorporating the theological dimension into the analysis. When doing a narrative analysis on biblical texts, one should constantly remember that these stories were told and written down in ancient times with a theological intention in mind. This implies that one should be aware of the rhetorical effect of these narratives in their contexts of origin and transmission, and they should be interpreted accordingly. Narratives are sometimes one of the best literary forms to express faith convictions, and to convey these convictions to next generations.

CHAPTER 6

Approaches focusing on the reception of texts

6.1 Introduction

In the previous section we saw how and why interpreters turned away from studies of the production of the text to the text itself. In the last decades of the previous century, the debate on interpretation began focusing on the *reception* of texts by different *readers*. The role of the reader in the *production* of meaning became the centre of interest.

6.1.1 Criticism of previous approaches

Previous approaches tended to disregard readers and their (different) contexts. Historical-critical approaches focused on the *origin* of a text and text-immanent approaches on the relationships among elements *in the text itself*. In both cases the reader is merely the one who *receives* what is already objectively "there". The interpretation of a text might then be compared to opening a parcel to reveal its content. The great danger is precisely that careless handling will damage the content, that is, that the ideas, interests and emotions of the reader will get in the way of "correct" interpretation. Although interpretation requires much effort and skill, it does not *create* meaning. Against this view, various objections were now raised:

❖ Different readers do not agree about the meaning of a text in the way that different mathematicians agree about the correct answer to a sum. Somehow "the meaning of the text" is not something one can calculate according to a set procedure. When two learned and clever scholars give different interpretations of the same text, there is no clear way of testing who is right. Instead, one often feels that both are saying something important, although neither has managed to say everything that can be said. If the meaning of a text were a *fact* that one could discover, one would expect consensus about it, but this is not what one finds in practice. Even those who use the same approach reach different conclusions.

❖ The lack of consensus could be explained as something temporary. We are still slowly moving towards the correct and full interpretation of each individual text, but one day we shall get there. This argument, however, does not ring true. The Bible, for instance, has been interpreted for many centuries. It does not look as if this long history of interpretation has brought us closer and closer to a final answer. Instead, new meanings have time and again been discovered in the biblical text. If we examine this process, we see that each era has looked at the Bible from a different angle, often using the methods and ideas that were popular at that time. Although the text has not changed, people at different times have interpreted and applied the text differently. It would seem that the interpretation of the Bible is deeply influenced by the context within which it is read. (The same can obviously be said about other old texts).

❖ Previous approaches had tried to base interpretation on objective and certain facts. It was felt that historical studies or a study of the text itself could provide such facts. But is this true? After all, any historical reconstruction is itself an interpretation; therefore different historians hold different views on historical events. And texts, though they seem to provide a fixed starting point, do not contain all the information we need to understand them. What sense can I make of a note written by someone I do not know to someone else I do not know, unless I know in what context it was written? To understand any text, I need to construct a context

in which it makes sense. To do so, I have to draw on my own world of experience and not only on the words in the text.

❀ Those who concentrated on the text itself could argue that they dealt only with clear facts, with what is "in the text for all to read". Still, not all meaningful aspects of texts are "present in the text" in an unambiguous way. Consider the case of humour. If something in a text is funny, a complete and accurate interpretation should certainly render an account of it. But in what sense is "something funny" present in the text? A passage is not marked "funny", nor does the text say "laugh here". The humour I find in the text depends on my response to what is in the text. I may even miss the humour because my culture has not taught me to regard what is described in the text as funny, *on* because I personally lack a sense of humour. Thus it seems that I can identify humour in a text only by introducing something of myself (my cultural training and my personality) into the reading process. In the same way tension, irony and opposition are not simply "in the text"; they depend on the perception of the reader.

6.1.2 The active, creative reader

These objections to previous approaches led many to the conclusion that the role of the reader in interpretation had been misunderstood. The reader cannot be regarded as a tape-recorder with a blank tape that simply records the meanings that come to him from the text or from historical studies. Such a view turns the reader into a passive "receiver" of a "message". The new view was that reading is an *interaction* in which the reader is far from passive. *The reader does not merely discover meaning, but plays an active part in the creation of meaning*. Texts do not "have" fixed meanings that simply need to be "unwrapped". Instead, meaning arises in the interaction between texts and readers who deal creatively with the texts.

This led to a new interest in the reading process, which had previously been seen as largely unproblematic. Now scholars started asking what actually happens when one reads. Most people would agree that reading can be hard work. What sort of work does a reader do? What are the mental processes involved? What skills and competencies are involved? Are some people better readers than others and, if so, why? How can one improve one's reading skills? Such questions are frequently asked in cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, but they are also discussed among literary critics and literary theorists.

At the same time there has been a new appreciation of the creativity of readers. Authors were always praised for creativity and originality, but readers were expected to *reproduce* the meanings of texts precisely. The new emphasis on the reception of texts has led to a blurring of the distinction between the author's creative work and the reader's reproductive work. Consider the following example: You hear a good sermon on a well-known biblical passage and say: "Now I understand the passage for the first time". The sermon, which is really the minister's interpretation of the text, has suddenly brought to life a text that you have known for years. The sermon is *about* the text, but the sermon is not simply the text. It is a piece of creative work in its own right. The Bible and other classic texts continue to influence people over many centuries partly because readers continue to read them in new, creative ways.

6.1.3 Reading from within a context

Readers do not, however, read as isolated individuals. The very fact that one has to know the language in which a text was written to read it shows that reading has a social dimension. One cannot make sense of a text written in a language one does not know. Actually, a reader needs far more than a bare knowledge of the language. Many aspects of the reader's context play a role:

cultural and religious values and beliefs, social conventions and customs, the reader's experience of interaction with other people, and so on. Thus the individual reader draws on a whole world of knowledge and experience when she or he reads. The specific context of the reader provides the *horizon of understanding* that enables the reader to make sense of the text.

When readers were seen as passive "reading machines", the differing contexts of readers could be ignored. If, however, readers actively construct meaning and use their contexts to do so, then it matters greatly what the context of a particular reader is. Since readers' contexts differ, we may expect a variety of interpretations and, as we have seen, this is precisely what we get in practice. That there has been some degree of consensus among *academic* readers of texts should not fool us. Academic readers of the Bible were, up to recently, nearly always middle class, white males who shared a similar educational background. In short, these readers could be expected to have very similar perspectives on texts because they all read from a (largely) shared context. But what if the same texts were to be read by women, by members of the working class or by blacks? The turn to the world in front of the text brought a new interest in the role that the different contexts of readers play in the reading process. Academic reading was no longer seen as the sole standard.

This led to a number of studies in "contextual reading". Some examine the influence of different *historical* contexts. How was the Bible (for instance) read during various eras? How was it read by people facing specific historical challenges (for instance, under apartheid)? Other studies examine the role of different *social* contexts. How would women, blacks, gays or workers read a specific text? What role does social class play in reading? How does a group's experience of oppression affect reading?

6.1.4 Implications

The view that readers play an active role in the creation of meaning has the following implications:

⚙ The view that the reader is able to ascertain (make *certain* of) the meaning of a text in an objective or neutral way can no longer be held. The claim that the meaning of texts can in any way (by a "close reading" of the text itself, for instance) be accurately determined makes no sense if reading is seen as a creative process. Since the reader actively *makes* sense of a text (and does not merely *find* sense in it), the distinction between the "meaning-for-the-reader" and the objective "meaning-of-the-text-in-itself" cannot be maintained. As we have seen, it is to be expected that different readers who look at texts from different perspectives will reach different conclusions.

⚙ Because readers create meaning with the use of tools they find in their different contexts, there will always be a plurality of interpretations of a specific text. The ideal of finding one single, final interpretation is abandoned. Indeed, differing views can be accepted as both inevitable and, in some respects, enriching. In particular, the formal, academic way of reading is no longer held up as the sole standard.

⚙ If one recognizes that the reader is a person of flesh and blood, it follows that "meaning" cannot be understood in purely cognitive terms, that is, as something concerning ideas or thoughts only. Meaning invariably also includes the *effect* or practical influence of the text on the reader. In the turn to the world in front of the text the emphasis falls on the use of language as an *effect*ive act and on interpretation as a trans*action* in which all the parties are actively involved. Certainly, language can be used effectively to carry information or thoughts, but it can also be used to call people to action, to stir their feelings or to stimulate reflection.

"Meaning" is thus defined more broadly to include the emotional and volitional (of the will) aspects.

In the following sections we shall look more closely at: Approaches that focus on the role of the reader (6.2), Rhetorical criticism (6.3) and Deconstruction (6.4). The following group of approaches should also be noted:

6.1.5 Contextual approaches

In a sense all interpretation of the Bible is contextual. It is the attempt to discover the meaning of the Bible from within a context and for a particular context. Contextual approaches, however, entail a deliberate attempt to take people's concrete experiences and problems in a specific context as the point of departure for the interpretation of the Bible. Contextual approaches focus on the influence a specific world of experience has on the interpretation. The claim that certain interpretations have universal validity is rejected.

The latter claim is especially typical of the academic world and is connected to the view that "true knowledge" is objective and generally valid. As opposed to this, contextual approaches emphasize both that the academic world itself reads texts with contextual spectacles and that the academic world represents a highly restricted context. People from quite different contexts who have had different experiences also read texts and find meaning in them. They use their own world of experience to make sense of the texts and the texts to make sense of their world. Contextual approaches specifically want to bring to attention those interpretations often dismissed as "unscientific" in academic circles. After all, these interpretations show how the majority of people, those with little or no academic training, deal with texts.

In the field of biblical interpretation there are a number of people who want to read the Bible through the spectacles of specific groups, each with its own experience of oppression and marginalization. The specific context of the interpretation depends on the group in question - victims of classism, racism, cultural imperialism and the like.

Liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology and African theology, for instance, have each developed their own hermeneutics, so as to interpret the Bible from within a context and for the relevant context. In all these cases the positive evaluation of interpretations from within the group's own experience and context is accompanied by a distrust of the dominant interpretations in the society. The latter are seen as ideological distortions that serve to maintain the status quo. Such contextual approaches are thus closely related to the ideological criticism that is discussed in Chapter 7.

6.2 The role of the reader

6.2.1 Background and theory

We have seen that some approaches regarded the reading process as relatively unproblematic: a reader registers the properties of the text mechanically, much as a tape recorder records sounds. Should the meaning carried by the text not be clear immediately, further analysis, either of the text itself or of the world behind the text, can bring clarity. Such analyses are comparable to techniques to turn the volume up on the tape recorder or to remove mechanical distortions from the tape. In both cases the techniques serve solely to allow for better, clearer reproduction of what is already fixed on the tape. Obviously the best readers would be those able to record and reproduce the meanings of the text without a hint of distortion.

Scholars who have, over the past few decades, challenged this view demanded that the creative role of the reader be recognized. To grasp their point, we need only look at what happens when one reads an extremely simple text, say the four letters "S T O P" that appear on the ubiquitous traffic sign. One would say that this text should be clear to all people with an elementary knowledge of English or Afrikaans. We seem to know at a glance what "stop" means.

Indeed? Is the single word a noun (punctuation mark, hole on a musical instrument) or a verb (to fill up, to stay over)? The text itself does not indicate that it is a verb in the imperative. Even when this is read into the text, one can hardly say one has grasped the meaning of the text. After all, the command applies to motorists, not to pedestrians. In addition, the motorist should be aware that the text requires her to bring the car to a halt, not to stop talking. Nor does the motorist bring the car to a stop immediately, but at the "right place", a place not indicated by the text at all. If, on the next day, the same text should lie flat on the pavement, the motorist would not attach the same meaning to it. The same text is now a different text.

From this example one learns the following:

- The text of the stop sign has the meaning conventionally associated with it only if somebody reads that particular meaning into it. What is "in the text itself", before it is read, is much too vague and ambiguous to be called "meaning".

- The reader must introduce meanings from her world, the world-in-front-of-the-text, in order to *make* sense of the text. A truly objective reader who simply registers properties of texts on a blank tape (not that this is possible) would not be able to find any meaning in the text of the stop sign.

- What the reader needs is far more than a knowledge of the particular language (the type of knowledge found in dictionaries and grammars). Rather, it is a knowledge of language usage, a familiarity with the functioning of sign systems.

- The "meaning" at stake here is not a "content", something stored in a "meaning bank", that a reader may discover or acquire. It is more like an event. The sign warns or commands the reader to react in a certain way. The reader "understands" the meaning only if she knows how to *handle* the text of the stop sign, how to fit it into the practice of driving a car

- The example tacitly reminds us that reading is a process that takes time. Had the stop sign contained a long list of instructions, a motorist would have been unable to read them in the available time.

It is possible to argue that the example of the stop sign provides a slanted view. Is it not by chance that the word "STOP" is ambiguous? And is it not on account of the contingent demands of road traffic that traffic signs employ brief, incomplete texts?

Modern linguistic studies indicate that these objections cannot be sustained:

- Firstly, modern linguistics has shown that *polysemy* (multiple meanings) is not a property of some words only; it is inherent in language as such. Therefore linguistic expressions can in principle never be univocal and unambiguous. There are always more possibilities than you can pin down in a single "meaning".

- Secondly, sign systems always function in a limited way. They serve to represent what is *not* present. There can be no question of completeness in a set of signs. The single word "stop" does not direct the reader to a clear, univocal meaning, but a longer, "more complete" text would not solve the problem. On the contrary, the proliferation of signs would tend to create a new set of gaps for the reader to bridge. To read is therefore not to fit the pieces of a jigsaw

puzzle, cut from one block, back into place to "restore" the original picture. The reader who wants to gain a complete picture from reading a text can manage this only by fabricating some of the missing pieces herself. The complete picture gained in reading a text is partly a creative construction of the reader. It is not, as it were, *there* in the text. In this respect a text always contains *less* than the meaning the reader finds in it.

Texts are not treasure chests from which readers can extract ready-made meanings. Evidently the reader plays a vital role in the process of interpretation. What exactly this role entails is not, however, equally clear.

Often the term "reader-response criticism" is used as a blanket term for all the diverse approaches in which the role of the reader is taken seriously. This includes approaches such as the following:

❀ Stanley Fish's affective stylistics

❀ Norman Holland's transactive criticism

❀ David Bleich's subjective criticism and

❀ the reception aesthetics of the Constance School (especially Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser)

There is, however, no uniform theoretical framework adopted by the proponents of all these approaches. The differences between the various approaches often depend on more or less suitable models or metaphors employed to explain the reading process. It is not possible to deal with each of the various approaches in detail here. What follows outlines certain general implications of approaches that emphasize the creative role of the reader, and indicates some important issues in the debate.

(a) The reader and the critic: two perspectives

These approaches often distinguish between the perspective of the reader and that of the critic. Critics are like spectators who discuss a game of football that they have just seen. Readers are like players who are involved in the game themselves. The critic looks from the outside at a complete whole (a text); the reader finds herself engaged in *making* (creating) the text. At any given moment, a reader has to struggle to make sense of this sentence or this word. The text as a whole cannot yet be seen. While the critic reflects (thinks back), the reader looks forward, trying to find a path through the text. Although the two perspectives cannot be separated completely, the distinction has proved useful.

At first glance it would seem that the critic is in the better position, because the critic can, as it were, "see everything". The critic no longer has to battle to put together the various bits (words, phrases, sentences) in order to make sense of them, but can calmly analyze the relationships between the various parts of the text that are already "there". The problem is that the critic can easily forget how he or she had to struggle as a reader. After all, the critic has a text to reflect on only because he or she has gone through the process of reading. In the case of sport, the players and the spectators are two different groups of people. In the case of interpretation, the critic is the same person who had previously been a reader of the text. Nobody can interpret a text as a critic without first having read it.

At the stage of reading, one often has to make difficult decisions. To be sure, the word "bat" is there on the page, but the reader has to decide that in this context it means a cricket bat and not a flying mammal. To read is always (at least to some extent) to put together a text by attaching meaning and coherence to the individual parts. When one returns to the text as a critic, the analysis (taking apart) one gives will depend on how one put the text together in the first place.

Put more simply, what the critic "finds" in the text is often simply what this same person put there as a reader. Thus the *exegesis* (taking from the text) of the critic is at least partly based on the *eisegesis* (putting into the text) of the reader.

This means that no critical interpretation is ever fully objective. Unless I first face the difficulties of the reading process, I cannot step back to regard the text from the perspective of the critic. As we saw previously, the perfectly objective, passive reader would not make any sense of a text. It is precisely what readers put into the reading process that makes reading meaningful. Of course one does not read *completely* subjectively, that is, as an isolated individual with nothing but one's own thoughts as a guide. Even as a reader one sometimes takes a step back to look critically at one's own reading. Perhaps the first idea that pops up in one's mind does not provide satisfactory sense, forcing one to examine other possibilities. In this way the perspectives of reader and critic interact in the practice of interpretation.

(b) The reader's context

One cannot read, we said, without using the resources one finds in one's context. What are these resources? What exactly do readers bring to the reading process? Among the divergent opinions three groups may be distinguished:

⚙ Some theorists emphasize the free, creative subjectivity of the reader. Readers use their imagination to call up possibilities that would give the text a degree of coherence and sense.

Wolfgang Iser's view is typical of this line of thought. He believes that reading involves an interaction between text and reader. The text in itself does not "have" a meaning, yet it does contain certain fixed points. One cannot, for instance, arrive at the meaning of a text by simply adding up the already-known and fixed meanings of the individual words, because each word can have many meanings and can gain new ones in a specific context. But the reader cannot simply ignore the words (or some of them) either. The words present a challenge to the reader: How can the words be understood in such a way that they hang together and provide sense? Which of the possible meanings for each word would be required? The reader has to test the various possibilities in her imagination until she finds a satisfactory "picture" of the text as a whole. It is only at that stage that the text becomes a living reality or, as Iser puts it, is *realized.* Though Iser does not deny that readers are influenced by historical and social factors, the reader's inherent ability to create possibilities imaginatively is central to his view. But reading is not a one-way process in which the reader gives meaning to the text according to set patterns. The reader also learns and grows in the process of meeting the challenges posed by the text. Iser's theory thus emphasizes the freedom and creative potential that all human beings share.

⚙ Other theorists emphasize the psychic structure and dynamics of the reader, employing various psychoanalytical theories about the psyche. According to these theories, the reader is not a free subject, but one formed by the interaction between many factors and processes in the human psyche and by the individual's experiences as a child. The individual reader would, for example, approach a text with particular repressed contents in the unconscious and with particular techniques developed by the person for coping with (or manipulating) reality.

Norman Holland, for instance, uses the term "identity theme" to indicate a constellation of defence mechanisms, expectations, fantasies and transformation patterns that develop in a unique and lasting way in each individual. Such an identity theme determines how a specific reader would approach a text. The reader may exclude certain possible meanings (defence) or satisfy certain expectations, imaginatively creating sense (fantasy), and, finally, make a

meaningful whole out of the text that is meaningless in itself (transformation). According to Holland, interpretation is a function of *identity*: each person interprets according to her or his identity theme. Holland's theory thus emphasizes the way in which readers are shaped by factors in their personal lives.

⚜ Still other theorists emphasize the way in which the individual reader is formed by social factors and therefore carries certain communally determined frameworks and strategies into the reading process. The motorist who reads the stop sign *effectively*, does so because in her society such signs are *conventionally* read in this way. One can say that the conventions of the community operate through the individual.

In this regard Jauss talks about the reader's *horizon of expectation* - the particular culturally, socially and historically determined frame within which a reader makes sense of a text. Such an horizon provides the available possibilities for meaningful reading. Since one's horizon of expectation codetermines *what* is read (that is, what meaning is assigned to a text), readers with different horizons of expectation (for instance, in different historical periods) would read the same text "differently".

In his later work Fish goes even further. According to him, the reader actually *writes* the text, following certain conventional strategies of interpretation that he acquired as a member of an *interpretive community*. The text in itself contains *no* clear indicators that force the reader in a particular direction. Nonetheless, reading is not the free creation of meaning, nor is it the product of individual identity, for the reader is, after all, formed as reader by the interpretive community to which she belongs. Fish's theory thus emphasizes the way in which individual readers are shaped by communal forces and conventions.

Who is right? Probably there is some truth in each of these views. In fact, these views are not mutually exclusive. The context of the reader has many aspects. General human potential is one factor, personal history another and the conventions of a social group still another.

(c) Meaning as event in time

New Criticism warned people against the "affective fallacy", the tendency to confuse the meaning of the text with the effect the text has on the reader. Critics who emphasize the role of the reader, on the other hand, are inclined to say that the meaning of the text *is* the effect it has on the reader. Meaning *happens* when one reads and is closely related to the effect, experience or response associated with reading.

Iser distinguishes between the *text*, which has no meaning in itself, and the *literary work,* which comes into being as something meaningful only in the reading process. Other theorists avoid the word "meaning" altogether, preferring to talk about the "reading experience" or the effect of the reading process. Those who wish to maintain a clear distinction between the effect the text has on the reader and the meaning of the text in itself, have to adopt the perspective of the critic (see a above). But, as we have seen, critics need to remember that any meaning one ascribes to the text can only be something one had previously acquired as a reader interacting with the text. The "meaning of the text" is not something to which one has independent access, access that *bypasses* the reading process. The critic's analysis is at best a *reflection* on a prior reading experience. Thus the critic too reports on the effects and events that occurred when a text was read.

If one sees meaning as a stable "content" that is "transmitted" through language, it is possible to distinguish between an objective meaning "in the text" and a subjective response "in the reader". The former is then the true, pure intention of the text and the latter a contingent side effect. But if one recognizes the active role of the reader in creating meaning, the distinction becomes

problematic. It looks as if the statement "This text is about growing up" describes the text itself, whereas the statement "This text inspires me" merely says something about my reaction as a reader. A closer look shows that the first statement, which identifies the theme of the text, also reports a reaction of the reader: "This is what struck me as the central point of the text". Another reader may identify a different theme. At the same time, the second statement definitely reports a response *to the text.* It does not say that I happened to feel inspired when I read the text, but claims that the text did something to me. Surely what a text *does* has to be part of its meaning.

The idea that meaning is an event or activity is not as strange as it would appear. The very form of the word "meaning" suggests an activity (compare "running", "talking", "meeting"). If I possess a book, I do not yet possess its meaning; it becomes meaningful only when I read it. And when I say that I found the book meaningful, I do not always mean that it gave me new information. Perhaps it made me see things I already knew in a different way. The attempt to separate meaning from activity and the effects of activity turns meaning into something abstract. The perspective on meaning as event is largely shared by rhetorical criticism, an approach that also emphasizes the active, eventful nature of language usage (see 6.3).

When meaning is seen as a stable content, the meaning of a text can be represented by means of *spatial models*. A type of diagram or chart can be used both to show the structural connections between the various elements of meaning (compare 5.3 on Structuralism) and to provide a synoptic view of the text as a unit. Such an approach is typical of a focus on the world of the text. New Criticism, as we saw, thought of texts as pictures in words. The main task of literary criticism is to describe the relationships between the elements that make up the picture. In the same way structuralists like to use diagrams to represent their findings.

If meaning is seen as an event, however, the passing of time becomes central and *temporal models* are more suitable. The reader (as opposed to the critic who looks back on a completed process) is never dealing with the whole of the text at once. What is loosely called the event of reading is really a series of events following one another in rapid succession.

In his earlier work Fish developed a method to make readers aware of this series of events, events that normally flit by so rapidly that readers are not aware of them as distinct moments in the reading process. It simply amounts to this: you repeatedly halt your own reading process to ask: "What is the effect of this sentence or word on the reader?" By reading thus, in slow motion as it were, the reader becomes aware that reading is not simply the registering of blocks of fixed meaning. It is, rather, a movement that takes place step by step and from moment to moment. What moves in this reading process is not the text; it is the reader herself. The reader's ideas, feelings and expectations change from moment to moment.

When this movement through the text is pictured as a journey, the possibilities and limitations of this view become clearer.

When people go somewhere for a holiday, the journey from home to the destination is merely a means to an end. The destination is all that matters. You can, however, also undertake a journey as a holiday. In this case the journey itself is the goal and "meaning" of the holiday. Similarly, the meaning we seek when we read may lie the reading process itself, in the "journey through the text". The implication is that you do not grasp the text's meaning *after* you have read it, as if the meaning were the final destination. Brief summaries of the meaning of classical texts (such as the Bible) usually sound fairly dull and do not reveal why these texts are highly rated. After the journey, a chart of the route or the souvenirs one brings back hardly tell the full story of the journey. What matters is the experience one gains during the time of travel.

This emphasis on the temporal aspect of reading leads to an approach that shows little interest in any ultimate conclusions about the meaning of the text. The aim is rather to produce more sensitive readers, readers able to benefit more from their own reading experiences.

(d) Iser's model of reading

Wolfgang Iser tried to describe the reading process itself. Like Fish, he pays attention to the temporal aspect: one reads step by step and one's view changes from moment to moment. This does not imply that, at a given moment, the reader is dealing *only* with "this sentence" or "this word". Because the reader is trying to join the various parts in order to get to a meaningful whole, he is always *looking back* and *looking ahead*. He reads "this sentence" in the light of previous sentences and forms expectations about what is to follow on the basis of "this sentence". At the same time a reader often has to revise a previous opinion in the light of "this sentence", leading to a new understanding of previous sentences. The reader's expectations are also constantly being adjusted. In brief, the reader is constantly orientating and reorientating herself, constantly assigning and reassigning meaning in the process. Wolfgang Iser, who places great emphasis on these aspects of *anticipation* and *retrospection,* puts it as follows:

> Every sentence contains a preview of the next and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come; and this in turn changes the "preview" and so becomes the "viewfinder" for what has been read. (In: Suleiman & Crosman, 1980:54)

This movement of the reader through the text is not without problems, for the text as such does not supply all the "steps" needed in the reading process. The example of the stop sign has already shown that no text contains a full set of instructions for reading it. There is always at least *something* the reader has to add to make sense of the text.

In this connection Iser talks about "gaps" or "open spaces" in texts that the reader has to fill in. The gaps challenge the reader to involve herself in the creation of the *literary work* (for Iser this is more than simply the *written text*). The reader makes sense of the text by filling in the gaps. This involves *choices*, because the gaps may be filled in different ways. "What I have read" is not simply what was already there in the text; it is partly what I constructed by filling the gaps in the text.

According to Iser, a text does contain some fixed beacons that limit the creativity of the reader. The fixed beacons are not, however, really fixed meanings; they become part of a meaningful whole only when readers connect them to one another to form a picture. The connecting lines are not prescribed; they may be drawn in a number of ways.

Iser explains his view using the example of stellar constellations. The stars themselves remain in the same relationship to one another, but different people see different pictures in the same group of stars, because they link them in different ways. The reader, of course, is constantly drawing connecting lines, often drawing new lines and revising old ones as new beacons appear.

According to Iser and his followers, the reading event is an interaction between text and reader in which both indicators in the text and the reader's creative contribution play a role.

(e) Who determines the meaning of a text?

All approaches that emphasize the role of the reader agree that there is a degree of *indeterminacy* in all texts. After all, if texts determined their own meaning completely, the role of the reader becomes a purely technical one. Many theorists believe that Iser still assigns too small a role to the reader and that he overemphasizes the limits imposed on the reader by the text. Can one really say that the text limits the reader in *any* way?

When one looks for examples, it soon becomes clear how difficult it is to find fixed points in the text. Indeed, there are *words*, but words, as we have seen, do not have fixed meanings. Formalist critics attached great importance to the form or structure of texts and described such structures in detail. But before that, many readers had made sense of the same texts without saying a word about structure. It seems that structure is not something that is objectively "there" in the text; it is something that appears when readers approach the text from a certain perspective. Theorists strongly impressed by this often say that *all* meaning derives from readers. In Fowler's words: "Texts do not make meaning; readers make meaning" (1991:26).

This line of thought brings with it its own problems. If the text really makes *no* contribution, what is it that we interpret? Would it not be better to study "reader X", rather than "the book of Jonah"? And what can we ultimately say about "reader X", since our only access to reader X's interpretation (whether oral or written) is our own reading experience of it. Now "reader X's interpretation" can, according to this line of argument, play no determining role in our own reading experience. In this situation each reader is ultimately a prisoner in his or her own world, quite cut off from other readers.

David Bleich and Stanley Fish attempt to get round this problem without assigning any determining role to the text.

⚙ For Bleich, the reading experience is indeed purely subjective. At the level of immediate response, the reader creates purely subjective meaning by the process of symbolization. When one wants to say something about the reading experience, however, one moves to a new level, that of interpretation. At this level the reader's response is re-symbolized, but no longer in a purely subjective way. Interpretations make use of the language we share with others, therefore interpretation is a social matter. For Bleich, meaning (at the level of interpretation) is something that is negotiated between interpreters as they search for a mutually acceptable way of expressing their responses in words. In this process, knowledge is created, not discovered. What we call "knowledge" is the result of a current agreement. Since "knowledge" or "meaning" is not anchored somewhere in the text (or even in the response to it), "knowledge" or "meaning" remains open to re-negotiation. Nor is the untrained reader in a worse position than the expert is, for the expert's knowledge concerns only current agreements, and these have no objective or normative value.

⚙ In his later work, Fish approaches the matter from another angle. He does not give the text any determining role, nor does he believe that individual readers create meaning purely subjectively. A reader is always already a member of an interpretive community that prescribes the available strategies of interpretation to her. The reader writes the text, as it were, but the reader herself has already been "written" by her interpretive community. Readers cannot but interpret texts by means of the dominant reading strategies of their interpretive community, therefore their interpretations are usually experienced as convincing by other readers from the same interpretive community. This "unquestionable" meaning, however, owes nothing to "facts" given in the text. Interpretations may change as the interpretive communities themselves change, but these changes are not the result of the deliberate efforts of the individual reader. There is no room here for Bleich's "negotiated knowledge".

⚙ Actually one can hardly call the later Fish a "reader-response critic" any longer, since the reader, according to Fish, functions nearly as mechanically as the "reading machines" that merely register meanings in a text. The only difference is that the machines are now driven by interpretive communities and not by texts.

(f) Who is "the reader"?

Those who emphasize the interaction between text and reader (thus still assigning an important role to the text) often seek features in the text itself that would stimulate and structure the activity of the reader. The concepts "implied", "inscribed" or "encoded" reader are often used in this regard. In different reading models these concepts are employed in different ways.

⚙ Wayne Booth, for instance, sees the implied reader as the ideal recipient of the text, the person who fits the text like a glove, as it were. The real (contemporary) reader does not necessarily start off as this ideal recipient, but in the text an ideal reader, one who would understand the text "from the inside", is presupposed. Generally the empirical reader tries to identify with this ideal reader implied in the text. If the real reader refuses the role the text seems to prescribe for him, the reading experience will probably not be very rewarding. On the other hand, when the reader is able to identify completely with the implied reader, reading reaches an optimal level.

⚙ It should be clear that Booth's implied reader is only *partly* "in the text". To identify the implied reader in itself requires a reconstruction (interpretation) that different readers may make differently. Moreover, the emphasis Booth places on identification and assent indicates that his model lies on the boundary between reader-response criticism and rhetorical criticism (compare 6.3).

⚙ Iser uses the same concept, but his implied reader is even less a creation of the author. The implied reader takes shape only in the reading process, when the real reader starts realizing that the text presents her with an agenda: gaps to be bridged, decisions to be made, and so on. Because the outline of the implied reader depends as much on what is *absent* from the text as on what is present in the text, Iser places his implied reader *between* text and reader, not inside or outside the text.

⚙ Jonathan Culler and others who prefer the term "inscribed reader" have something else in mind. They are interested in the conventional codes that make a text readable, the ways in which a text accommodates or frustrates readers. The inscribed reader is neither the ideal recipient nor the creative co-author of the literary work, but is linked to the codes emphasized in the text. The pattern of these emphases (their succession and the tensions between them) marks out the route readers must follow through the text, or indicates the actions readers must perform. It does not enforce a *particular* reading, but outlines the field opened by the text, the field within which sense can be made of the text. To rephrase: the inscribed reader indicates the possibilities of reception of a text; it does not determine the specific reception (that is, interpretation).

(g) The ideal or competent reader

The above cases deal with a reader connected to a particular text and thus, in a limited sense, "in the text". Another series of terms explores the reader's ability to read texts as such. What makes a person "able to read" or "receptive of texts"? Mere knowledge of the alphabet, grammar and the meanings of words is clearly not sufficient. Even a person who knows a particular language well may be unable to understand certain texts in that language. Equally, two people who share a language may read the same text with differing degrees of insight: to the one it means little; the other discovers an endless world of meaning in it.

If there are levels of reading ability, there must be a theoretical standard for measuring reading ability. Various theorists personify this standard as the "ideal", "competent" or "informed" reader. In each case the personification indicates the sum of presuppositions that make reading

meaningful and meaning-conferring action possible. When a real reader gets stuck because she does not know the meaning of a word, one of these presuppositions is revealed: a reader must have the necessary semantic knowledge and skills. Often, however, the presuppositions remain hidden. The reader who does not "spot" the reference to another text (because she is not acquainted with the other text) does make sense of the text, but passes over certain possibilities of meaning nevertheless. The "ideal reader" would draw on these possibilities of meaning. The real reader reads the reference, but not *as a reference*. Similar examples can be given for word play, genre, irony, and the like.

The problems surrounding the term "ideal reader" can be seen in Culler's struggle with it. The concept "all possible readings" is too vague (even as a theoretical construct). What would be impossible? Consequently, Culler at first spoke of the ideal reader as one with all the possibilities of making *acceptable* readings at his disposal. Even such a "reader" is a theoretical construct, for nobody can possibly have all the codes and conventions of a society at her fingertips. But, it remains difficult to distinguish between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" readings. Moreover, the term "ideal reader" suggests that certain readings are better than others, a view difficult to substantiate. Is a reading better simply because the reader has exploited more possibilities? After all, to heap up possible interpretations haphazardly is not to make much sense.

For these reasons Culler now prefers the term "competent reader" (not "ideal reader"). This term still refers to a person commanding a wide range of possibilities for making sense of a text, but implies that different readings or interpretations may be equally competent. Thus Culler rejects the idea of a graded standard.

In his earlier work, Fish introduced the term "informed reader". The idea of a ranked order is not avoided here: readers can be more or less informed. Fish does not suggest, however, that more informed readers (more closely approaching the ideal) necessarily provide better readings of a text. Rather, more informed readers are more sensitive to the possibilities of language.

It should be noted that Riffaterre's "superreader" does not belong here. The "superreader" is not an imaginary ideal person, but a framework constructed from a number of readings of a text by apparently competent people. The framework indicates what elements in a text evoke response, irrespective of the content of the response, thereby showing us what elements in a text are of literary significance. Riffaterre's "superreader" is not, to be sure, "in the text", yet refers to elements in the text. Moreover, a superreader is linked to a specific text.

What do the categories such as "ideal", "informed" or "competent" reader contribute to the practice of interpretation? How do these theoretical constructs relate to real readers?

- First, they set an ideal for readers who want to present an argued, critical reading. Such readers try, as it were, to adopt the position of the ideal reader. They deliberately look for possibilities, try to render a full account, and so forth. Fish (1980:49) says that his informed reader is partly himself: "... a real reader (me) who does everything within his power to make himself informed". Real readers strive to overcome their limitations (at least in part) and to read the text as an ideal reader would.

- Secondly, they remind us that communal conventions and codes make interpretations acceptable to others. The ideal or competent reader is (partly) also the idealized image of the interpretive community. Individual readers need the aid of communal conventions in dialogue with others, who judge whether their readings are "competent", "informed" or "acceptable". The concept "informed reader" is particularly significant, since it implies that the individual gains the possibilities that enable meaningful reading from the interpretive community.

❀ Thirdly, these concepts serve to make the implicit, often unconscious, presuppositions of real reading an explicit topic of discussion. When I ask about the codes, conventions or rules of reading or about the possibilities of reading meaningfully, I become aware of the limitations of my own reading. I see what I did not do (but could have done) when I read the text and what types of competence I might have lacked. On the one hand, this aids critical, self-conscious reading; on the other hand, it places "my reading" as one relative to other possible readings.

6.2.2 Jonah in the light of the role of the reader

The discussion above shows that the role of the reader may be introduced into the discourse about the interpretation of a text in a number of diverse ways. Moreover, an analysis of reader responses as they emerge in temporal order (as advocated by Fish) would require much space, even in the case of a text as brief as Jonah. For present purposes some limits had to be set.

In the following discussion the various possible approaches are grouped under two headings: a) "The reader in the book of Jonah", and b) "Jonah in the reader". Under the first heading the ways in which the activity and involvement of the reader seem to be presupposed by certain aspects in the text itself are examined. Under the second heading, the possibilities that readers may have at their disposal for making sense of the book of Jonah are examined. In both cases, for brevity's sake, typical examples are selected.

(a) The reader in the book of Jonah

❀ It is striking that the book of Jonah ends in a question (addressed to Jonah) to which the text provides no answer. The answer is, as it were, left to the reader. One could say that this gap in the text deliberately leaves the readers the task of writing the ending. Iser's terms "gap" and "implied reader" can be explicated using this example.

❀ The question is not strange in itself: had the story continued to record Jonah's answer, the effect would not have been the same. It is what is *absent* from the text, the missing answer, that seems to force the reader to take a hand. On the other hand, this "gap" does not allow the reader random freedom, for it occupies a specific place in the reading event.

❀ A question about Yahweh's right to show mercy could have arisen earlier, immediately after the sparing of Nineveh. After all, even at that stage there was a question Jonah did not answer (4:4). By the time the reader reaches 4:11, the question appears in a new light because of Jonah's actions in the intervening time. In fact, a reader may even, in *retrospect*, *revise* her answer to the question in 4:4 (another gap). The answer the reader provides or reads in at 4:11 must fit into the previous reading events, yet it can also necessitate a rereading of the preceding text. In the chess game between reader and text it is, as it were, the reader's move, but the possible moves are limited by the game to which the reader has already committed himself.

❀ We now see why Iser does not place the implied reader either inside or outside the text. The silhouette of the implied reader appears (and changes) only in the reading process. It is something *between* text and reader. It is not easy to explain why the reader has a limited choice at 4:11 and why no answer can be given without thereby accepting certain implications. Neither certain features in the text nor particular aspects of the reader can, in isolation, provide an adequate explanation. It is only the person who has shared in the reading events (experiencing and shaping them), that can give an adequate answer at 4:11.

❀ We looked at the gap that ends the text first, since this example is a simple one. Earlier on, gaps could only be bridged *tentatively*. As early as 1:3 the reader experiences a major gap in the text. When Jonah flees, neither Jonah nor the narrator supplies a reason. Obviously there

is no fixed law that such a reason *must* be given, yet what sense can a reader make of any story if characters act without reasons? Here, too, a temporary answer from the reader is required for the reading process to make sense.

❀ The pressure to supply an answer will probably be strengthened by the reader's retrospective view of the first two verses. Jonah's flight is particularly shocking when seen in the light of the expectations created by these verses. One strongly expects Yahweh's commission to a prophet to be carried out, because Yahweh is the Great King and prophets are Yahweh's messengers. Formally, verse 3 commences (in Hebrew) as if the conventional formula of obedience (that does occur in 3:3) will follow. Following Fish's method of observing the reading process in slow motion, one might say that the reader, having read the first words of verse 3, has already completed the verse in anticipation. When the sentence takes a different course, this abnormality calls for an explanation.

❀ What possible explanations would be available *at this stage*? Of the many *theoretically* possible explanations only a few can really be based on what the text has provided up to now. A reader acquainted with the lot that befell prophets of doom (even in Israel) and with Nineveh's reputation (perhaps from the book of Nahum) would all too readily employ the word "fear" to fill the gap.

❀ The decision that the reader makes at 1:3 depends in part on how the reader bridged a previous gap, one so "small" that it is easily overlooked. In verse 2 the most natural reading runs "... and preach *against* her (Nineveh), *for*...". The Hebrew, however, is slightly ambiguous. The reading "... and preach *to* her, *that*..." is also possible, though this would certainly not be the normal way of construing the Hebrew. In any case, the "normal" reading would have been more acceptable to Jews, who felt one had to preach *against* Nineveh. This reading implies that Jonah was commissioned to announce doom. The second, somewhat "abnormal", reading leaves room for Nineveh to react *positively* to a *warning* and opens the possibility that Jonah fled to avoid this positive outcome. This example also shows that gaps do not occur only where something is *absent* from the text. Ambiguity also creates gaps.

❀ In 4:2 the reason for Jonah's flight is finally mentioned again. Meanwhile the reader's tentative bridging of the gap is not confirmed or refuted directly. Forms of the Hebrew word *yara'* (to fear) do, however, appear six times in 1: 5-16. This conspicuous *repetition* influences the reader's retrospection. At this stage (for the reading events to make some sense), the reader has to start asking: "What is this story about?" The reader has already had to revise the expectation (created by verses 1 and 2) that the story is about a prophetic message to Nineveh. Now the repetition of the fear motive creates the impression that the story deals with *yara'* in two senses of the word: fearfulness and the respect for Yahweh that is the mark of true religion in the Old Testament. Thus it becomes easy for the reader, in her retrospection, to read fear into verse 3 as well, thereby confirming her previous, tentative explanation. At the same time, a new expectation is created, namely that the crew's true fear of Yahweh (1:16) will be rewarded, while Jonah's fearfulness will be punished. Note that Jonah too confesses (in copy-book phrases) that he fears Yahweh. To say that his confession is hypocritical is a judgment made by the reader in the light of the story up to that stage.

❀ When Jonah does finally offer a reason for his flight (4:2), the reader has to reconsider his previous decisions. Possibilities previously rejected present themselves again. What one cannot say is that previous gaps have now been bridged by the text itself. The reader must decide whether or not to believe Jonah. Had Jonah given his "official" reason immediately before or after 1:3, this decision would not have seemed important. Surely the reader had no reason to distrust Jonah *then*. *Now*, however, Jonah's credibility is in serious doubt. Note

how the temporal aspect keeps cropping up in approaches that concentrate on the role of the reader. From the position of the critic with his encompassing, spatial overview of the text, it is possible to discuss Jonah as if there is no gap regarding the reason for Jonah's flight. From the position of the reader, however, there are two vital gaps: one at 1:3 and another at 4:2. Both demand a decision and the reorientation that accompanies it.

❀ These examples sufficiently illustrate the complexity of this approach to interpretation. One has to stop at virtually every word and frequently one is forced to return to the beginning to reconstruct the whole of the picture, taking as much care as the first time. Moreover, the reader is repeatedly led (or misled) to try to complete the story tentatively:

  ❀ When the story does not, as expected, end with chapter 1, readers have to readjust. A story of deserved punishment becomes one of undeserved grace.

  ❀ When Jonah obeys Yahweh's command at the beginning of chapter 3, readers may resurrect the expectations created in 1:2, but place them in a new perspective. Bitter experience can teach us to obey Yahweh, as it does Jonah.

  ❀ The new expectation is that Yahweh will save Jonah (his faithful messenger) from Nineveh amid the storm of rage evoked by his message. But this expectation is not met either; the story takes a different course.

From the point of view of the text and its origin, Jonah is *one* story; the reading process, however, involves many stories - written and rewritten by the reader.

Further examples of gaps in the text and of the role of the reader may be briefly mentioned:

❀ Why does Jonah ask to be cast into the sea (1:12)? Any answer must depend on readers' changing assessments of Jonah as a character. The text never settles the issue.

❀ *Repetitions* of key words and phrases occur very frequently. Repetitions may be boring, but in Jonah they serve rather to challenge or stimulate the readers, because the same word or phrase gains new meanings in the changing contexts. The play on the Hebrew word *ra'ah* (evil, disaster, rage), which runs right through the story, is particularly striking.

❀ Apparently unnecessary repetition or information (redundancy) leads readers to ask why there is *more* in the text than is (apparently) required. Thrice (1:2, 3:2, 4:11) Nineveh is called "the great city" (and 3:3 adds a parenthetical remark about Nineveh's size). The phrase may be conventional in 1:2; later one has to ask why the text harps on this theme. Would the reader give the same answer at 3:3 and at 4:11?

❀ The striking structural parallels between the two halves of the book have already been discussed as a formal feature in chapter 4. Readerly approaches emphasize the effect on the reader: the reader is invited to understand and assess certain events in the light of previous, parallel events.

❀ Whenever parallels dominate, any rupture in the pattern presents the reader with a challenge. In 3:2 there is a *near* repetition of 1:2. The slight differences should make the alert reader ask why the second commission is not *quite* the same. As mentioned earlier, 1:2 is apparently a commission to deliver a message of doom, yet a different reading of the verse is possible. Since the implication of doom is markedly *absent* in 3:2, the reader has to reconsider her reading of 1:2 as well.

❀ Verse 3:4 plays on an ambiguous word. Jonah preaches that Nineveh will be *overturned* (the literal meaning of the Hebrew), using a word than usually denotes total destruction. In this context (at this stage) the reader could hardly understand it differently, yet the same word

can be used positively of a complete change of heart. Later, when Nineveh has indeed been "turned around", but not destroyed, the reader might consider whether Jonah's prophecy has not been (ironically) fulfilled after all.

⍟ Critics of other schools had long known about these aspects of the text and had noted the role that humour, irony and quotations from or references to other parts of the Old Testament play in Jonah. These aspects have been dealt with by traditional interpreters (without emphasis on the reader): humour has been examined by Wolff (1977), irony by Good (1981), and quotations and references by Magonet (1979). Readerly approaches, however, remind us that these features are not "in the text" in an absolute way. What the reader does not experience as comic is not humour for the reader; what the reader does not recognize as a quotation or reference cannot play a role in interpretation *as a quotation*. Moreover, readerly approaches emphasize the function and effect of humour and irony, rather than the mere identification of "characteristics". The close connection between this approach and the rhetorical-critical one becomes clear here. Both operate from a functional perspective and examine an ongoing process.

⍟ The book of Jonah is richly endowed with challenges for the alert reader - only a few of these are mentioned above. For instance, it takes an informed reader to notice that the episode of Jonah and the fish has links with the many stories about heroes that descend to the netherworld or are swallowed by the chaos monster, only to be reborn as new people. Later, when it turns out that Jonah is not such a wonderfully "new person" after all, the reader must consider whether this archetypal story might not have been used in a playful, ironic way.

These examples show that the implied reader of Jonah is a particularly knowledgeable and skilful reader. Having reached this conclusion (which in itself requires considerable reading skill), you tend to watch out for possible hidden meanings throughout the rest of the book.

Finally, it cannot be overemphasized that we are dealing with *possibilities*; the text does not provide final answers. The meanings conferred by readers therefore *remain* tentative. Instead of leaving readers dissatisfied, the book is the more meaningful because it cannot be reduced to a set "message". Theorists frequently attach great value to "open" texts that yield no fixed, final meaning. Therefore Jauss (1985) regards Jonah as remarkably "modern". The "great value" is, admittedly, relative: it applies primarily in the case of literary texts. In the case of commands or instructions for use, we require "clarity". In many respects the book of Jonah is meaningful precisely because it continues to invite interpretation and discussion. The abiding influence of this text on readers is closely linked to the impossibility of ever finally "clarifying" its meaning.

(b) Jonah in the reader

The previous section suggests that features in the text invite (but do not automatically cause) reactions in the reader. Whether or not the reader responds to the invitations depends on the reader's competence as reader. This competence is present in the reader prior to any reading of the book of Jonah. In other words: *Only readers who are familiar with a language and its grammar, communal codes, conventions and strategies of reading are able to identify "features in the text that call for a response"*.

For instance, the question at the end of the book appears "striking" to the experienced reader only because she knows that narratives seldom end in this way. The reader who has already, on the basis of communal narrative codes, decided that Jonah is a narrative, finds the concluding question extraordinary. Yet a typical problem in logic could also start as a narrative and end in a question. In such a case the concluding question is not "striking".

To read a text with understanding is to read it as "something" (a joke, narrative, recipe or set of instructions). To identify a text as "belonging to this type" readers need to be familiar with the codes, conventions and markers typical of each genre. In the book of Jonah the very first Hebrew word, *wayehi* (more or less, "And it came to pass") is a typical marker of narratives in biblical Hebrew. The presence of some isolated markers or codes cannot, of course, provide absolute certainty about the type of text (the introductory *wayehi* does not, for instance, settle the question of the historicity of a passage). One cannot (as some structuralists had hoped) describe the complete system of codes governing a text, because codes and conventions, though communal, do not belong to all members of a community absolutely. Not all readers are ideal or competent readers in terms of the internal standards of their community.

Readers of the book of Jonah need both a *general* competence regarding the language (grammar, vocabulary, and so on) and a *specific* competence that would make this text "readable". One cannot, however, separate the two forms of competence completely. An example illustrates the point:

In Jonah 1:3-5, forms of the Hebrew word *yarad* ("go down") occur three times. At the general level the reader has to know this verb, its forms and its usages to read the section. This knowledge in itself suffices to "make sense" of the story. To conclude that the verb symbolizes Jonah's moral "downfall" requires more knowledge. One could argue that, purely at the level of narration, other words (*halach* and *bo*) would have served as well. Moreover, "down" conventionally has a negative connotation in such cases. By exploiting these possibilities readers make *more* sense of the narrative.

There is, however, a limit to the possibilities experienced as meaningful or fruitful within an interpretive community.

A reader who overlooked the symbolic potential of *yarad* in her own reading might, when it is pointed out to her, regard this possibility as enhancing the impact of the text. Most readers would, however, reject as far-fetched the suggestion that special value should be attached to the middle word in the Hebrew text, to the numerical values of certain Hebrew letters or to the total number of letters in the text. Yet these strategies of interpretation have been used in certain circles (e g Jewish cabalistic circles).

It follows that one cannot say that the competent reader is the one who considers *all* possibilities of meaning. Competence is defined in terms of the values of the community (Fish's interpretive community). Within the community, competence *also* involves that certain possibilities are ruled out (from the start). Seeing that different interpretive communities assign meaning in different ways, we can hardly talk about readers in general.

When we deal with an ancient text, we have to consider how the ancient community of readers would have reacted. The place name Nineveh would probably have evoked an immediate, strong reaction among the original readers. A modern reader without specialized knowledge might not even know that Nineveh is the name of a city. Historical reconstruction is, however, an accepted strategy of interpretation within the majority of schools of interpretation. This strategy *presupposes* that a text is best understood when its *original* meaning (the meaning it had for the first readers) can be ascertained. With the aid of historical studies (that also involve reading and interpretation) and the human imagination, one tries to place oneself in the position of the first readers.

But this is not the only possible reading strategy, nor is it simply "available". Modern readers may feel reasonably sure that they know what "Nineveh" signified to the first readers of Jonah (an element of speculation does enter here, but this goes for other reading strategies as well).

Elsewhere the data needed for this strategy of historical reconstruction may be lacking. See the following examples:

⁕ Jonah's booth or shelter reminds modern, critical readers of the feast of booths, but interpreters have not yet made sense of the connection. Was there a controversy among Jews about the feast of booths that could illuminate the passage? We simply do not know.

⁕ In Jonah, various divine names (mostly Yahweh and Elohim) are used for Israel's God. Given the highly artistic composition of the book, these variations can hardly be ascribed to chance. All the same, scholars have failed to detect a meaningful pattern in the variations – one that convinces the scholarly interpretive community. Either we are dealing with a code that is no longer available to us, or modern readers are employing a code that identifies a problem not apparent to readers in those days.

The examples above indicate what a complex, unending task it is to study the readability of a text in terms of codes, conventions and reading strategies. One cannot even pin down all the acceptable possibilities for constructing meaning in a specific community. And an "unacceptable" possibility may become "acceptable" if it suddenly gains enough adherents.

This approach is more useful as an indicator of the influence that the reader's world exerts *from the very beginning of the reading process*. What the reader already knows - about Jonah, about Yahweh, about prophets - determines how the very first verses will be understood. Further expectations based on these first verses are connected to the horizon of expectation the reader had prior to reading. Texts become "effective" only when they are activated by readers. For instance, readers might see the repetition of certain words (*raʾah*) as meaningful, while hardly noticing other repetitions (in an English text "the", "and" and "is" occur frequently). To describe the role of the reader solely in terms of effect, reaction or response does no justice to the proactive role of the reader.

The reader's presuppositions and reading strategies usually operate at the unconscious level. The conscious attempt to examine them - checking with what knowledge and ignorance, with what standards of sense and nonsense, *I* (not "we" or "the reader") have read - helps me to place my reading in context. Though it does not produce a new reading of Jonah, it does help me to make sense of interpretations by other readers of Jonah who made different choices in the reading process. An analysis of my own road through the text does not, in itself, offer a reading strategy. It merely opens the possibility of clarifying, in a confrontation or dialogue with other readers, the reading strategies I have already used. Out of this confrontation or dialogue a new "I", "we", interpretive community and interpretations may be born.

6.2.3 Observations and evaluation

Though "reader-terminology" is currently popular and is likely to remain so, there are indications that no theory of "reader response" will gain lasting favour *as an approach to interpretation*. Some of the theorists named in the discussion on background and theory (Fish and Culler) have already distanced themselves from this approach.

The unwieldy and vague title of this section: "Approaches that focus on the role of the reader" is significant in itself. The role of the reader has become an important emphasis or focus in the debate on interpretation, but the debate has not yielded an accepted theory with well-defined questions. The various possible theoretical frameworks and complexes of questions currently in use are neither necessarily complementary nor without internal problems. The "interesting" views they provide often lack coherence.

❀ Certain empirical approaches seem promising and reasonably unproblematic. One could, for instance, explore how a text has been interpreted in different historical periods (reception history) or how different readers today read the same text (empirical reader-studies). In both cases the question about the reader's role in interpretation is postponed, not addressed, because in reality the researcher is giving an interpretation (reading) of a previous interpretation (reading). The conclusions of such studies often depend on the tacit assumption that the researcher has some form of direct access (not itself an interpretation) to the text and to the interpretations of other readers.

❀ The bald claim that *all* interpretations are freely created by individual readers has the advantage of being irrefutable. Unfortunately, you cannot cite evidence in support of it either. By denying the possibilities of fruitful communication from the outset, views of this type spell the end of all arguments and studies. In philosophy such views - views that leave each individual locked into his or her own windowless world - are called *solipsistic*. When the reader's role becomes the alpha and the omega in interpretation, this role can no longer be discussed in a *communal* theoretical debate.

❀ The idea of an interaction between text and reader looks attractive, but in practice it proves impossible to delimit the roles in the interaction. From one perspective it seems as if the text is the only real object of study after all: the text has gaps, provides challenges, offers possibilities and requires certain responses. From the opposite perspective the reader has the last word. Each aspect of the text is a product of the reader's creative act of interpretation and the role of the text virtually disappears.

❀ In his later work Culler accepts that this problem cannot be solved:

"For the reader the work is not partially created but, on the one hand, already complete and inexhaustible ... and on the other hand, still to be created in the process of reading ... The attempt to produce compromise formulations fails to capture the essential, divided quality of reading." (1982:76)

❀ A study of the factors that enable reading as such (or of the attributes of the ideal "competent reader") would doubtless provide interesting results - if anybody could complete such a mammoth task. Up to now only vague and general conclusions have been reached. To say that your whole world of experience is involved in reading is simply to postpone the question by posing it in a new way.

This does not make the rediscovery of the role of the reader a senseless episode in the debate on interpretation. Valuable perspective on the creativity of the reading act, the temporal nature of reading and the active involvement of the reader have been gained. As a result, we speak less naively about what a text "says", about the text's "structure" or "message" and about the status of our own interpretations. What we normally do thoughtlessly when we read or interpret has become an area of study that generates its own questions.

Moreover, these approaches have made a contribution in the very area where they failed to fulfil anticipated expectations. The focus on the reader's role was needed to generate questions, although it proved too restrictive to allow for adequate discussion. Small wonder that the concepts, techniques and questions of reader-response criticism are now bearing fruit in other approaches. Questions about reader identity and role led away from the exclusive focus on the reader - either towards a better understanding of texts and textuality, or towards a more comprehensive study of contexts and contextuality.

6.3 Rhetorical-critical studies

6.3.1 Background and theory

Unlike other fashionable approaches to interpretation, rhetorical criticism has old roots. The ancient Greeks already studied and taught rhetoric as the art of speaking effectively. For centuries, rhetoric, logic and grammar formed the *trivium,* the basis of education in Europe. Even today, eloquent speakers and writers wield great influence, while those who lack eloquence are ignored. It is impossible to overlook the practical importance of rhetoric.

All uses of language are "effective" in that people use language to *do* something: to convey information, to warn, to promise, to criticize, and so on. The point is that not all people achieve the effects they aim at – some are more *effective* users of language than others. When I warn someone, I have performed the act of warning, yet my act remains ineffective unless my warning is heeded. Rhetoric is concerned with the effect that the use of language has *on an audience*. It is in this sense that rhetorical criticism involves a focus on the world in front of the text, the world of the reader.

Aristotle saw rhetoric as an important part of philosophy in the broader sense, defining it as *the art of persuasion in matters about which difference of opinion is possible*. Logical, mathematical or empirical proofs are seldom able to settle everyday disputes. Often important decisions have to be taken in the absence of absolute certainty. Unless one is prepared to resort to force or to leave these decisions to chance, one has to search for "good reasons" to adopt one course rather than another. In this search for wise, reasonable decisions, one is forced to depend on rhetoric. This applies to courts of law and political assemblies, but also to debates on economics, religion and morality. In the modern, democratic world in which more people are able to voice their opinions and in which few things can count as certain, the renewed interest in rhetoric is hardly surprising.

(a) Art of eloquence or art of persuasion?

Rhetoric, we might say, is about "speaking to good effect". But what exactly is "good effect"? From the very beginning, there were two views on rhetoric. One saw rhetoric as the *art of eloquence* (good speaking). According to this view, the "good effect" is an impressive, stylish speech, one of which the audience will say: "Well said!" A rhetorical act is seen as effective when it puts across a case in a clear, coherent and striking way. The emphasis falls on matters such as choice of words, coherent structuring and the use of figurative language. In such cases the study of rhetoric becomes largely the study of style and the "special effects" (variously called figures, schemes and tropes) speakers use to impress their audiences. Since this approach focuses on the resources of language, it is often taught in language departments.

The other view saw rhetoric as the *art of persuasion*. According to this view, the "good effect" is an influence exerted on the audience, one that makes the audience say: "Now I am convinced!" A rhetorical act is effective when the audience is persuaded to change its opinions, actions or attitudes. The emphasis thus falls on arguments, appeals and evidence, in brief, on the "good reasons" presented by the speaker. In some cases the study of rhetoric becomes largely the study of informal logic or practical argumentation. Since this approach focuses on reasoning in the broad sense, it is often taught in philosophy departments.

Clearly these two views on rhetoric overlap at many points. What is said in a clear, coherent and striking way will often persuade people. When I say that a speech impressed me, I am already suggesting that it influenced me in some way, although I may not be fully persuaded by the

speaker's arguments. In the same way I can hardly say that someone made a good point without admitting that the person managed to use language effectively at that point. Still, the overlap is not complete. One can admire a speaker's skill without being in the least impressed by the arguments and one can see the strength of an argument presented in a jumbled, ungrammatical way. Rhetorical theory has not been able to bridge the gap between rhetoric as art of eloquence and rhetoric as art of persuasion completely.

In the following sections, I shall deal mainly with rhetoric as art of persuasion, but without denying that persuasion itself often depends on eloquence.

(b) Rhetoric as the attempt to influence others by means of words

Although the term rhetoric was originally used to refer to *communication between a speaker and an audience*, it can also be used of *written* communication. What matters is that the speech or text is viewed as something *addressed* to a group in order to exercise a certain influence on it. In one sense all uses of language are rhetorical, because all linguistic expressions *can* have a persuasive effect (in the broad sense), irrespective of the intention of the author. One can apply a rhetorical perspective to any (written or oral) communication by examining its potential to influence an audience.

Still, all communications are not rhetorical in the same way. When you ask me what time it is and I tell you, I would not say you persuaded me to tell you what the time is and you would not say that I convinced you that it is ten o'clock. It is not very useful to regard a command, a request or an examination question as an example of rhetoric. But often the intention to influence or persuade - the attempt to bring about change - can clearly be seen. For instance, it makes sense to assume that the major portion of the Bible was written with the deliberate purpose of influencing people's religious and ethical views.

Rhetoric does not, however, always aim at dramatic change, a total "conversion" of the audience. It is seldom a matter of getting an audience to accept fully something they had previously rejected completely. Chaim Perelman rightly said that rhetoric seeks to gain *or strengthen* an audience's adherence to certain views. The following examples will illustrate this point: As a Christian I may "adhere to" (Perelman's terms) certain beliefs without always paying much attention to them. If my adherence to these beliefs is strengthened, I do not believe new things, but I may start acting more consistently according to the beliefs I already held. On the other hand, someone who has not persuaded me to accept his point of view may have succeeded in influencing me. I may view his opinion more sympathetically ("Although he is wrong, he has a point"); therefore I may be prepared to look for a compromise.

Since rhetoric is the attempt to exert *influence* through words, words must have a certain *power*. Rhetorical power is, however, a form of power exerted solely *through words*. If someone holds a gun to my head and orders me to hand over my money, that person does not have to speak eloquently or to use reasonable arguments. Similarly, certain people use their political or social positions to influence others without taking trouble to persuade. I may "agree" with my boss because I do not wish to be fired. Because I do not really agree, I have not been persuaded. In such cases one cannot talk about the power of rhetoric. But when I persuade the gunman not to rob me or convince my boss that my plan is better than hers, I do use rhetorical power Many theorists argue that we need rhetoric because it puts reasonable persuasion in the place of coercion (the use of force).

If nothing *forces* me to change my opinion, why should I be persuaded to do so? In what way can words influence me? Rhetoric seems to provide a clear answer: Words have an influence when

they give me *good reasons* to act or think in a certain way. The trouble is that it is impossible to define "good reasons". If I believe the policy of a certain political party will work in my interests, I have a good reason to vote for that party. But if I believe, at the same time, that this policy will not be in the interest of the country as a whole, I shall also have a good reason not to vote for that party. We shall look at such problems in more detail later. For the moment it is sufficient to note that rhetorical power depends on good reasons, but that reasons can be good in different ways and that different "goods" can clash with one another.

The question of persuading arises only if we accept that words can influence people to change in certain respects. The influence of words is, however, not a mechanical, predictable force. If one says that a particular rhetorical act has the *potential* to influence an audience, this does not imply that the potential will always be realized. The audience may react by manifesting a particular change, but may also refuse to be persuaded. Thus one has to assume that the audience too has a certain freedom: a freedom to choose and a freedom to change. Again, this freedom is not absolute. I cannot persuade someone to fly by flapping her arms. Because the effect of rhetoric depends on the power of words, which cannot be calculated exactly, and on the reaction of an audience, which cannot be predicted with certainty, no rhetorical theory can really claim to provide all the answers. Rhetoric remains a messy, unclear field of study.

Those who study rhetoric deliberately restrict themselves to a sphere within which there are few certainties and many unanswered questions. Although there is (after many centuries) no generally accepted theory of rhetoric, the *practice* of rhetoric still flourishes.

(c) Studying motivation

Rhetorical criticism focuses on "language as action", on what people wish to achieve when they use language and how they pursue their aims. While most approaches to interpretation ask what a text *means*, rhetorical criticism asks primarily what a text *does* (or tries to do). Though words, being unpredictable tools, cannot *cause* or force people to act or think in a certain way; they may *motivate* people or give them "good reasons" to do so. Rhetorical criticism therefore studies texts as structures of motivation or webs of "good reasons".

What motivates people to change their minds or their actions? In some cases people are persuaded by *rational arguments and proofs*. Rhetorical critics will therefore look for the arguments presented in a text, but they need to be aware that not all reasonable arguments will follow the formal rules of logical and scientific proof.

Stephen Toulmin and Chaim Perelman, who made great contributions to rhetorical theory in the 20th century, both tackled the problems surrounding "proof". On the one hand, many argue that one should only believe what can be proved beyond doubt – by the methods of science or formal logic. These *absolutists* seek fixed, universal truths. On the other hand, many now argue that no proof is ever adequate. Each "truth" seems true to the person who believes it, but no truth is beyond doubt. Such *relativists* or sceptics deny that there is any universal truth or reliable knowledge.

Toulmin and Perelman argue that neither absolutism nor relativism provides us with guidance in important practical matters. Doctors who have to make diagnoses and prescribe treatment, voters who have to decide for which party to vote and judges who have to deliver verdicts in court cannot rely on absolute truths, yet they have to make decisions that affect the lives of people. To make wise decisions, they are forced to depend on good reasons that fall short of absolute proof. Rhetorical arguments provide such reasons. For instance, although the evidence in a court case is never absolutely conclusive, there are cases where "guilty" is the only *reasonable* verdict.

Rhetoricians often make use of arguments that are reasonable without being fully conclusive. In many areas of our lives more conclusive forms of proof are simply not available. Therefore, when rhetorical critics examine the "arguments" in a text, they take into consideration all aspects of the text that appeal to people's reason in the broadest sense. For instance, an example showing the good or bad effects of certain policy in the past does not prove that this policy will have the same effect in future. Nevertheless, it does establish a possibility that should be reasonably considered. Similarly, if one quotes the view of an expert to support one's claim, one has, strictly speaking, proved nothing. Yet it is reasonable to consider the opinion of experts when one makes a decision.

In examining arguments in this broad sense, rhetorical criticism tries to establish what *claim* the text makes, what *evidence* it offers to support the claim and how the evidence is *linked* to the claim (why it is considered relevant to the claim). The assumption is that humans are – at least to some extent – reasonable beings, who respond to good reasons and attempt to make wise, informed decisions in the absence of conclusive proof. Rhetorical critics often use the juridical analogy: a court has to reach the best possible decision based on available evidence. In the court situation, being unable to exclude uncertainties and the possibility of error, one has to weigh probability and improbability, stronger or weaker grounds. In short, it is a situation of human freedom and limitations.

But people are not only reasonable beings – not even in this broad sense. People are also strongly motivated by their feelings, values and interests, and rhetorical acts exploit this. Therefore rhetorical criticism also has to pay attention to the ways in which a text plays on the less rational aspects of the human personality. What is it that people treasure, hope, fear or despise? What evokes compassion, anger, enthusiasm, laughter or courage in an audience? When one deals with such questions, one has to look beyond the arguments themselves and examine carefully the positive and negative connotations people may attach to certain words, deeds and ideas. This is by no means easy, because connotations and associations are not eternally fixed; they vary from time to time and from culture to culture.

A modern reader will not automatically grasp the connotations that "Nineveh" held for ancient Israelites. Even the knowledge that Nineveh was a pagan city, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, will not help one to understand the fear and hatred that mention of this city evoked. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus plays on people's feelings about different groups of people. Although the text mentions a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan, it does not explain the associations these characters called up. The appeal to feelings (values, interests) is often not clearly marked in the text itself, but depends on the particular context that the author shares with the audience.

Some believe that any appeal that is not to reason is somehow disreputable or misleading. People should base their decisions on reason - not on feelings, prejudices or preferences. There are, however, good reasons (!) to reject this strict view. First, it is not always easy to draw a clear dividing line between "pure" reason and "mere" feeling. When money goes missing, we are likely to suspect the person with a long criminal record rather than the one with a reputation for honesty. From a strictly logical point of view this is prejudice, but it is certainly not an unreasonable prejudice. Feelings, preferences and "prejudices" often contain hidden elements of reason. Moreover, an appeal that caters to people's existing feelings and values is likely to find a more receptive audience. Once the audience is in a receptive mood, one can try to change certain aspects of their thought and behaviour. Paul follows, for example, this strategy when he addresses the Athenians (Acts 17:16-32).

Finally, the appeal to people's feelings spurs people on to action, while mere intellectual agreement can remain passive. The Bible often uses appeals to feeling when it wants people to act on an idea and not merely to assent to it. Rhetorical criticism studies such appeals to see how they tend to motivate, activate, empower and inspire.

Remarkably often people are also motivated by the impression they form of the particular speaker or writer. Does the person come across as honest (rather than sly), compassionate (rather than callous), reasonable (rather than fanatical)? In short, is this a person in whom I can have confidence? Although we are not always aware of it, we are frequently swayed by the person (author or speaker) rather than by the person's arguments. Because this is so, skilled rhetoricians are careful about the impression they make on an audience: they present a particular case, but they also present themselves.

When one hears a speech, the speaker's body language, gestures, tone of voice, and facial expressions all help one to form an impression of the speaker's character. When one studies old texts, one has to rely on a more restricted body of evidence. Can one draw conclusions about an author's character from the author's written text? If "drawing conclusions" had to depend on a reliable method that would establish beyond doubt what the author was like, the answer has to be "no". Nevertheless, we do in practice draw such conclusions and we can – to some extent – defend them. Authors do "put their stamp" on texts, particularly through their style. The style of an author invites us to label the author: learned, enthusiastic, courageous, imaginative, caring, and so on (or, frivolous, pompous, domineering, prejudiced, and so on).

Specific situations call for specific virtues. We may take it that authors wish to present themselves in a favourable light, but it is important to note which feature is highlighted in a particular text. Whereas one situation might demand decisive action and thus a forceful personality, another situation might require tact and care – and a different type of personality altogether. By attending to the self-presentation of authors and speakers, rhetorical criticism gets a better understanding of the demands of a particular rhetorical situation (at least, as it was seen by the people in question).

Aristotle identified three grounds of persuasion: *logos* (reason), *pathos* (feelings) and *ethos* (the character of the speaker). These have been dealt with above. Are there others? Undoubtedly people are motivated by beauty and artistry and also by a sense of wonder and admiration. Whether or not these motivations should be considered separately or as subdivisions of the three mentioned above is a matter of definition.

Rhetorical criticism studies the rhetorical characteristics of texts that seem to have an "appeal function"; that is, texts that seem to motivate people to change their minds or actions. As we have seen above, such texts, although they do not offer conclusive proofs, do present an audience with good reasons. They appeal to the audience's reason, feelings and values, and impression of the speaker or author.

Since rhetoric itself offers no certainties or guarantees of success, rhetorical criticism has no absolutely fixed points of departure. The rhetorical critic cannot claim absolute validity, guaranteed by a logically coherent theory, for her conclusions; the critic herself stands within "the realm of rhetoric". Rhetorical criticism does not reach conclusions that eliminate all possible doubt, but this does not mean that rhetorical criticism proceeds at random or "illogically". Instead, rhetorical critics proceed as rhetoricians themselves do: they build up a case as best they can and present it for approval to an audience.

Rhetorical critics make claims about a text and its functioning, back these claims by reasonable arguments and try to give a coherent, convincing, reasoned account that is relevant to the understanding of the text. Obviously, the reader of such an interpretation retains the freedom to reject the reasoned account - on reasonable grounds. *Thus rhetorical criticism studies rhetorical acts by rhetorical means. Rhetorical criticism is itself a rhetorical act.*

(d) Audience orientation and the rhetorical situation

The rhetorical act is always structured from two sides. It is no use pleasing your audience if this means sacrificing your intention; it is equally useless to state your case clearly but in such a way that it has no impact. Along the way the audience has to be won over. This means that "audience-orientation" has to be built into the structure of the rhetorical act. Perelman rightly says that the speaker who builds her argument on assumptions not acceptable to the audience is guilty of a form of question-begging. The speaker wishing to persuade an audience of the very thing of which they are not persuaded (which they do not accept yet) has to start with what the audience does accept and work from there.

Therefore a skilled rhetorician will search for "common ground" with the audience. Shared values, beliefs and ideas become the springboard for the rhetorical action in that the "already accepted" paves the way for the "not yet accepted". Kenneth Burke paid great attention to the way in which rhetoricians need to *identify* with their audience. Unless the audience perceives the rhetorician as someone sharing to some extent their interests, values, language, and so on, the rhetorical act will fail. Of course, the rhetorician does not identify with the audience at all points: rhetoric works *through identification to transformation*.

In many ways Jesus brought a strange and revolutionary message. How were people to accept something so new and different? In the New Testament we often see how Jesus identifies with his listeners by taking as a point of departure their everyday experiences and values. Would a shepherd not look for a lost sheep? Would a parent give a child who asked for bread a stone? Isn't it silly to light a lamp and then to hide its light? In this regard classical (Greek) rhetoric spoke of common *topics* (or commonplaces) that provide the basis for further arguments.

Rhetorical criticism has to identify both the common ground (shared topics) and the contested areas in a rhetorical text. For instance, the author of the book of Jonah does not have to convince the intended audience that Jonah was in the wrong when he disobeyed Yahweh. That much was common ground. The idea that Yahweh could also care for and have mercy on heathen nations was, however, not generally accepted. In dealing with ancient texts, it is hard to tell the difference between the shared presuppositions and the new, disruptive ideas. Often ideas that were commonplace to ancient audiences seem novel to us, while ideas that struck the original audience as revolutionary are now part of our tradition.

Audience orientation has implications for our view of the *form* of the rhetorical act. The form (structure, style, and so on), often dismissed as mere "presentation" or "ornamentation", frequently helps to create *a basis of identification*. Thus a speaker addressing an audience packed with academics would wish to show a familiarity with the technical terms of academia. A speaker addressing a group of factory workers would, in turn, choose a "down-to-earth" approach and exhibit his knowledge of the slang of the township. In both cases the aim is to turn the potentially opposing "me" and "you" into an "us". On the other hand, a striking metaphor often invites an audience to see a familiar situation in a new light.

Because each rhetorical act takes place in a particular context with its own shared presuppositions and areas of dispute, rhetorical criticism has to make an effort to reconstruct the *rhetorical situation*

in which the text functioned. Lloyd Bitzer described a rhetorical situation as one in which a group of people (the *audience*) face an *exigence* (a problem, obstacle or lack) that can be modified by a *rhetorical discourse*, but subject to specific *constraints*. For the sake of simplicity, we may call the exigence the problem, noting that certain problems cannot be solved by rhetorical discourse. We cannot make pollution disappear by talking about it, but we can change the attitudes of the people who cause pollution by talking to them. A rhetorical situation is thus one in which words can make a difference.

The constraints in a rhetorical situation determine to what extent change is possible. Some constraints cannot be overcome by means of rhetoric (physical realities, for instance) and others (fixed beliefs, respected traditions, strong personal interests) are not easily overcome. But a rhetorical discourse introduces its own constraints (arguments, the appeal to feelings, the speaker's character), which also press on the audience. Indeed, the rhetorician will try to make the rhetorical discourse "fit" the existing situation so as to exert maximum influence.

The following is a typical rhetorical situation: A student (the audience) with some talent does badly at university because he lacks self-confidence (the exigence). A lecturer talks to the student to encourage him (the rhetorical discourse), keeping in mind the problem and the constraints inherent in the situation. She cannot turn the student (who has limited talent) into a genius; she can try to overcome the constraints of a negative self-image, an attitude of despondency and a lack of confidence.

An understanding of the rhetorical situation (the problem, the audience, the constraints) makes the task of rhetorical analysis much easier. Unfortunately, we do not have all this information when we deal with biblical texts. In such cases rhetorical criticism has to resort to methodological fictions such as the "implied speaker" or the "implied audience" to get some grip on the rhetorical situation. Instead of knowing the setting and seeing how the text fits into it, the rhetorical critic has to examine the text and deduce from that what situation it would have fitted. This procedure is obviously unreliable, yet it is part of our reading practice to make such assumptions about texts. Here, as elsewhere, rhetorical criticism chooses a course that is theoretically suspect, but that conforms to our everyday practices.

Each rhetorical situation involves a basis of shared values, premises and conventions, even where there are differences of opinion concerning the specific problem. This alerts us to the *social basis of rhetoric*. Even when the rhetorical situation involves a single speaker and an audience of one (or when one addresses oneself rhetorically), rhetoric is by its nature not a matter between individuals. The broader community provides, as it were, the platform from which rhetorical transactions can take place. Rhetorical criticism overlaps with ideological criticism, because both approaches deal with the social context that influences communication between individuals. The ethical implications of this will be discussed in a later section.

(e) Some tools of rhetorical criticism

There is no single standard method or terminology in rhetorical criticism, although a variety of approaches have been proposed. One of these, socio-rhetorical criticism, has been discussed in chapter 4. This section will look briefly at the traditional (or Neo-Aristotelian) approach and note some of the contributions of Chaim Perelman and Kenneth Burke.

Those who follow the classical tradition - that of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian and others – make use of the classificatory concepts (in Greek and Latin) developed in the classical era. These concepts were originally used in the teaching of practical rhetoric, but they have some use in rhetorical criticism as well.

A rhetorical discourse is first classified according to its *genus*: forensic, deliberative or epideictic rhetoric. Forensic rhetoric, the rhetoric of courts of law, deals with past actions and judges them to be either just or unjust. Deliberative rhetoric, the rhetoric of political meetings, deals with future policies and judges them to be either advantageous or disadvantageous. Epideictic rhetoric originated from speeches at funerals, where the character of the dead person was discussed. Aristotle believed it dealt with the present (the past being an example for the present) and judges actions to be either honourable or shameful. The scope of epideictic rhetoric was later expanded so that this genus included the rhetoric of teaching and preaching.

In classical theory the rhetorician had five tasks ("offices"): to find relevant arguments (*inventio*), to arrange the material logically (*dispositio*), to find the appropriate words and style (*elocutio*), to memorise the speech (*memoria*) and to deliver the speech (*actio*). Only the first three are relevant to the rhetorical criticism of texts.

In considering the arguments in a discourse, the critic identifies the topics or commonplaces (*topoi* or *loci*) that serve as "common ground". Next the critic identifies the various argumentative devices used in the discourse: enthymemes, maxims, examples, signs, and so on. The critic also determines to what the speaker or writer appeals at each point: *logos*, *pathos* or *ethos* (see above).

Regarding the arrangement of the discourse, the critic notes the *divisions* of the rhetorical discourse from the introduction (*proem*) to the conclusion (*peroratio*) and judges whether each of these achieves its specific purpose and whether they fit together. One might also pay attention to the *purpose* of the rhetorical discourse and each of its parts. According to Cicero, the three "functions" of rhetoric are to persuade (*suadere*), to teach (*docere*) and to delight (*delectare*).

In considering word choice and style, critics pay attention to the linguistic techniques used in the discourse, especially figurative language (*tropoi* or *figurae*). Is the style appropriate, clear and interesting? What purposes are served by the figures of speech?

This approach, of which only the outline has been given here, works best when it is applied to formal discourses following the classical pattern. It is, for instance, of considerable use in the study of the Epistles in the New Testament, since at least Paul probably had some knowledge of the rhetorical theory of his day. Its shortcomings are more obvious when one tries to apply it to rhetorical discourses cast in other forms (narrative, for instance) and from other times and cultures.

Chaim Perelman called his "new rhetoric" a theory of argumentation, but his view of "practical reasoning" is so broad that he is able to include under "argumentation" many discourses that classical rhetoricians would not have considered to be argumentative. For instance, he discussed figures of speech not as ornaments but as arguments in the broad sense. Moreover, he maintains that rhetoric is the typical form in which we reason about matters of value. Because "proofs" are not available in such matters, the emphasis falls on ways of influencing people's views and attitudes.

He pointed out that the rhetorician must strive from the outset to establish the *presence* of certain key ideas or values. By fixing attention on a particular issue, theme, value or idea (and by placing others in the background), the rhetorician takes the first step towards making the audience see things in a new light. Figures of speech often help to "create presence".

Having established presence, the rhetorician uses various argumentative means to change the audience's established pattern of thinking. Sometimes the rhetorician uses looser forms of accepted patterns of argumentation: quasi-logical arguments (arguments showing formal resemblances to

syllogisms), arguments based on claims about the nature of reality ("each result has a cause"), arguments based on illustrations or arguments based on analogy. In each case the starting point has to be what is already accepted by the audience: all arguments are, according to Perelman, *ad hominem* arguments in that they are directed at a specific audience and caters to the perceptions of that audience.

But some of the argumentative devices are not "arguments" in the normal sense. A typical example is the forging or breaking of links (*liaisons*) between ideas or attitudes. Perelman argues that our views are very often based on our associations. For instance, we may associate age with weakness of body and mind and therefore show a bias against older people. But this liaison can be broken and a new one can be established that links age to experience and wisdom. Similarly, an idea with a positive connotation, say, justice, may be made to appear negative in a specific context by distinguishing between a true and a false form of justice.

Rhetorical critics using Perelman's insights will point out how a rhetorical discourse gives presence to certain aspects of a case and denies presence to others and how argumentative devices function at a hidden level, for instance, through suggested analogies. Most of all, it will seek to show how a rhetorical discourse establishes and breaks the links between ideas that shape our perceptions.

Since Kenneth Burke's contribution to rhetorical theory cannot be summarized briefly, I mention only some of the terminological tools he provided to rhetorical criticism. His basic philosophical point of departure is that human social behaviour, unlike the behaviour of physical objects, cannot be studied by using the methods of natural science. Physical objects obey the laws of motion; human social life depends upon *symbolic action* (the use of language being the prime example). For the study of symbolic action the metaphor of drama is the most appropriate; therefore he calls his approach *dramatism*

In a drama certain actors (agents) within a certain setting (scene), do certain things (acts), using certain means (agency) to achieve certain goals (purpose). From this Burke derives his *dramatistic pentad*: scene, agent, agency (means), purpose and act. These five basic terms he regards as the "principles of motivation". I do something because the circumstance demands it (scene), because of the person I am (agent), because I have the means or opportunity to do it (agency), because I have a goal in mind (purpose) or because I am reacting or responding to a previous act (act). Obviously these principles of motivation usually work together, but in a particular context I may stress ("feature") one of them. In analyzing texts, one would find that some texts emphasize the determining force of the context (scene), others the character of the hero (agent), others the way in which people are spurred on by a goal (purpose), and so on.

Burke is particularly interested in what he calls the *ratios* between the terms of the pentad. In a ratio two terms are linked in a way that suggests that the one term gives rise to the other one. Two examples will have to suffice: If a text suggests that people (agents) are the *products* of their environment (scene), the text uses the scene-agent ratio. Another text, using the agent-scene ratio, might suggest that people *create* their environment. Similarly, the agent-act ratio asserts that a person's inherent character determines that person's actions: the dishonest person tells lies. But the act-agent ratio asserts that a person is shaped by his or her actions: the person who slips into a lie here and there eventually becomes habitually dishonest.

What some call "pentadic analysis" (the study of the motivational terms and ratios in a text) is a powerful tool for coming to grips with the tendency of a text. For instance, when the scene-agent ratio dominates, the text presents a mechanistic, deterministic view of human behaviour. When the agent-scene ratio prevails, however, the text has an idealistic tendency. Burke also argues that four "master tropes" - metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony - provide basic structuring

devices for rhetorical composition. Burke understands the terms very broadly, not as figures of speech but as devices for presenting one's views in language. The term metaphor, in his view, embraces all techniques that invite readers to see a matter from a certain *perspective*, metonymy embraces all techniques of *reduction*, synecdoche all techniques of *representation*, and irony all techniques that set up a contrast or a *dialectic*.

The following should help to clarify Burke's idea: All rhetoricians wish to present a particular perspective; they want an audience to see a matter from a specific angle. This makes a degree of reduction necessary. When I talk about Sarah as a good (or bad) teacher (my perspective), I do not consider Sarah as a (good or bad) athlete. I reduce my view to what is relevant. But I also have to find ways of representing my perspective. I need examples, references or anecdotes that present Sarah as a good (or bad) teacher. Moreover, I will make my perspective clearer by contrasting it with other perspectives. Sarah stands out as a good teacher when she is compared to Clive. Or, Sarah's decision in a certain situation demonstrates that she is a good teacher when one considers other decisions she could have taken.

The theory of the master tropes helps rhetorical critics to see the basic "shape" of a rhetorical discourse: What is the basic perspective? What is eliminated by way of reduction and how? What techniques of representation are used? What contrasts and dialectical interactions are set up? The theory also helps one to question a text critically: Is the perspective not too narrow or too broad? Does the reduction not eliminate relevant details? How adequate is the representation? Are the contrasts too sharp or too vague?

A merit of Burke's theory in general is that it can be applied to texts that are not overtly rhetorical or argumentative. Burke prefers the more supple word "identification" to "persuasion" and argues that rhetorical acts often influence people's *attitudes* rather than their beliefs or actions. Many biblical texts that present no direct arguments and issue no clear commands can be read as invitations to identify with certain views, actions or characters and to adopt a certain attitude to these. It is quite possible that this indirect approach is in the long run more influential than the direct one.

(f) Rhetoric and ethics

Rhetoricians exercise a certain power, and where power is involved, *ethical* questions cannot be avoided. "Who exercises power, on whom, to what purpose?" are key questions in rhetorical criticism. Comprehensive answers can be given only from within the context of systems of values. If rhetoric indeed has transformative power, a critic has to answer questions about the *value* of the intended transformation. Moreover, since rhetorical criticism is both the study of rhetorical acts and is itself a rhetorical act, it cannot avoid responsibility by claiming that it studies texts with "scientific objectivity".

Modern rhetorical theory generally denies that values are simply posited and that reasoned discourse about values is therefore ruled out. Wayne Booth's view on this can be considered representative. According to him, the clear distinction between value judgments (about which one cannot argue) and factual judgments (about which proofs can be offered) cannot be maintained. The moment one asks "Why *ought* I to change my view on this matter?" facts and values are inextricably linked in the subsequent debate.

The problem of the ethics of rhetoric goes back at least to Plato or even the Old Testament (cf 2 Sam 17). When is rhetoric *good*? If rhetoric's sole purpose is to persuade, one could say that it is good when it persuades successfully. But what if a good (skilful) speaker should persuade people of a bad (immoral) case? Hitler was a highly successful orator; Jeremiah was apparently not.

Moreover, a certain type of success is always easy to achieve: "It is not hard to praise the Athenians to the Athenians" (Aristotle). Must we say that the unscrupulous politicians who buy votes with extravagant promises (that the party has no intention of even trying to honour) are practising good rhetoric simply because they are clearly successful?

Such questions are also relevant to the rhetorical study of the Bible. The book of Jonah is an impressive rhetorical performance, but other books in the Old Testament present us with different views about the relationship with foreigners. In particular, one has to compare to Jonah Nahum's rejoicing over the fall of Nineveh (regarded as brilliant poetry!) and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which probably come from much the same time, but emphasize separation from foreigners. In other cases one has to account for traces of chauvinism, sexism and class interest in the Bible.

Some rhetorical critics, particularly the neo-Aristotelians, sidestep the problem. They restrict themselves to a classification and description of the rhetorical techniques and avoid value judgments. This has led to the accusation that rhetorical criticism dodges its critical responsibility by failing to deal with the ideological edge of texts – the very "textual power" that is integral to rhetoric. When rhetorical criticism does ask critical questions about matters such as class interests and power relations in texts, it becomes a form of ideological criticism.

Perelman and Burke did not pretend to be neutral observers of a particular practice; both openly defended specific values that they wished to see applied in social life. They made their "ideological" commitments clear and argued against opposing positions. Burke in particular developed his whole sprawling terminology as a "counterstatement" (the title of one of his books) to what he saw as prevailing tendencies.

Rhetorical criticism is well placed to pose questions of power and values particularly sharply. The very fact that people are often persuaded by "bad" rhetoric proves that no value system commends itself as self-evident to all people. Moreover, it can be shown that each value system is rooted in rhetoric and can be defended only by means of rhetoric. But the study of rhetoric also shows that one cannot simply adopt a stance of undifferentiated tolerance: some value systems – backed by powerful rhetoric – have had intolerably bad effects.

Clearly some kind of standard is needed to prevent all possible rhetorical utterances from being placed on exactly the same level or being judged solely in terms of practical success. Toulmin talks of the court of reasonability in which all clear-thinking people with suitable experience act as judges. In the same vein Perelman postulates a universal audience of reasonable and competent people. To demolish such constructions is not very difficult. In reasoning about values, terms such as "clear-thinking", "suitable experience", "reasonable" and "competent" provide the material for questions, not the answers.

Other possible answers are, however, equally unconvincing. Before accepting a beautifully egalitarian theory that places all rhetorical utterances at exactly the same level, we should consider whether we are prepared to allow each would-be Hitler's racial rhetoric free play, to expose our sick children to any form of crackpot treatment or to regard the views of a person who claims to be a fried egg as worthy of serious consideration. In answer to those who accept that the only standards are those of the majority or those of the rulers, it is necessary to point out that majorities may change their minds as well, and that power relationships shift - in both cases often as the result of successful rhetoric.

(g) Another form of rhetorical criticism

In the field of biblical interpretation, James Muilenburg and others following in his footsteps used the term rhetorical criticism in another way, pleading for a type of criticism that would be a corrective to the one-sidedness of form criticism. Their argument is two-pronged:

- Form criticism sees each literary unit as an example of a genre and thus focuses on the general features of the genre and on the *Sitz in Leben* that is common to all texts of this genre. Thus the specific features of the text (for instance, its artistry) disappear into the background. The rhetorical criticism proposed by Muilenburg examines primarily the *unique* literary features of a text – those features that differentiate it from other texts of the same genre.

- Form criticism usually deals with smaller units that can be identified as "pure genres" and tends to ignore the more comprehensive units within which these units are embedded. In the book of Jonah the prayer in chapter 2 departs from the narrative genre of the rest of the book. Should the prayer therefore be studied in isolation or should one ask how the prayer and the narrative complement each other? The prayer may be a secondary addition, but in principle a literary composition may be a skilful blending of genres. Muilenburg's approach leaves room for the study of complex texts containing elements of different genres.

- This approach sees rhetoric primarily as the art of eloquence or the art of literary composition. This type of rhetorical criticism would be more aptly called stylistics or literary appreciation.

(h) The rhetoric of the text and the rhetoric in the text

In practice, rhetorical criticism can take one of two courses. It can focus on the main elements in the chain of argument, the typical rhetorical style and the overall rhetorical thrust of the particular text. It can also concentrate on the fine details of the individual strategies in each sentence and on the rhetorical "turns" (tropes) that go towards building up – bit by bit - the persuasive force of the whole. If the former approach is adopted, we may speak of the rhetoric of the book of Jonah or of the rhetorical strategy (singular) of the book. If the latter approach is adopted, it is better to talk of the rhetoric in the book of Jonah or of the rhetorical strategies (plural) of the book. Naturally the two can be combined. The following application of rhetorical criticism to the book of Jonah concentrates on typical examples.

6.3.2 Jonah in the light of rhetorical criticism

By placing the first three verses under a microscope we can illustrate how rhetorical criticism deals with minute detail. The result is the more significant because one's first impression is that we are dealing with a very simple, unsophisticated narrative style.

According to Perelman, the first task of the rhetorician is to create presence, to fix the nub of the matter in the minds of the audience. Obviously more than the introductory sentences can be used to do this, yet it is desirable that the distinction between foreground and background should be apparent at an early stage. The first two verses succeed admirably in placing the core material in the foreground. It is the conventional framework itself (And the word of A came to B saying: Get up, go to C and do E) that immediately fixes attention on the variables in the formula. The reader is immediately aware that this is a story about Yahweh, Jonah and Nineveh, and that the repayment of evil by evil is at stake. The last part of verse two, in particular, confirms that the *locus* (or *topos*) of the argument is the ethical field.

The three actors in the ethical drama are all known to the audience and all call up powerful *topoi* and associations:

- One could say that Yahweh self-evidently belongs to the formula in verse 1 and that it is a commonplace (commonly accepted *topos*) that Yahweh is the judge who punishes evil (verse 2). That Yahweh is the God of Israel is also presupposed by all. From this perspective it is even possible to consign Yahweh to the background. Only later, from verse 4 onwards, the author makes it clear that we are not dealing with the self-evident Yahweh who is little more than a mechanical ethical principle, but with an active - even unpredictable - God.

- Jonah is known to the audience from 2 Kings 14 and occupies a much more ambiguous position. As a commissioned prophet (here) and as a "true prophet" (2 Kings 14), he is on the "right side" in the ethical sense; as a prophet of hope and a prophet from Galilee in the Northern Kingdom, he is under suspicion.

- Nineveh obviously represents the threatening, oppressive pagan world (cf the book of Nahum). The specific reference to Nineveh as "the great city" (the only "superfluous" phrase in the first sentence) is the beginning of a rhetorical strategy that becomes evident only at a later stage. At this stage it serves a twofold rhetorical purpose. It is linked to the evil ascribed to the city - great evil deserves great punishment. It also emphasizes how the small Israel (represented by the individual Jonah) had to face a vast heathen world, a theme that runs through the book and that naturally links up with the experience of the audience.

Perelman has argued that a persuasive speaker has to start with premises accepted by the audience. The first two verses activate a number of commonplaces that serve as "common ground". The familiar "call formula" helps to create a non-threatening atmosphere: we are getting a good, orthodox story. That evil will be requited with evil is nothing new; that Nineveh in particular deserves punishment is self-evident; that a prophet is commissioned to announce this judgment is normal (cf Amos 3:7). Skilful readers, mindful of Jonah's earlier activity, would regard Jonah's commission here as a fitting complement to his earlier activity (reported in 2 Kings 14): first salvation for Israel; now punishment for Israel's enemies!

Even at this elementary level we detect traces of Burke's master tropes, although confirmation is given only in the rest of the story.

It is fairly obvious that Jonah represents Israel and Nineveh the heathen world (synecdoche). The complex relationship between Israelites and non-Israelites, with all the feelings attached to it, is reduced to a single, concrete set of events (metonymy). From the first sentence onwards these events are placed within the perspective of Yahweh's commissioning and judging word. The question is not how Israelite and non-Israelite relate to each other in general, but how this relationship appears in the light of Yahweh's commission and judgment. Just as the metaphor "the winter of our discontent" applies a certain perspective (the coldness and misery of winter) to a person's feelings, making us see the feeling from that perspective, Yahweh's word offers the perspective from which Jonah's and Nineveh's actions are viewed. Whatever else one might say about Jonah or Nineveh (from a different perspective) is secondary and is therefore eliminated by metonymic reduction.

The motive force behind the events is irony rooted in the fact that the characters in the story are not static, self-identical entities, but enter into dialectical relationships with themselves and among themselves. In the first two verses it is still possible to see Yahweh as "self-evidently good" and Nineveh as "self-evidently bad"; about Jonah the readers give a double judgment from the start (see above). Jonah, one could say, is an ironic figure from the outset. Around him the other characters develop in dialectical relationships.

If we look closely, it becomes apparent that the persuasive force of the book of Jonah depends virtually entirely on the reader's acceptance of the validity of these discursive strategies. Readers

who would, for instance, reject the validity of the perspective outright (by denying the existence of a God) would not be persuaded of anything. Nor can the book of Jonah function as a persuasive *argument* for people who do not accept that a story that apparently recounts a contingent, unique set of events can address a problem that crops up repeatedly in different forms at different times. The story is persuasive only if we grant that the complexities of the problem can be reduced to and represented by a story such as this.

Ultimately all persuasion depends on the acceptance of the possibility of an internal dialectic or ironic self-consciousness. Readers who are either unchangeable givens or variables that are constantly created anew by external factors cannot yield to persuasion. Persuasion applies only to people who can change in dialectical relationships with others and who can themselves induce change. Such people can see themselves ironically and are therefore not bound to their own identification with themselves. Here the readers are invited to find themselves in Jonah (to let Jonah represent them), but also to "see Jonah doubly" and to reapply this double vision to themselves. When I see myself doubly (or ironically), I become aware that in addition to the "I-with-this-opinion" there is already another I, critical of this opinion. I may choose which "I" I want to be; I may allow myself to be persuaded.

Starting from shared presuppositions, the author can present arguments to induce change. This has to be done with great care, because no audience welcomes an abrupt reversal of their values. If Yahweh suddenly decides to pardon Nineveh or Nineveh is suddenly portrayed as good, the audience would dismiss the story as implausible. Even in Jonah's case the author has to take care. But the audience is less than certain about Jonah and would not be totally surprised to hear bad things about him. (Would the story succeed rhetorically with Isaiah in the main role?) Nevertheless, the audience initially has three reasons for identifying with Jonah: he is an Israelite (one of us), a prophet (a man of God) and opposed to Nineveh (our enemy's enemy is our friend). At the start, the identification pattern is simple and, to the audience, self-evident: we and Jonah and Yahweh are on the good side; on the opposite side stands those evil people without Yahweh (Nineveh and all other pagans and oppressors).

No rhetoric on earth can reverse such an identification pattern completely, nor is this what the author of Jonah intends. It is possible to offer arguments indicating that certain aspects of the basic pattern may be rearranged - on the basis of the presuppositions of the pattern itself. In this case it entails that Nineveh (and other pagans) may not be *self-evidently* opposed to Yahweh and that Yahweh may not be *self-evidently* "on our side". Here the dangers of identification clearly emerge: Identifying ourselves with Yahweh and Yahweh's cause may easily come to mean, in practice, that we identify Yahweh with ourselves and our cause.

In verse 3, Jonah, the rhetorical catalyst, starts pulling the identification pattern apart. The readers are shocked by a prophet who flees from his task without bothering to give a reason or to argue his case - although the shock is somewhat lessened by the fact that it is a Galilean prophet of salvation. Rhetorically the shock serves a double purpose:

First, it is necessary to capture the readers' attention. The stock formulas and nearly self-evident thought content of the first two verses have served their purpose of placing author and audience on the same level. Now the audience must not be allowed to fall asleep. (Classical rhetoric called this technique of stirring matters up after the introduction *tua res agitur*.)

Secondly, the audience's identification pattern changes immediately. If Jonah is no longer on Yahweh's side, we are no longer on his side. He now belongs to the side of the pagans. The adjustment is not that painful, for no firm identification has taken place yet. The Jonah with whom the audience could identify was a commissioned prophet, an Israelite and the instrument

that would bring about the downfall of Nineveh. Now he is just a Galilean from the distant past. The audience may now refuse to be represented by such a person (*we* are not like that!) and feel even more snugly at home on Yahweh's side (we, at least, know better!).

In distancing itself from Jonah, the audience makes a crucial admission: not all Israelites are automatically on Yahweh's side - Jonah's people, the Northern Kingdom, were not. Perhaps (who knows?) not all of "us" are either. And perhaps not all pagans are the same. The fragmentation of the "us" is not forced on the audience from the outside; it flows from the elements of the original formula itself. The "good" side is for Yahweh and ... whoever is not for Yahweh has no business there. The author helps the audience to make this move:

First, the word *yarad* (go down) is used twice of Jonah in this verse. This fits naturally into the narrative (although other words were available), but does carry the suggestion of a "downward path". In fact Jonah keeps going down all the way to the belly of the fish. Secondly, the implications of Jonah's flight are clearly portrayed in the last part of verse 3. Instead of going to Nineveh with Yahweh (in obedience to Yahweh) to preach against pagans, he goes to Tarshish with pagans (the sailors) to avoid Yahweh and Yahweh's command. When Jonah turns against Yahweh, he ends up, automatically as it were, in pagan company.

The author does not, however, condemn Jonah harshly. It is rhetorically important that the audience should later identify with Jonah once again, else they would not be able to recognize themselves in the figure of Jonah. Jonah's "badness", like Jonah's "goodness", is therefore left open to question. That Jonah flees is shocking, not abominable. What are his reasons? If he were simply scared, it would be quite human. Note that it is *human*, not specifically "Israelite". So even the excuse the audience offers on Jonah's behalf undermines the type of thinking that would separate Israelite and pagan completely.

Moreover, Jonah's "sin" is really more than a little ridiculous. Who can flee from Yahweh? If distant Nineveh's wickedness "came up before Yahweh's presence" (verse 2), one cannot flee to Tarshish to escape this presence (verse 3). The audience may be inclined to say: "If Jonah had stopped to think, he would not have made such a fool of himself. All this trouble and expense (Jonah's flight is described in detail) wasted on a crazy project doomed to failure!"

The humorous tone that marks the book as a whole has the rhetorical function of producing a playful mood. When the charge against Jonah is finally directed against the audience, it is not in an atmosphere of bitterness or malice.

The premises that are present in embryonic form in the first three verses form the basis for the rhetorical strategy of the book, which cannot be discussed in detail here. One major strategy is the undermining of "self-evident truths" by "breaking liaisons".

⚙ Yahweh is, for instance, divorced from the one-sided characterization as "God of Israel", whose task is to look after Israel alone. In place of this Yahweh who acts mechanically and according to a set pattern we get "this God" of whom one has to say "perhaps" and "who knows?" (1:6 and 3:9; both from the mouths of pagans). The national God is replaced by "the God of heaven and earth who created the sea and the dry land" (1:9; ironically from the mouth of Jonah). This too is a God that pagans might find and serve (1:14, 16). Above all we are confronted by a Yahweh who is more that a personification of moral law, a Yahweh who repents (3:10) and shows mercy (4:10; from Yahweh's own mouth).

⚙ Pagans are divorced from a one-sided, negative judgment. In 1:5-16 the crew's progression stands in contrast to Jonah's regression. The crew moves from blind fear and prayer "each to his God" to a deep "fear of Yahweh" (in the usual Old Testament sense of "true faith") and later

pray, sacrifice and make vows to Yahweh. The audience can pardon their misdirected prayers in verse 5 for the same reason that they pardoned Jonah: they are a little confused. Fearing, praying and casting something overboard are the correct reactions to the storm, and finally the crew learns to fear correctly, pray correctly and cast overboard correctly.

❂ The audience might regard Nineveh's sudden repentance with suspicion; therefore the author carefully guards against any possible impression of superficiality. In the king's decree the three aspects of repentance are listed in climactic order: the ritual (fasting), the spiritual (prayer) and the moral (change of lifestyle) (3:7-8). Rhetorically these verses also serve to build tension (the first two aspects alone would not have sufficed at all). At the same time the learned target audience can pride itself on having picked up this snippet of theological skill.

The figure of Jonah poses the greatest challenge to the author as rhetorician. If the audience identify with Jonah outright, they are going to end up where Jonah ends up - in outraged rejection of Yahweh's grace to pagans. If they distance themselves completely from Jonah, they are not going to realize how much of Jonah they carry within themselves. The fact that Jonah is the only Israelite in the story - and the main character to boot - makes him the natural candidate for identification. Moreover, in 4:1-3 he is allowed to air views that many in the audience would share - though they may not articulate them as baldly.

The author's rhetorical strategy is therefore aimed mainly at undermining Jonah's image by making him appear ridiculous. This is very clear in 1:3-12 and 4:5-9, yet elsewhere, where he strikes a more dignified pose, elements of irony are not lacking. In 4:3 Elijah's words fit ill in Jonah's mouth. In his prayer in 2:2-10 there are dubious features (compare the smug 2:8-9 with 1:16). But the author guards against a sustained attack on Jonah: in chapter 2 and in 3:1-4, he is deliberately rehabilitated and made into something of a hero. After all, the author's intended readers are neither naive nor wilfully disobedient; they are a group of people who believe that they share with Jonah the experience of having learned obedience the hard way.

It is rhetorically highly important that Jonah should fall, get up, and fall again, and the author manages this with superb skill and artistry. From a narratological perspective, the first part of the book may be read as a cautionary tale about deserved punishment (up to 2:1) or an inspirational tale about undeserved grace, the second part being a complete story in itself. In the rhetoric the two parts are interwoven.

The first part makes the point that Israelites too may be deserving of punishment and that pagans too may come to serve Yahweh. It also shows Yahweh as a God who bestows undeserved mercy. The problem is that readers may distance themselves from Jonah at this stage; therefore Jonah becomes a hero in the start of the second part, enabling readers to "adopt" him again. Once more Yahweh shows undeserved mercy – to the disgust of Jonah and of those in the audience who are unable to stomach any reprieve for Israel's sworn enemies. The conclusion catches the readers off balance, because they are still (at least partly) identified with Jonah. Thus they can hardly deny that the final question applies to them or avoid the suspicion that they may have made fools of themselves.

The delicate balance between identification with Jonah and rejection of Jonah is maintained in Yahweh's actions towards Jonah. The audience is at times invited to reject Jonah and to laugh at him, yet Yahweh never rejects him and takes him remarkably seriously. In the finale, Jonah is not bound to one of his two roles by an answer put in his mouth. Whether Jonah is to be hero or clown, servant or rebel, remains a matter of choice. To take the side of Yahweh's mercy in 4:11 does not necessarily imply a rejection of Jonah (or of Jewishness); to sympathize with Jonah's

protest in 4:1-3 need not imply a final rejection of Yahweh. Thus room is made for the audience to be persuaded without loss of face.

In the long run, no rhetorical strategy can depend on undermining alone, for the purpose of rhetoric is positive: to induce or increase adherence. The "self-evident truths" are not merely undermined; they are placed in a new perspective and in their essence confirmed. One could argue that the author merely "gave presence" to some implications of Israel's religion that had been overlooked.

It is not denied that there are essential differences between people and that these depend on differing relationships with Yahweh. The point is rather that Israel's own history shows that such differences are not eternally fixed or ethnically determined. Both the historical placing of the story and the veiled references to Israel's history are relevant to this. The one-sided view is undermined - precisely because it is a one-sided view of Israel's own creed. The Yahweh of this story, the Yahweh against whom Jonah rebels, has always been a "gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and full of kindness". That Yahweh rules over all nations was no new idea either. By forging a link (liaison) between these two aspects of Israel's faith and by drawing the conclusions this has for Israel's relations with pagans, the author succeeds in presenting what was at first an unacceptable idea as the logical consequence of Israel's faith.

Still, it required great rhetorical skill to guide the audience along this course. One is struck by the strong appeal that is constantly made to the intellectual powers of the audience. The artistry of the narrative (discussed in other sections) requires skilful and alert readers. Such readers, in turn, enjoy the intellectual game and commend themselves when they notice the subtleties. One cannot call this an appeal to the intellect - rather an appeal to the prejudices of the intellectuals! But it is assuredly not simply a striving for effects, for the effects carry the readers through the argument and in that sense carry the argument itself.

6.3.3 Observations and evaluation

- Rhetorical criticism focuses on what is *done* when language is used, on the appeal function or motivational force of utterances. A text is seen primarily as a transaction between people, an address directed at a specific audience in a specific context. Although rhetorical criticism can still draw on the classical tradition of rhetoric as the art of persuasion and the art of eloquence, the "new rhetoric" has broadened the scope of rhetoric so that the rhetorical perspective may be applied to texts that would formerly not have been regarded as rhetorical. Nevertheless, the rhetorical perspective can probably not be applied equally fruitfully to all texts.

- Other possible perspectives are not necessarily challenged; indeed, rhetorical criticism often has to use the methods and results of other approaches. Thus rhetorical criticism uses the tools of historical criticism to reconstruct rhetorical situations and "close reading" or structural analysis to examine the details of a text. When rhetorical criticism deals with the exercising of power in the public sphere, it clearly resembles ideological criticism. The emphasis on the audience's role links rhetorical criticism to readerly approaches.

- The network of links with other approaches makes rhetorical criticism a versatile approach, but also leaves it open to criticism. In the absence of a standard "method", rhetorical critics may be accused of selecting bits and pieces of other approaches, fitting them together and adding rather speculative thoughts about the purpose or intention of the text. Rhetorical critics may answer that they themselves move in the sphere of rhetorical acts: they do not speak from a lofty perch above the "realm of rhetoric". At this practical level many questions of theory and methodology necessarily remain unanswered.

- More serious criticism concerns some presuppositions of rhetorical criticism that do not necessarily fit into other theoretical frameworks. Rhetorical criticism seems to presuppose that the potential effects of texts are largely dependent on the techniques that authors consciously employ and that audiences respond with a considerable measure of freedom of choice. These presuppositions seem to ignore the unconscious forces that may determine both authors and audiences and the possibility that texts may gain meanings not intended by their authors. The clear distinction between conscious and unconscious may be questioned. Burke argues that rhetoric often works (in the case of the author and the audience) at a level between the conscious and the unconscious. But rhetorical critics seldom assert that authors are in full control of what they write or that audiences have unlimited freedom of choice. They tend to restrict themselves to the sphere of everyday life in which we all necessarily assume a degree of responsibility for our actions and a measure of free choice. Those who wish to deny all validity to these everyday perceptions have to construct grand theories to support their massive claim. Such theories are seldom plausibly and almost invariably elitist.

- This approach is of great value to biblical interpreters, because much of the Bible was clearly written with the intention of persuading. The study of the Bible's appeal function has to be of interest to those interpreters who read the Bible primarily with a view to its use in our context - in the preaching of Christian churches, for instance. Unfortunately, rhetorical criticism has generally dealt only with the rhetorical situation of the original audiences. If they are to serve the needs of Christian communities, rhetorical critics will have to develop in more detail a *historical rhetoric* to studies the potential impact of texts in changing contexts.

6.4 Deconstructionist approaches

6.4.1 Background and theory

The relationship between the terms deconstruction, poststructualism and postmodernism is a matter of debate. For present purposes I shall regard postmodernism as the blanket term for a powerful but diffuse current of thought which has, since the late 1960's, challenged the (real or perceived) principles of European modernity. Although postmodernism has influenced – in different ways – many academic disciplines, it is a general climate of though that is not confined to theoretical enterprises. Poststructuralism I shall regard as a particular *theoretical* branch of postmodern thought that both appropriates and criticizes the principles of structuralism. Deconstruction I regard as a branch of poststructuralism that takes its lead mainly from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (who coined the term) and the Belgian-born American literary theorist Paul de Man. In this chapter I draw mainly on Derrida's work.

Unfortunately, these neat categories fail to capture the complexity of the academic debates. Prominent figures in these debates (Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Julia Kristeva, Harold Bloom, Giles Deleuze, Gayatri Spivak, and many others) are not easy to place. They borrow freely from one another, but also implicitly and explicitly criticize one another at certain points. Most of them would probably reject the notion of distinct schools, each with its clearly delineated theory, as a misplaced remnant of modernist thinking.

Moreover, they deliberately operate across disciplines, questioning the traditional boundaries that separate philosophy, literary criticism, social theory, gender theory and psychoanalysis from one another. They take over and mix insights gained from a bewildering variety of sources: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Saussure, Bakhtin and Levinas are among the favourites. The borrowed material is, however, reworked and subjected to searching criticism. Their own contributions

would not necessarily appear under the banner of poststructuralism or deconstruction; they may be presented as psychoanalytical criticism, feminist criticism, postcolonial criticism, cultural studies or even (occasionally) Marxist criticism.

If the previous paragraphs did not leave readers confused, they have failed in their purpose. Poststructuralism and deconstruction both oppose neat theories that can be slotted into our existing framework of thought alongside other theories; they wish to shake the framework itself. A feeling of bewilderment may be the inevitable effect of the process by which they hope to restructure our ways of thinking. The next section will deal with this in more detail.

(a) The agenda of poststructuralism and deconstruction

Though the complexities of poststructuralist and deconstructive thought make it difficult to introduce these theories to those unacquainted with it, it is fair to say that most poststructuralists share a particular view of the Western tradition and an agenda that flows from this view.

In brief, poststructuralists believe that Western thought and practice have for many centuries been stuck in a groove. Neither revolutionary ideas nor liberation movements have managed to change this. Both have yielded some (limited) results, but these partial successes have not affected the structure of thought and practice as a whole. Each time the apparent novelty was ultimately incorporated (or co-opted) into the existing framework. Thus Marx's ideas bore fruit in the Russian revolution, but this neither ended oppression (within the Soviet Union) nor shook the foundations of capitalism. Marx's hope that workers' organizations would usher in a radically new era has come to nothing, because organized labour and labour action (strikes, negotiations, etc) have simply become an everyday part of the system.

The point is that "the system" that churns out oppression is not primarily located in an elite group, a system of ownership, a mode of production, a body of laws or a bureaucracy. It is located in the whole of our signifying system, which ties the various parts together in such a way that breaking one of the individual bonds makes little difference. I use the term "signifying system" with some hesitation, because it could create the impression that poststructuralists are concerned only with ideas. This accusation is often made. But poststructuralists generally resist the subject-object dualism that opposes ideas to actions, institutions and material objects. A signifying system in my usage does not exclude embodiment or materiality. Institutions, practices and "bodies" belong to the signifying system to the extent that they have meaning or significance for us. The signifying system distinguishes the "normal" (or "natural") from the "abnormal" (or "unnatural") and thereby provides the norms for the society. It imposes an order in the very depths of our thinking that inevitably ends in the subordination of some to others. Because it operates beneath the level of consciousness, we (the vast majority, not a small minority) cooperate with it "freely". Thus when there is no police force to enforce the law, we police ourselves.

Poststructuralists claim that what we (practically everyone) see as "normal", "proper" or "natural" is no more than one possibility among many. It is not "given" to us by God, nature or reason; it is a construction that can be deconstructed and reconstructed in a different way. There is no fixed point or foundation (God, nature, the human subject) from which all constructions have to start. Since no construction can claim to have a firm foundation, all constructions are to some extent violently imposed: they exclude other possibilities without adequate reason.

In the overarching signifying system various aspects of our unsatisfactory world are interlinked in surprising ways: truth with power, the subject with subjecting or being subjected, propriety and private property, the private with privilege, authorship with authority, and so on. Moreover, the various forms of discrimination (manifested in racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and

so on) have a common root in judgments linking "otherness" with abnormality, unnaturalness and irrationality. These judgments (discriminations!), though baseless (without firm foundation), have real consequences – those who step out of the accepted signifying system are branded "mad" and placed in an asylum. Because of the pervasive influence of the signifying system (we have internalized it), attempts to attack it at a particular point have little hope of success – as we have noted above. Nor is there any "foundation" that can be undermined.

Therefore, when poststructuralists direct their attacks at a range of targets, it is never with the aim of simply discrediting a particular idea or changing a particular practice. The attacks are theoretical in the sense that they question and undermine the ways of thinking and acting that gave rise to the particular ideas and practices. Thus each attack destabilizes the system by exposing its *general* weakness.

(b) The legacy of structuralism

Structuralism can be viewed as the culmination of attempts to develop a controlled, verifiable and scientific approach to the study of texts. Poststructuralism obviously rejects this positivistic strain in structuralism. In a number of other respects, however, structuralism provided arguments that poststructuralists found very useful.

First, Saussure argued that meaning cannot be found in a reality outside language. Since the signified is part of the sign itself, all meaning is mediated by the sign system – any link with the world outside language is at most indirect. Secondly, he showed that the link between *signifier* and *signified* is arbitrary. It is not given in nature or reason, but is constructed in different ways in each language. Thirdly, he argued that the meaning of signs is determined differentially, that is, by the differences between signs within the same system. Meaning is not determined by some essential attribute of a sign that makes it possible for us to understand it in isolation (outside context of the sign system). Finally, Saussure suggested that all sign systems may be studied according to the pattern he developed for the study of language.

Poststructuralists adopted these ideas and expanded their scope. *All* meaning (or significance) is mediated to us by language or by a system structured like a language. For instance, (sensory) perception does not give us an access to reality that bypasses language, nor does it inform our language. Instead, perception is an effect of language: we perceive only according to the categories provided by our language. Words represent things, but the need for representation already implies the absence of the thing represented. Our meaningful world as a whole is a linguistic world.

But the system of language is made up of arbitrary signs (not rooted in nature or reason). The implication is that our "meaningful world" is merely a particular construction, not a fixed reality. As Saussure showed, different languages categorized "reality" in different ways. This does not mean that particular individuals constructed the system of language, because language as system (*langue*) is impersonal and communal. It would be more apt to say that the system of language constructs us by providing us with a meaningful world. The "meaning" of this world is not, however, eternally fixed or founded on a firm base.

If meaning is differential and not based on an essential property of the sign, it follows that no sign may be privileged above the others. All signs are equal in that they all mean in terms of the others. Not only does the language system lack a foundation outside itself; it has no centre in itself. There is no "transcendental signified" outside the system and no singular meaning around which other signifiers group themselves in ranked order. Instead, to determine the meaning (signified) of any sign, I have to refer to other signs, which again refer me to still other signs. Nowhere do I

encounter a meaning that comes forth from contemplating the sign in itself and that escapes the endless process of differentiating.

Structuralism assumed that a sign system (*langue*) can be studied synchronically, in an ahistorical state of stability. Given such a fixed system, it is possible to analyze texts based on this system in an objective, strictly scientific way. Although the wiser structuralists did not claim that this procedure would reveal the meaning of a text, they believed it would show *how* the text is structured as a meaningful unit. The strictly objective procedure would eliminate most disagreements and limit the proliferation of conflicting interpretations. All this becomes possible because the basic stability of the sign system is assumed *and because the interpreter is regarded as a neutral observer outside time and space.* .

Poststructuralists challenge these presuppositions. The ideal *langue* of synchronic studies can be conceptualized as a field in which the signs occupy fixed positions with relation to one another. The relative positions of the signs (not their "content") determine their meaning and the rules of their usage. Now such a stable situation does not persist for even a minute in practice. The mere use of signs continually destabilizes the system. When a word is used in new contexts, the result is a shift, however small, in the whole system (since all the relationships have to be realigned). But the practical point that *parole* (the use of signs) constantly changes the *langue* (the sign system) is not the main one. Derrida argues that the possibility of using signs depends on the principle of *arbitrary* substitution or representation. The signifier "stands for" the signified, but there is not reason why a particular signified should stand for a particular signifier. This allows for a situation in which one signifier can stand for different signifieds, so that the sign is internally differentiated (differs from itself).

The signifier "cat" can be used both "literally" and "figuratively" (Deconstruction generally questions the fixed boundary between literal and figurative). Since the literal and the figurative "cat" are not different signifiers, we have to say that the sign "differs from itself" in the two uses. Moreover, we can also say that a lion is one of the big cats. This is not a figurative use of the word, yet it is different. The possibility of this internal differentiation is always present in language – it belongs to its very structure.

Paul de Man approaches the problem from a different angle. The three systems that work in language - grammar, rhetoric and logic - do not complement one another but often clash. Thus the phrases "biblical interpretation" and "scholarly interpretation" follow the same grammatical pattern (attributive adjective plus noun), but have different logical patterns. Similarly, "You were very clever" may be praise or criticism. The ironic sentence and the "straight" sentence cannot be distinguished from one another grammatically.

From the side of readers there is no greater stability. Again, the practical point that no human reader has an overview of the whole system or the time to differentiate the individual sign from all other signs is a minor one. Readers are in principle not outside the signifying system, being themselves effects of the system. In the process of reading they leave their traces on the text and the text leaves its traces on them. When I read the end of a text I am no longer the reader I was when I read the beginning. Nor will I be the same when I reread the text. Readers too are internally differentiated, in flux, unstable.

Derrida thus questions the distinction between *langue* and *parole* and argues that the structure of language is in constant flux. Indeed, flux, substitution and differentiation are the structuring principles of language. No fixed structure is objectively present in a text or in the underlying language. Meaning is indeed contextual in the double sense that it depends on the context of signs within a system and on the context of use. Since both the system and the use are in flux, however,

the context cannot be pinned down. As Derrida puts it, the context is never "saturated" - *it has no boundaries*. Whereas structuralism emphasises the importance of differential language *systems*, poststructuralism emphasizes the *differentiality* of the system.

(c) Logocentrism and the metaphysics of présence

Derrida claims that the Western tradition of thought has been dominated by "logocentrism" (*logos* = word, speech, idea, reason) and the metaphysics of presence. According to Norris (1982:19), "Deconstruction works to undo the idea - according to Derrida the ruling illusion of Western metaphysics - that reason can somehow dispense with language and arrive at a pure, self-authenticating truth or method."

In logocentric systems some fixed point of reference is identified and used as a centre of all signifying systems. Everything else is assigned meaning in relation to this centre; even change can be understood in terms of the unchanging centre. This "logos" that serves as centre may be God (as "transcendental signified"), some truth or idea, an absolute origin (*arché*), or – typically in Western humanism – the reasonable, self-conscious human subject. Whatever it is, it is conceived to be unitary, self-identical (it simply is itself), immediately present to itself (it needs no outside mediation), the source of meaning and value, and self-authenticating (it vouches for itself). This obviously means it must be located outside language as a system of differentiation, in which nothing has meaning in itself or remains fixed in space and time.

Derrida connects the notion of a fixed centre with that of "full presence", the notion that something can fully know itself and be fully conscious of itself as "this, here and now" as opposed to "that, there and then". "Presence" thus refers to both time and space and sets up a boundary between "inside" and "outside". The "inside", being primary and authentic, is the judge of the "outside", which is always secondary and copied. Western philosophy has usually regarded the human subject, viewed as unified, self-conscious and rational, as such a centre, fully present to itself. The subject's inherent rationality (logos) gives rise to the idea (logos) "inside" the subject (purely interior, without the mediation of language). Secondarily, the subject's speech (logos) expresses this interiority by means of the word (logos).

Logos as word (language) is thus secondary to logos as reason, as idea present to the subject *before* it is expressed. The human subject as creator of language uses language to order the outside world in accordance with reason – the subject is "the measure (judge) of all things". Meaning therefore can always in principle be fixed: it is a human product based on an idea that was fully present to the language user. Derrida's critique of the notion of *présence* questions the assumption that the human subject has an immediate or direct (introspective) access to its own consciousness, that the subject is itself the pure origin of univocal meaning.

Before moving to the details of Derrida's critique, it is important to note that he does not regard logocentrism (or the metaphysics of presence) as a harmless philosophical mistake. The basic oppositions implicit in any logocentric system (identity-difference, rational-irrational, centre-margin, primary-secondary, and so on) give rise to a whole chain of oppositions. Just as the basic oppositions were ordered hierarchically (always giving preference to the first term), so the other oppositions derived from them also impose violent hierarchies. These hierarchies are at work in (for instance) sexism, racism and homophobia.

Although Western humanist philosophy spoke of "the (human) subject" in general, in practice the spokespersons of logocentrism were (virtually without exception) European, middle-class, heterosexual males. This set the standard for "being a subject" and "being at the centre". Those who did not conform to this standard were banished to the margins. Establishing a centre

inevitably leads to the marginalization of some. The centre never simply stabilizes an order *in language*; since language (in the broadest sense) is the source of significance, the linguistic order has political and social implications. When identity is privileged at the expense of difference, those who are perceived as different will automatically be regarded as inferior.

Derrida points out that none of the orders imposed in the name of a centre or foundation has ever validated itself. Each supposed *description* (of the "true" order) is accompanied by a command, a *prescription*. "These are the facts; therefore this is what you have to do." A truly self-evident and self-validating order would require no command. Although logocentric thought claims to *inform* us about the (real) order of the world, it really orders the world to *conform* to its (arbitrary) commands. Logocentric thought, far from being a "purely rational" search for neutral "truth", is closely linked to strategies of domination – knowledge is power!

Once the notion of a centre (foundation, *arché*, full presence) is rejected, nothing limits what Derrida calls the play of signifiers. Without a secure, fixed point with reference to which we can test our interpretations, the search for final truths, assured knowledge, reliable methods and criteria, eternal moral values or any "metaphysical comfort" (Nietzsche) becomes pointless. Contrary to popular opinion, however, Derrida does not reject *all* notions of truth, knowledge, criteria and moral value. He seeks to redefine these notions, freeing them from their metaphysical baggage and their complicity with regimes of domination.

Derrida recognizes that this is no easy task. Logocentrism (metaphysics) is not a conspiracy cooked up by philosophers in the service of a small elite. It has shaped our whole language (and thus our subjectivity) so radically that we cannot "mean" except by means of the language of metaphysics – it is our only language. To pretend to criticize the signifying system "from the outside" would be to slip back into the very mistake of metaphysics, the mistake of claiming a position outside language. Derrida therefore deliberately uses language (the language of metaphysics!) against itself, looking for openings, inconsistencies and instabilities that can be exploited to undo the built-in logocentrism of our language. Deconstruction is not a new theory or method, but is an activity in and against language.

(d) Phonocentrism and "writing"

Derrida's denunciation of what he calls "phonocentrism" and his preference for "writing" are closely connected to this argument against logocentrism. Phonocentrism assumes that the spoken word directly expresses a thought that was fully present to the speaker beforehand (outside language). It implies that the speaker has immediate access to his or her own meaning. In phonocentric thinking writing is devalued, because it is merely a "substitute" for speech, a "copy" of speech. Derrida explains:

> The priority of the spoken language over written or silent language stems from the fact that when words are spoken the speaker and the listener are supposed to be simultaneously present to one another; they are supposed to be the same, pure, unmediated presence. This ideal of perfect self-presence, of the immediate possession of meaning, is what is expressed by the phonocentric necessity.

> *Writing*, on the other hand, is considered subversive in so far as it creates a spatial and temporal distance between the author and audience; writing presupposes the absence of the author and so we can never be sure exactly what is meant by a written text; it can have many different meanings as opposed to a single, unifying one (quoted in Kearney 1986:116).

Using Saussure's theory, Derrida argues that speech is possible only on the basis of a system of substitution, a possibility of making "copies". This system and this possibility exist prior to and outside the act of speaking. It is, in a sense, *inscribed* (written) in the language and in the speaker as a product of language. Moreover, "meanings" are not created spontaneously in the minds of speakers; they are always already inscribed in the language. In this sense speech is a copy of writing.

Derrida's point is far from simple and clear. In the first place, by writing he does not mean writing as we know it; therefore his term is often left untranslated - as *écriture*. Though *écriture* in his sense is not identical to (ordinary) writing, it is analogous to writing rather than to speech. Nor is he saying that speakers or writers interpret what they have said or written after the act of speech or writing is completed. He is saying that speakers and writers have no direct, privileged access to "their" ideas – no access that bypasses "a kind of writing".

Perhaps the best way to get a grip on Derrida's use of *écriture* is to note with what he associates it. As opposed to speech (supposedly an expression of an original, self-sufficient thought present to the speaker), *écriture* is related to separation, differentiation and absence. The written text is no longer tied to the supposed source, but moves away in time and space. It survives the death of its author; in a sense it *is* the death of the author, because the text, once written, slips from the authority of the author. In its journey the written text is subject to different interpretations and uses in different contexts – it is not tied to the intention of an author. The written text is not self-identical but self-differentiating. Instead of marking presence, it marks absence (of its author, its referents and a determinate meaning).

But *écriture* also relates to the impersonal, non-conscious and arbitrary aspect of the linguistic system and the influence these have on supposedly free subjects. Derrida often relates *écriture* to what Freud called the unconscious. In this respect it suggests that subjects do not create meaning "freely" and consciously, but are constrained by rules and forces of which they are not even aware. Admittedly, Derrida does not regard these rules and constraints as if they were "things" - substantial in themselves and outside language. Like the trace (see below), *écriture* is not a thing, but rather a non-thing – the indented (empty) space when a letter is engraved that makes the letter appear by pure differentiation. Derrida also notes, using the same image of engraving, that writing is not without a certain violence (pressure, indentation).

Derrida deliberately overturns the existing hierarchy by giving preference to "writing" rather than to speech. Speech is really another form of writing. It is possible to understand speech only through its analogy to writing. But this overturning is not final; it is a preliminary move against logocentrism and phonocentrism.

(e) Différance, *the trace and the play of signifiers*

As we have seen, Derrida believes that neither the system of signs nor the sign itself is stable. The system is constantly changed by *parole* and the sign tends to become internally differentiated. In Saussure's theory differences could be used to determine meaning, because signs and their relationships to one another were deemed stable. *One could identify in terms of difference*. When everything is in flux, *fixed differences give way to a process of differentiation*. Derrida uses the term *différance* to capture something of this instability. The term is based on two meanings of the French verb *différer*: 1) to differ (to be non-identical, separate, distinct, not equal) and 2) to defer (to interrupt, postpone, delay, divert). Derrida notes that the French verb "seems to differ from itself"; it is an example of internal differentiation. He also insists that *différance* is "neither a word nor a concept" (Derrida 1998:385). Derrida derives from both these meanings a new noun

that differs from the normal French word *différence* in writing but not in speech: *différence* and *différance* are pronounced the same.

By packaging the two meanings in one term, Derrida addresses simultaneously two aspects of differentiation, the spatial and the temporal. "To differ" suggests what is separate or non-identical by being differentiated *in space*. "To defer" suggests something differentiated *in time* – "not now but later". According to Derrida, *différance* is what makes differentiation in time and space possible. It is not a difference or set of differences, but the condition of "differencing".

Différance may be taken as indication that the meaning we assign to a text is always preliminary, that meaning always moves beyond our reach. At the very moment that meaning is "established", this meaning is undermined by the new differences that have instantly emerged between this newly established meaning and other existing ones. Each new act of interpretation sets off a chain reaction of differentiation through which closure (finality about meaning) is infinitely postponed. This common understanding of the term is not wrong, but it does not plumb the depth of Derrida's idea.

By calling *différance* the provisional name for "sameness which is not identical", he shows his interest in the interplay between sameness and difference, regularity and singularity.

Texts (contrary to the view of some) are not simply "marks on paper", open to any random interpretation. They are, instead, *re-marks* (iterations, repetitions) that emerge with a degree of recognizable regularity from previous cases. For instance, they "belong to" a known genre or exhibit the known style of an author. Without this regularity, texts would be unreadable in an absolute sense. Yet texts are also irreducibly singular and can never be deciphered according to a fixed code or law. Derrida often uses the example of the (handwritten) signature to explain this. A person's signature is supposed to be the unique mark of authenticity, a representation of the uniqueness of the person. Yet to function in this way, the signature must be repeatable and recognizable. This opens the door to copying in the sense of forgery.

Différance "designates this unity of chance and necessity" (Derrida 1998:389), the fact that textual meaning is determined in many ways, but never in such a way that meaning is the determinate effect of determinate causes. *Différance* as *internal* differentiation ("non-identiy with oneself") "renders determinacy both possible and necessary" (Derrida 1988:149), but also limits it.

Différance has to be defined mainly in negative terms: it is not a thing or substance, an activity of the subject or the object, an origin or cause (in the past) or a *telos* (in the future). Nor is it absence, nothing or negativity; it goes beyond the normal dialectical oppositions - presence-absence, being-nothingness, inside-outside, cause-effect, *arché-telos* – of metaphysical thinking and undermines them.

In this respect it is closely linked to the "non-concept" *trace* – probably the most difficult term in Derrida's vocabulary. In both French and English the word trace has a wide range of meanings – path, footprint, faint mark, minimal quantity, and so on. Networks of traces enable interpretation, but traces are not specific aspects "in the text". One could say that these traces are something like the memory of texts, keeping in mind that memories are not eternally fixed (traces may be erased). Moreover, traces also relate to the future. In interpretation traces enable both a degree of retention (of the past) and a degree of pre-tension (determinate openings towards the future).

Traces make it possible for interpreters to offer readings that would at least find widespread acceptance, but they do not set an absolute limit. Indeed, both *différance* and the trace leave room for *play*, another important term in deconstruction.

The word play (specifically the French *jeu*) has a number of meanings. It can refer to the uncompromised, free activity of (for instance) children - usually associated with fun. In this sense it is sometimes translated as "freeplay" (a translation Derrida dislikes). It can also refer to the (relative) "looseness" between parts in a machine, which is absolutely necessary for the functioning of the machine. Without play in this sense, the machine seizes, jams and grinds to a stop. Lastly, play is also (in French) associated with gambling. In this sense, it adds to the connotation of uncertainty that of risk and possible loss.

Derrida makes use of all these senses of play. In contrast to the desperately serious quest for the one, univocal meaning of a text, the play of interpretation has an element of irreverent gaiety and a lack of deadly solemnity. "Deconstruction celebrates the endless multiplication of meaning over the spurious if comforting unity of a single correct reading" (Kearney 1986:123). Derrida himself delights in playing with words, in punning and parody. But he does not believe that play is either fully creative or in all respects free. The play of signifiers also implies that human beings can never control or creatively "make" meaning. Subjects are themselves subject to this play: they are as much playthings as they are players. Nor is the game of interpreting without cost. Often there is much at stake, yet one cannot avoid the risk. One can, however, gamble responsibly!

Two implications of Derrida's notion of play deserve careful attention. Because there is a *certain* play, interpretation is both *unlimited and limited*. Although there is always an opening for new meaning, some interpretations are indeed *false or bad* (see Derrida 1988:146). This is not really a paradox. The list of positive whole numbers (1, 2, 3, 4 ...) is infinite (unlimited), but certain numbers (-1, ⅛, 0, etc) fall outside this list.

Moreover, the proliferation of possible interpretations does not depend on the "richness" of texts, but on their "poverty". The features of texts that enable new and different readings are all connected to openness and lack. For instance, writing (*écriture*) is not bound to a fixed context in time or space, fixed laws (of genre, etc) or an originating intention of the author.

No one is able to control the infinite possibilities of meaning in language, since there is no centre that stabilizes the system. As Culler (1975:247) says: "Interpretation is not a matter of recovering some meaning which lies behind the work and serves as a centre governing its structure; it is rather an attempt to participate and observe the play of possible meanings to which the text gives access." Some take this to mean that the meaning of a text is *indeterminate* and that deconstruction, having done away with stability, amounts to a dizzying pursuit of an endless stream of novelties. Indeed, some American theorists seem to relish above all else the sense of being "cast into the abyss", the "state of suspended ignorance".

Derrida, who dislikes the term "indeterminacy", often draws attention to the *great stability* in our patterns of thought, conventions, usages and traditions and notes that *without this stability no reading would be possible*. But the stabilizing factors are not fixed, absolute or natural; the point of deconstruction is that they may be questioned and destabilized. To ignore an established, traditional reading in order to present a "new reading" (which will always in some ways be an old one) is to miss a vital opportunity to interrogate the traditional reading. How did it establish (impose) itself? What possibilities were pushed to the margins when this tradition became central and why? What forces (ideological, political, etc) were at work?

What "play" does is to open up the space for such questioning. In "writing" the possibility of "closure" is in principle ruled out; precisely those texts that (on the surface) wish to *establish* (fix) a particular view manifest most clearly the structural impossibility of grounding anything by means of language. Somewhere in each of the texts there will be an opening, a counter-current, an ambiguity, an "otherness" with respect to what the text puts forward as its identity. At these

points where the text "differs from itself" the structure of *undecidability* (of the meaning, act, intention, etc) in the text is revealed. Derrida uses undecidability (rather than indeterminacy) because decisions are in fact made and have to be made; the term undecidability suggests that deciding is an act of responsibility and not the following of a fixed law (method, procedure).

In Derrida's work the experience of undecidability is often linked with words that – when they are carefully examined - undermine the logic of logocentric thinking: supplement, graft, pharmakon, hymen, etc. It is not possible to examine all of these here. In American deconstruction more emphasis falls on the disjunction between literal and figurative language. At certain points a text allows two mutually exclusive readings – a literal and a figurative one. Since the language itself does not offer a solution, the reader is faced with an *aporia* (blockage) that reveals *the impossibility of reading*. Language is *opaque*: it shows itself, but it is neither a mirror of nor a window upon the world beyond language. It sometimes seems as if American deconstruction (emphasizing indeterminacy) lacks the ethical edge of Derrida's deconstruction, which always involves responsibility toward "the other" that calls from the text.

(f) Textuality, intertextuality and dissemination

One of the logocentric oppositions that Derrida calls into question is that of "inside and outside". As a result, the notion of "the" text (neatly framed, separated from other texts and with its own author) becomes questionable. Texts are "invaded" by other texts and "spill over" into other texts. These "other texts" are by no means all texts in the traditional sense (written documents). According to Derrida, social practices, cultural norms and political ideologies (for instance) are all texts that influence other texts and are influenced by them. All texts share in a general textuality, which means that they are *inscribed* and exhibit the structure of writing (as defined by Derrida).

Thus Derrida's famous statement "There is nothing outside the text" (or, "there is no 'outside-of-text'") does not mean that nothing but written documents (or expressions in language) exist. With this statement he wishes to emphasize that we have no access to reality but through language in the sense of *écriture* (see Degenaar 1992:201). Derrida is not arguing that everything in reality consists of texts (written documents). He wishes to undercut the notion that the meaning of a text can be fixed by referring to a stable point outside the text (context, reality as it is perceived, etc). Because these supposedly "outside" factors exhibit the structure of *écriture,* they are by no means more fixed and stable than texts in the normal sense. They function as signs among other signs, and our awareness of them is shaped by textuality and language. The play of signification and *différance* affects them as well.

Texts cannot be read from a fixed, non-textual point of reference outside themselves. Nor can they be read as self-enclosed systems of meaning. A "text" is, from a deconstructive perspective, not an ahistorical, stable or fixed document that remains "there" as an unchanging self-identical monument. If this were the case, the meaning of the text could indeed be determined by describing in detail the relationships within the fixed frame (as proposed by New Criticism). But texts are caught up in the play of signification in which they are constantly differentiated from themselves. Indeed, there is no point of origin at which the text ever was self-identical. Texts are thus more like on-going events than like "things".

When a text is written, it is at once new and old; it is both a new selection and combination and a repetition of other texts. The "author", inscribed into the author role by a vast number of texts, consciously uses existing "texts" (themes, plots, technical terminology, structuring devices, arguments, etc). But a great number of other existing texts find their way into the new text at the

unconscious level: ideological biases, grammatical schemata, snatches of forgotten experiences, etc. When this text is read, something similar happens. The reader (also inscribed as a text) brings to the reading, both consciously and unconsciously, a host of "texts". The text is read "in the context of", "in the light of", "as opposed to", "with a view to" or "from the perspective of". All these phrases refer to the participation of other texts in the process of reading.

Moreover, each reading (or re-inscription) of the text leaves "traces" that may (or may not!) be activated in subsequent readings. For instance, many readers of the Bible are deeply influenced by the traces left by centuries of biblical interpretation within Christian communities. These traces, in turn, may depend on earlier (now erased) traces left by long forgotten "texts". Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think of a linear history in this regard. Some people would understand a modern play based on the book of Jonah in the light of their previous knowledge of this book, but some may read the play first and then read the book afterwards "in the light of the play".

The term "intertextuality", apparently first employed by Julia Kristeva, is often used in this regard. Intertextuality does not simply mean that texts contain conscious or unconscious quotations from and references to other texts. It refers to the open process of play among texts, which allows one to read (again, consciously or unconsciously) one text in the light of another – earlier or later - text. Thus one could speak of "Derrida's influence on Plato", given that Derrida's reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* has left a "mark" that is currently hard to ignore when one reads the latter. Of course, "Derrida's influence on Plato" makes sense only if the two personal names are taken to refer to texts.

The notions of textuality and intertextuality undermine the opposition presence-absence, because they remind us that any text is "present" to us only by virtue of other, absent texts. For instance, for someone without prior acquaintance with the particular language in a text, the text would be absent as a meaningful text. "Acquaintance with the language", however, implies knowledge of other, absent texts. Neither presence nor absence is "pure", because the two supplement each other in writing or reading.

Without a central "presence", meaning cannot be "located" – behind, in or in front of the text. Instead, meaning is *disseminated*, scattered, spread out across the boundaries of texts. The term dissemination, which cannot be discussed fully here, implies both a loss of meaning and a gain of (new) meaning. When seed (semen) is scattered, it shifts its location, loses its "nature" and gives rise to new life that is "the same but different." One could also talk of a cross-fertilization among texts, in which meanings are both exchanged and changed.

Here one has to remember Derrida's broad conception of "text": intertextuality and dissemination can lead to the intermingling and transformation of *different* systems of signs. Thus dissemination also takes place when a particular *ideology* influences a *text* and the text in turn influences a particular *social practice*. Of course, the "influences" are not direct and predictable, but in a sense "playful". There is no continuous line in which the ideology necessarily reinforces the social practice through the text. Instead, there is often rupture, fragmentation, doubling back – mainly because other texts intervene along the way. Meaning is therefore constantly being constructed and deconstructed in an intertextual event in which a reader (another unstable "text") becomes entangled in a play of differences among other unstable texts.

A further implication is that a text never belongs to either the author or the reader and is never written or read either "subjectively" or "objectively". Deconstruction disputes the communication model with its hierarchy of author-text-reader and any rigid distinctions between the world behind the text, the text itself and the world in front of the text. Instead, a text is seen as an

integral part of an intertextual play of signs through language. A text is merely an "episode" in the history of textuality.

Derrida's terms are often tricky precisely because he seeks to undermine the meta-physical connotations entrenched in our languages. In his vocabulary textuality, *écriture*, *différance*, trace, play, supplement and dissemination have specialised meanings. At the same time he acknowledges that one is forced to use words that are tainted by logocentric thought, although they are in some ways inappropriate. For instance, he frequently uses the terms language, sign and structure, but he makes it clear that deconstruction is *not* a theory of language (as *langue*), of the sign or of structure. He also regards the words "meaning" and "interpretation" with suspicion.

(g) Deconstruction and the reading of texts

Derrida prefers the term "reading" to "interpretation" because the latter suggests a reliable, fixed method that can be used to "decipher" meaning in the text. He certainly does not want to sell a "new method of interpretation" called deconstruction. Deconstruction, as Derrida practices it, actually entails a wide variety of reading strategies; he insists that each text (and context) partly determines the strategy to be used. It is, however, possible to identify some characteristic reading strategies often employed in deconstruction.

Contrary to the view of some critics *and* some admirers of deconstruction, a deconstructive reading is not a random "playing around" in which "anything goes". Derrida insists that any reading needs a "guardrail" to prevent it from going off at a tangent. This guardrail is provided by a careful "straight" reading that employs all "the instruments of traditional criticism" (including reference to possible intentions of the author). By following "solid" traditions, conventions and codes one reaches a reading that would ensure a minimal level of consensus as to the meaning of the text. That is, most people would agree that the text at least means *roughly* this. Certain completely ridiculous and incompetent readings are excluded.

But the preliminary reading is not based on absolutely stable, "natural" facts; the traditions and conventions used to reach this reading are stable and solid only up to a point. A deconstructive reading questions and destabilizes at least some of them, showing that other forces are at work in the text as well. Barbara Johnson says in this regard that deconstruction proceeds by "teasing out the warring factions" in the text. Deconstruction is thus not an assault on the text from the *outside*, but an analysis that shows the text to be *internally* divided – the text "deconstructs itself". One needs to get the overt "drift" of the text in the preliminary reading in order to demonstrate the counter-currents within the text.

Deconstructive readings often identify words, metaphors and arguments in the text that turn out to be double edged, or crucial breaks in what purports to be a closely knitted line of thought. These show how the text could easily have taken another direction.

A famous example is Derrida's reading of JJ Rousseau's argument about speech and writing. Rousseau insists that speech is superior to writing; the written word is no more than a secondary, inadequate "supplement" to the spoken word. To overlook this "surface meaning" of Rousseau's text is nothing but incompetent reading. But in his deconstructive reading Derrida shows how slippery the term "supplement" is. Something that is full and complete in itself requires no supplement. Moreover, in French "supplement" can mean "that which supplants (replaces) something else". In a long and rigorous argument Derrida demonstrates that Rousseau's use of the word "supplement" effectively overturns the point Rousseau strives to make.

The history of biblical interpretation provides examples of the contradictions that arise from following "self-evident" or "undeniable" lines of reading. Since the time of the New Testament many interpreters have argued that women are "clearly" secondary and inferior to men because - in Genesis 2 - Eve was created *after* Adam as his "helper" (supplement!). But the same interpreters often argue that humans are superior to all other creatures because – in Genesis 1 – they were created *after* all the others. And many interpreters believe that Jonah 1:9 is the key verse in the first part of the book, because it stands at the *centre* of the structure (not the beginning or the end).

In other cases the deconstructive reading depends on what is all too deliberately excluded from a text or pushed to the margins. For instance, a text may seek to lay down the rule that X = Y "in all normal cases". The text thus acknowledges that X is not always Y, but may sometimes be A or Z. It tries to neutralize such challenges to the rule by *ruling* that some cases are abnormal. The "abnormal" may indeed be ignored, but what is left unsaid is that certain cases are called "abnormal" merely because they do not conform to the rule. Such cases are thus not ignored because they are ("naturally") marginal; they are *marginalized* because the rule ignores them.

Deconstruction attempts to turn a text against itself to show how traditional interpretation (including the "interpretation" that constituted the writing of the text) has sought to exclude or marginalize meanings allowed by the play within the text. It emphasizes the "openings" in the text that logocentric readings, intent on a single truth, seek to suppress. Through these openings we then hear different voices calling to us from the text and become aware that the apparently self-identical text is inhabited by differences and otherness.

Since individual texts are woven into a broader fabric of textuality, deconstruction is not simply an exercise in abstract philosophy or literary criticism. As we have seen, Derrida believes that the typical binary oppositions of metaphysics are linked to a social order and its hierarchical structure. Deconstruction exposes the hierarchy by undermining and overturning the binary oppositions, which are, after all, merely constructions or impositions. Deconstruction is therefore (in the case of its worthier exponents) a form of social critique.

Derrida explains his procedure as follows: Having recognized that the binary oppositions of metaphysics set up an "order of subordination", deconstruction does not try immediately to neutralize the oppositions. The opposition male-female, always implying subordination of the female, is not deconstructed by saying that men and women are equal. First one has to *reverse* (overturn) the order by positing that men are secondary to women. Of course, this is not a "truth" that deconstruction wishes to establish; indeed, the reversal remains within the old logocentric system of thinking. But this move of "upsetting" (overturning) will prove to be so upsetting (unsettling, disconcerting) to people that they may rethink the entire system of which the male-female hierarchy is part. Without the moment of reversal, it is impossible to *displace* the system, that is, revise the entire conceptual framework.

In this connection Derrida speaks of a "double gesture, a double science, a double writing". Deconstruction posits and practices the reversal of the order, knowing that the reversal provides no adequate answer to the problem. Precisely those who now see that the superiority of women to men is nonsense (having previously regarded the superiority of men to women as sense!) would be forced to question the whole chain of concepts that ties people to this opposition - and others. Derrida's point is that any particular opposition or concept functions within a "systematic chain" or system of concepts. It is the conceptual order (and the related non-conceptual order) as a whole that has to be shifted.

6.4.2 Jonah in the light of deconstruction: Fishy stories a, b, c …

Since deconstruction questions the notions of a privileged reading and a correct way of interpreting, no reading is *the* (final or correct) deconstructive reading. All readings that show how a text "differs from itself" and from the accepted interpretation of it contain elements of deconstruction. Often deconstructing the "accepted" interpretation involves rigorous and detailed arguments based on the possibilities offered by the text itself. By calling attention to such possibilities, deconstruction demonstrates how we impose meaning by a process of exclusion. But experiments with unusual forms of presentation are also sometimes used to demonstrate how random and questionable any "method" (system, structure) is.

In this section I juxtapose three fragments of deconstructive readings of Jonah. The fragments – all interpretation is fragmentary – yield no new totality, but undermine the notion of a final synthesis terminating all questioning. Rather than showing how deconstructive criticism "should be done", they demonstrate the plurality of possible interpretive discourses.

(a) The sign of Jonah

What is the book of Jonah about? Jonah and the sailors? Jonah and the fish? Jonah and Nineveh? Most interpreters agree that the book is about Jonah and God, because these two characters appear throughout the book, from the beginning to the end. They are the two "signs" we have to interpret to understand the book.

While most of the characters (even the fish!) are referred to by different words (signifiers), Jonah is always called Jonah. Surely the stable signifier /Jonah/ holds the key to the book – if we can only find out what it signifies! Jonah's personal name hints at his unique individuality as a subject. According to the typical humanist view, he must therefore be an autonomous source of meaning. Moreover, he is called "the son of Amittai", which can be read as 'the son of truth'. Of what truth is Jonah a sign? What does /Jonah/ (the signifier) mean?

One possible answer is that it simply means (in Hebrew) "dove". Of course Jonah is not literally a bird. Could he be a dove figuratively? But we have no stable figurative meaning for dove. Is he Noah's dove? The dove of peace? The Holy Spirit? The silly dove that flutters back and forth (Hosea 7:11)? The dove that mourns (Isaiah 59:11)? The beautiful dove (Song of Songs 1:15)? Just as language allows the signifier /dove/ to be linked to both a common species of bird and a singular person, so the logic of figuration allows "dove" to have divergent figurative associations.

Can we determine the meaning of Jonah as signifier and subject through the actions and words of Jonah? Again the interpreter is thwarted. In 1:9 Jonah "says who he is", but his previous disobedient actions give the lie to his "confession". In 3:4 Jonah obediently delivers Yahweh's message (3:4), but this word, which is not his own, turns out to be false as well. Nineveh is not destroyed. His other words and actions are equally ambiguous and convey no clear message. When he admits to the sailors that the storm is his fault (1:10), he provides no new information - the lot had already told the sailors this (1:7). In 4:2 Jonah refers to a previous "word" of his, suggesting that this had been a true word. This word had never been spoken and, in any case, it is simply a repetition of an old tradition.

In the last chapter Jonah fluctuates between anger, despair and gladness, demonstrating once and for all that there is no stable meaning to the signifier /Jonah/ and no fixed centre to the subject Jonah. Indeed, Jonah finds life so meaningless that he wishes for death. The sign of Jonah and the subject Jonah, far from being sources of meaning and truth, become the tomb of meaning and

truth. The signifier remains stable, but it keeps gliding over different significances without being finally fixed to any one.

Conventional exegetes might agree with this, adding that God provides stability and meaning in the story. But in the book God has different names. Early on there is some logic to the change in divine names. Jonah is called by Yahweh, the God of Israel. The sailors, being "pagans", pray "each to his god". The divine name *Elohim* that is used here can mean God, a god or gods – there is no difference in the Hebrew. When the captain asks Jonah to pray to his god (*Elohim*), a plurality of gods is again assumed. In 2:9 Jonah says that his God is Yahweh. Having heard about this God (Yahweh), the sailors pray and sacrifice to Yahweh. Thus the first section distinguished between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and the gods of other nations.

But later things become more difficult. In 3:3 Nineveh is called a "great city of god" (*Elohim*). Though this is usually taken to be a superlative ("great even by divine standards"), it could mean that Nineveh was a city of *Elohim* (gods?) rather than Yahweh. The beginning of verse 3:5 is usually translated "and the men of Nineveh believed God"; it can also be translated "*but* the men of Nineveh believed in *Elohim*" (god or gods), suggesting that the people of Nineveh placed their trust in *Elohim*, not Yahweh. They pray to this god of theirs (*haElohim*) and this god (*haElohim*) saves them. Is this god Yahweh or is Yahweh just one face of "this god" who is served by the people of Nineveh too and whose name is a plural?

In 4:2 Jonah introduces a new divine name *El,* the name of a common Semitic god. Is Jonah suggesting that he knew Yahweh was always just El? After this, all logic goes out of the use of divine names. In 4:6 Yahweh *Elohim* makes the gourd to grow, but in 4:7 *haElohim* sends a worm and in 4:8 *Elohim* sends a wind. In 4:9 *Elohim* addresses Jonah and in 4:10 Yahweh addresses Jonah. The last chapter uses four different divine names!

Does this mean that Yahweh, *El, haElohim* (the God) and *Elohim* (the many gods) are all the same? This could be a sobering though, but it does not explain the diverse actions attributed to the divine figure. We hear of anger and punishment, of compassion and repentance, of creative and destructive actions (the gourd and the worm). Can we still think of a divine unity masked by different names or must we accept that our singular idea of the divine is a vain attempt to get the better of an irreducible plurality? Since the book was written after the exile, the author and readers would have known that even the one solid "achievement" recorded in the book – the sparing of Nineveh – had no lasting meaning. Nineveh was destroyed in the end; therefore the word of salvation was as deceptive as the word of judgment.

This is not "the message of Jonah", nor would deconstructive critics claim that it is. The book is clearly a playful plea for openness to others (non-Israelites) and a defence of a pluralism *anchored in faith in and obedience to Yahweh.* What the deconstructive reading does is to question this final anchoring by showing that a more radical plurality and a less restrained play has slipped into the text *in spite of the overt intention of the text.* The God (*haElohim*) who is supposed to provide the centre has to be named by a word that is grammatically in the plural and acts in ways that are so unpredictable as to undermine all stable foundations.

It turns out that Jonah, as stable signifier or (supposedly) centred subject, has no stable meaning or truth to impart. All his words are ambiguous, questionable, unreliable. But the attempt to establish a foundation for meaning and truth in God as transcendental signifier fails, because God has many names and acts in diverse ways. Yahweh, whose "other" plural (internally differentiated) name can stand for (true) God and (false) gods, issues a word to Jonah, but this word is not a fixed truth. Its meaning is deferred: what was seen as a final word of condemnation turns out to be a

call to repentance. Is this divine word any more certain than the "word" that the sailors received when they cast the lots?

(b) Fishing expeditions: Fragments of an interminable dialogue

A: Surely you don't think theologians swallow the story of Jonah whole? As Campbell Morgan said: "Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they failed to see the great God." May an author not use fiction to present the truth?

B: Come now. If the great fish of chapter 1 is fiction, so is the great, compassionate God of chapter 3. Certainly, the book is about salvation, but what saves us is not the fictive fish or your fictive God, but our ability to create fictions, to build worlds of words. What you have to give up is not the factuality of the fish story, but the notion of facts beyond our fictions.

C: There you miss the point. Indeed, fictions are ways in which we express ourselves, but we do express *ourselves*, our real psychic life. You are running away from that problem just as Jonah did. He had to face up to his unconscious self, his darker, monstrous side before he could relate to his higher self. So the fish and God are equally part of the real Jonah. Fictions pure and simple don't help us to deal with the storms in our life.

A: I can't buy that. Jonah is not the individual; he is the representative of his people, their bigotry and xenophobia. That's what imprisons him.

B: So Jonah was swallowed by his interpretive community? The great fish was Stanley Fish! That would explain why he remains angry and negative up to the end: there is no way out of the interpretive community. Perhaps the book is a self-consuming artifact.

C: You should read Jung on symbols of transformation. Defeating the monster and rising again from the watery grave symbolizes rebirth – even the Christians got that right. That's why Jonah in chapter 3 is willing to obey his higher self and to venture into new territory.

A: Now you're the victim of *your* interpretive community. Clearly the story pokes fun at your archetypes by standing the familiar story on its head. Instead of wailing inside the fish, Jonah has a whale of a time – because he thinks he's safe from the outside world. Anyway, who's ever heard of rebirth by vomiting?

B: Vomiting? I've always heard 'spewed forth', but I like vomiting much better. It gets rid of the misleading organic metaphor of giving birth. You know, what is fully formed inside and is then exteriorized as the unique creation of the subject? Vomiting makes me think of the words we take in from the outside and cannot handle, master or assimilate to our systems. It reminds us that we can chew over the otherness of language but cannot digest it. We can deal with it only by disjunction – vomiting.

C: The unbearable queasiness of being – or is that Sartre? So the postmodern turn simply means that your stomach turns whenever you find something hard to digest. And yet you run to the ends of the earth – to Tarshish if you like - after every tasty neologism. You swallow the most unlikely stories as long as they tell you don't have to face yourself.

A: Or, for that matter, the other or the Other that you go on about. Because the book of Jonah is also about Nineveh, about oppression, poverty, AIDS. It's far more comfortable to think of these as undecidable fictions, isn't it? As I said, you're stuck in the fish.

B: And you in your fishy story. With your Other that you've mastered by making it in your image. You're truly "fishers of men", trying to get your hooks into people. Why should I take the bait? You have compassion for Nineveh, a city you haven't seen and won't ever see. A city

of oppressors, if one is to believe the story. Why shouldn't I have compassion with all that that is excluded from the story-world you embrace? Where are the stories of Jonah's wife and the women of Nineveh? Or of the animals starved in a "pious" act of repentance for human crimes? Or of the fish forced to swallow an indigestible meal?

No, I'm not running to the abyss to escape from your story – or yours [turning to C]; I am showing you that the abyss is inside your stories and your stories inside the abyss.

(c) Jonah in Noah's ark: Fishing for intertexts

Once upon a time, long, long ago, a man called <u>No</u>ah lived in the enormous city of Nineveh. Nineveh was an ecological disaster. Its trees had been cut down for firewood. The recycling depots and waste-removal services could not cope with the mountains of garbage. A column of thick smoke rose above the city. Overpopulation had become critical.

<u>No</u>ah knew that Nineveh's time was up: the city had lost all norms. The king of Nineveh had taken to pieces Jerusalem, the "foundation of peace", killing the men, raping the wo(e)men and desecrating the temple. <u>No</u>ah believed that the city-god of Jerusalem would take revenge. This rumour was brought by a (Holy?) dove, supposedly a prophet, a "son of truth".

<u>No</u>ah discussed this with the <u>men</u> in the city, warning them about their mistaken confidence in Nineveh's military and economic power. They said, "Go and tell it to the marines" and continued with their conspicuous consumption. <u>No</u>ah replied "Then you have to paddle your own canoe when the storm breaks" and went off to build himself a life raft.

Three days later it started raining heavily. For the last time, <u>No</u>ah visited the little bower on the hill that he had used as a love nest. There he had first introduced his mistress to apples from the tree which grew there - and to other forbidden fruit. Pocketing one last apple - it was then that the worm wormed its way into his pocket – he set off for his raft. The people of Nineveh were not worth saving; it was better for him to live than to die with sinners. So <u>No</u>ah publicly washed his hands, saying: "I am innocent of your blood soon to be spilt." He wanted no more of these fools he once called his people, of the rising crime rate and the economic instability. Since he had told his sons to set aside some animals for a rainy day, he felt quite at ease. Together with his sons and the animals (they were happy to leave their wives and mistresses behind), <u>No</u>ah boarded the raft, hardly sparing a thought for the hard-hearted people of Nineveh. As the rain poured down for forty days (cf Genesis 7:17; Jonah 3:4), <u>No</u>ah's raft drifted down the Tigris. Nineveh lay on the Tigris, which, according to Gen 2:14, was one of the rivers of paradise.

Meanwhile, the king of Nineveh, by now quite worried, declared a state of emergency, proclaiming that everybody should from now on follow a rigorous, simple lifestyle. The SPCA declared a day of fasting for the animals (cf Jonah 3:7) and sacred cows saying "The rich must live simply so that the poor animals may simply live." The king also tried to make peace with third-world countries such as Israel, promising to ad/just/ his imperialist policy. Even the multi-national companies, who had no clue what their right hand advisers or their left-wing allies were doing (cf Jonah 4:11), followed the new economic directives.

The people of Nineveh started to grasp at religious straws. New religious groups mushroomed. Everybody prayed, whined and burnt straw dogs. It was, however, too late. When the storm calmed after forty days, the enormous city had been covered with the primeval waters of chaos. Every citizen and all the animals had drowned. The damage must have cost billions, but nobody was left to pay it to. Centuries later another King of the Jews did pay a deposit to try to put the divine wrath in perspective somewhat.

Noah's little raft was swept away to the Persian Gulf, while the Wind blew wherever He wished. The Waves swept over the little boat and almost smashed it to pieces. Noah and his sons cried "Save us! We are about to drown!" But they could not figure out whom to call to. Even a global divinity competition to see which god could save them got them nowhere.

And the dove and the worm? The dove hovered over the stormy waters till it found shelter on Noah's raft. Noah's sons, considering it to be a bad omen, wanted to kill it, but Noah piously pleaded for the prophetic bird's life. The worm had laid its eggs and its offspring infected all the animals, so that most of them had to be cast overboard (except the golden heifer). Only two of each species eventually survived. Finally, they realized that they needed to sacrifice a scapegoat: "It is better that one bird die rather than a whole crew" (cf John 10:50). So they wrung the dove's neck and were astonished to find an olive leaf from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem in its beak. The dead dove, thrown into the sea, became a snack for a giant fish, the Leviathan, one of God's recreational monsters (cf Psalm 104:27).

When the giant fish swallowed the dove, the storm subsided, the Wind died down and darkness fell on the whole earth (cf Mark 4:39) The sons of Noah saw the olive leaf as a sign of hope from the city-god of Jerusalem, so they solemnly swore to serve this god.

Noah and his sons then prepared for an enormous party. While Shem and Japhet went to chop wood and carry water, Ham pickled a leg of pork and Noah got pickled on wine. Naked, Noah went to sleep it off and dreamt of a Holy Dove that said: "Keep watch, pray, and care for all the surviving animals. All animals (even worms and snakes) have to reproduce and fill the earth (cf Genesis 1:17). Let all species of animals and plants, all the languages and peoples, all cultures and religions, multiply and become as technicoloured as the rainbow. Holy is our Democracy. Let babies caress poisonous snakes (cf Genesis 3:15 and Isaiah 11:8). This is a new heaven and a whitewashed earth."

Then Noah, still in a drunken stupor, had a second vision. His raft was filled with animals, worms and birds (cf Acts 10:12). Somebody said: "Hammer your ploughshares into pangas and flick-knives (cf Joel 3:10). Slaughter and eat. But first get yourself decently dressed. Everything that moves on earth will now be meat/meet for you, as long as you do not spill any pig's blood. Noah replied: "Sounds good, but wouldn't all the animals, birds and worms fear me now (cf Genesis 9:2)?" He also complained "I cannot obey both these commands. It is too difficult to worship two gods."

When Ham woke Noah, he teased him about his crazy dreams: "You pigged out on the wine." But Noah blamed the pickled pork and swore never to touch it again. His hangover was so bad that he wished he were dead. "I am better off dead than alive," he said.

Shem then reprimanded Ham for these remarks. From then on there were family feuds. The descendents of Ham (re)built the city of Nineveh (cf Genesis 10:10f), kept pigs and were anti-Semites. But Shem thought Ham and his descendants were cursed and no better than pigs. Shem said: "I am now appointed as the pastor and lecturer for my brother. He shall be our wood chopper and water carrier" (cf Genesis 9:26). Japheth was happy to be relieved of this task (but he did not bury his hatchet) and went to live around Tarshish (cf Genesis 10:4).

Thus Noah's descendants happily embodied his double vision, shedding and mingling the blood of many people and animals. They demanded retribution (cf Genesis 9:5) for the blood of their kin (only). Animals were safe only when the men had to sleep off the glut after a party.

Did the dove survive inside the Leviathan? Of course not! It was dead before it hit the water. Prophetic messengers get ridiculed, persecuted, and crucified. The digestive juices of the giant

fish liquefied the poor dove. The sea monster had got his meal on time: God had opened his hand and provided food for his beloved toy (cf Psalm 104:25-28). The birds and the sea creatures, separated from one another on the fifth day, were now happily reunited (cf Genesis 1:21).

But after three days and three nights a new dove was formed from the watery chaos – created of water and Spirit. It stretched its wings, escaped from the jaws of the whale and flew over the Mount of Olives. According to Acts 1:12, the Ascension of Jesus Christ took place from the Mount of Olives. There it disappeared into the sky, free and forever beyond our reach. Or what do *you* think ...?

6.4.3 Observations and evaluation

Derrida's writings deserve to be treated with respect – any brief summary would be inadequate and a summary "evaluation" (by way of either dismissal or appropriation) would be presumptuous. The following observations are tentative indeed and some concern deconstruction as a fashion rather than deconstruction as a term – one among many - in Derrida's terminology.

※ Deconstruction at its best is rather like a Ferrari: expensive, powerful and elegant, but also tricky to handle, difficult to maintain and not necessarily the most reliable means of transportation. Few can afford to buy it; still fewer can keep it in running condition. Interpreters who do not hold academic positions (and most of those who do) may judge that life is too short for deconstruction. On the other hand, the cheaper imitations are not good investments. It might be possible to adopt some individual features of deconstruction to good effect, although Derrida would disapprove.

※ Deconstruction, unlike other, more superficial postmodern approaches, insists on rigorous, disciplined reading. Those who wish to practice it cannot dispense with the traditional tools of interpretation (including those of historical criticism). Far from rejecting such tools, Derrida considers knowledge of them and of their use to be a *minimal level of competence*. He is the last person to claim that one can go beyond a tradition by remaining largely ignorant of it.

※ That texts have no fixed, final meaning and that ideologies and power relations play a role in the production and reception of texts are not radically new insights. Deconstruction does offer a very complex set of arguments to support these points. In Derrida's view, this complex argumentation leads to affirmation of "play", otherness and differentiation *without providing an excuse for relativism, nihilism or irresponsibility*. In its broadest conception deconstruction is not an "approach to the interpretation of texts", but an attempt to destabilize and displace an entire order of signification.

※ The attempt to show simultaneously that we cannot get outside language and that the language we have is fundamentally inadequate raises great problems. One may doubt whether any number of extremely technical texts, moving at a high level of abstraction and using an arcane specialized terminology, can have any practical influence outside a small circle – even if the arguments all hold, which is far from sure. Some say that deconstruction has in practice established a new order of exclusion, because only an elite with the time and money to study it for years can ever become "insiders".

※ Similarly, the passion for "the other" (especially the marginalized other) and the ethical agenda of deconstruction that goes with it are not always evident in practice. Various groups use deconstruction to further the interests of their own groups – hardly a novelty. Derrida's "double science" sometimes becomes indistinguishable from cynical hypocrisy in the hands of less able writers. Undecidability issues in blithe fatalism among those who can afford this luxury, while others take it as an opportunity to demonstrate their own inventiveness

(decentred subjects still love centre stage).

- Christians might object that the Christian faith at its most basic insists on God as centre, *arché* and *telos*. This is undeniably so, but God is never "fully present" to us; God addresses us through words, which are always open to different interpretations – this too is basic to Christian faith. Moreover, the "radically other" God of Christian faith is internally differentiated as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and is therefore never unilaterally either over or outside or inside us. Whether deconstruction can deal with faith, hope and love as easily as it deals with "meaning" is another question.

- Christians, humanists and Christian humanists should also consider carefully the polemics against humanism found in most versions of deconstruction. Humanism as comprehensive doctrine or philosophy might well be presumptuous and inadequate (Christians would agree), but this is no reason to abandon humanism as a somewhat fragmented response to a vaguely perceived humanity, a response driven by responsibility rather than theory. The often mechanistic and violent terminology of deconstruction is at odds with even a humble sense of humanity, with the flesh and blood, skin and bones of human social life. There is, I believe, a danger that the human baby will be thrown out with the humanistic bathwater.

- If deconstruction were to tame our arrogance and teach us to face texts and one another with humility, it would be fully justified, whatever its other failures might be. Unfortunately, I see no signs of this happening. By a twist of irony, the rhetoric of deconstruction, being pretentious, aggressive and overly self-conscious, undermines the intention it professes.

CHAPTER 7

The hermeneutics of suspicion: The hidden worlds of ideology and the unconscious

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 Looking beneath the surface

A number of influential approaches to the interpretation of texts are based on the suspicion that there are hidden factors at work in the production, circulation and reception of texts. These factors are not directly addressed in the simple communication model (sender → message → recipient), yet they may influence the interpretation events unconsciously and radically. There is, as it were, *beneath* the worlds behind, in front of and in the text a basement level, *a world beneath the text*, of which interpreters are usually unaware. At this hidden level there are connections and blockages between author and text (or between author and reader) that are not visible at the surface.

The proponents of these approaches do not necessarily reject the results of other approaches completely. One can, for instance, study the historical background of a text, the structure of the text itself or the ways in which the text has been received and draw perfectly valid conclusions from all this. The trouble is that such studies, useful as they may be, do not tell the whole story. The surface meaning is often no more than a façade, a deceptive camouflage of other, hidden meanings. What appears to be "rational" might ultimately be mere rationalization. Because normal practices of interpretation focus only on the surface, they often help to keep the world beneath the text concealed. To get to grips with the hidden world beneath the text, one has to adopt a systematic *suspicion* or *mistrust* regarding anything that may appear to be "given" or self-evident in the text.

7.1.2 Guilty secrets

Many interpreters value *objectivity* highly. They insist that the task of the interpreter is to deal with facts in a neutral manner, using impartial reason as the only tool. Once one assumes that the surface conceals certain things, this view becomes questionable. Why are some things concealed? If one hides something, it is usually because one does not want others to see it. The hermeneutics of suspicion suspects that what usually remains hidden is indeed a *guilty secret*. Neither authors, nor texts, nor readers are "innocent" or neutral. They often work together to keep up the (false) appearance of normality and rationality. Consider this example: Two colleagues may have a conversation that sounds friendly and polite, although each may actually hate the other and may be out to undermine the other. The point is that the norms of our society do not allow them to express their hatred blatantly or to work against each other openly. For this reason the very real conflict is deliberately concealed behind a polite façade.

The hermeneutics of suspicion believes that similar things happen all the time. The apparently tranquil surface of our social life hides raging power struggles, generally involving oppression of the weaker by the stronger and the resistance that arises from this. Since aspects of these power struggles clash with our conscious standards of rationality and morality, a veil is drawn over the struggles or they are repressed to the unconscious. This is done by, for instance, maintaining a silence about certain key elements of the struggle. Silence serves a double purpose: the existence

of the problem is denied and the oppressive *status quo* is reinforced. For instance, many books (by white authors) set in apartheid South Africa simply dealt with whites and their problems. By leaving blacks (the vast majority of the population) out of the story, the problems of oppression and racial tension were hidden from view. The impression was created that "other problems" deserve more attention.

Another tactic is to represent certain things as natural, normal or self-evident at the surface level, thus rationalizing or justifying what is neither rational nor just. For instance, many (male) authors argued that "normal" women prefer to stay at home, keep house and raise children – the home is "by nature" the place of the woman. Such authors could then suggest that it is in the best interest of women that they should have no say in public life. If some women opposed this view, they would be made to appear "abnormal" or "unnatural". That this view happens to serve the interest of male domination is, of course, left unsaid.

7.1.3 Who fools whom?

The previous paragraph could suggest that a great number of people *deliberately* set out to deceive others in order to protect their own interests. Must one believe that what appears to be a simple love story in which the female characters conform to certain male expectations about women is "really" part of a subtle conspiracy to oppress women? The hermeneutics of suspicion does not usually make this claim. No doubt the author of the love story *intended* it to be simply a love story. Authors seldom deliberately and *consciously* create a deceptive surface to hide the "real" purpose of their books; they are usually as much deceived by the surface as their readers are.

The hidden level is most often an *unconscious* level. A politician who consciously defends a specific political ideology and equally consciously uses deceptive rhetoric in the process might still be influenced by *other* ideologies of which he or she is unaware. Authors and readers are, in a certain sense, the victims or prisoners of their own ideologies and unconscious motivations.

In classical systems of philosophy humanity is often portrayed as characterized by self-consciousness and rationality. As opposed to this, the "masters of suspicion" say that human consciousness and reason themselves are, in important aspects, formed by unconscious, irrational forces. If I, being male, grow up in a society in which women are treated as inferior, I will see women as inferior. This will appear to me as the only natural and reasonable point of view. When I write or read, I will not be *thinking* of oppressing women or of maintaining male privilege. Indeed, consciously I may intend to help "those that are weaker in body and in mind". That this intention is based on a sexist presupposition will not occur to me. In the same way, the white South African authors who left blacks out of their stories did not necessarily do so because they had a hidden agenda. They frequently described the society *as they really saw it*, that is, as a purely white one.

The very language we use often contributes to the problem. Regarded abstractly, words may be neutral, but in their functioning in social life they are caught up in chains of connotations and associations. For instance, "male" carries connotations of strength, hardness and activity and "female" connotations of weakness, softness and passivity. Similarly, the use of "non-white" in Apartheid South Africa made white the "standard" and defined blacks negatively as those who depart from this standard. Language is not the "pure" expression of reason; on the contrary, it frequently infects our "reason".

Authors and readers as conscious *individuals* may be quite "innocent", "reasonable" and "honest" when they present their intentions, views and arguments. Nevertheless, there are guilty, irrational and dishonest elements at work in and through them. What they (really) do not know of is often

what they do not want to know. The unpleasant truths (about lust, oppression, and so on) have long been pushed to a level where they are out of the view of consciousness. They have been given a pleasant covering and this covering is now all that reason and consciousness can see. Thus neither consciousness nor reason can provide the final key to interpretation. Both stop at the surface and may be misleading.

7.1.4 From the surface to the depths and back

This does not mean that the surface may be ignored. Since we have no *direct* access to the hidden level, we have to start with the surface. Certain clues that appear at the surface point the way to the deeper motives. When one knocks on the floor of a house, the echo reveals that there is a cellar underneath the house. The rationalizations and concealments that operate at the surface can never succeed in creating an absolutely solid or coherent whole: there are always places where the construct sounds "hollow" or trails "loose ends". Such shortcomings provide the clues that can be followed up with the aid of a hermeneutics of suspicion.

One must not expect that the clues will appear prominently or at key points in the text. After all, the surface is shaped by conscious motives. One has to look at the edges, at what is not said or is taken for granted. One has to ask questions that are precisely not posed by the text. Say a story is about the relationships between the various members of a household. Their feelings, problems and motives are described in detail. One learns in passing that there are also several servants in the household, but nothing much is said about them. Now one can ask how they react to events, what their problems are and how they see the members of the family. One can also ask what difference it would have made to the life of the family if they had not been there at all, instead of being merely "invisible presences". Would the problems of the bored wife, the domineering father, the ambitious daughter and the lazy son have been different if others did not do all the household chores for them? And what should we say of a society in which certain people live and work in a house without being members of the household?

Of course texts also convey other important meanings – ones that lie much closer to the surface. The hermeneutics of suspicion does not claim that its interpretation of a text replaces all other interpretations. Indeed, those who adopt this approach often say that what they interpret is not the text itself but the *ideological subtext*, that is, the assumptions, attitudes and interests that lie beneath the explicit statements of the text. Nevertheless, the explicit statements of the text do appear in a new light when the ideological subtext is brought to the surface. For instance, the text may argue eloquently that a certain solution to a problem is appropriate. If one adopts the point of view of the text itself, this may well seem true. But if a reading of the subtext shows that the ideology of the text has ruled out certain other options without even considering them, the matter could look different. Thus a consideration of the factors hidden beneath the text could lead to a new view of the surface of the text.

7.1.5 Taking sides in interpretation

We have seen that the world beneath the text remains effectively hidden from view precisely because texts are largely silent about it. Relatively few texts openly defend the oppression of women, for instance. Very many texts, however, take it for granted that women are in all ways weaker than men are. What is taken for granted does not have to be discussed. The hermeneutics of suspicion wants to break this silence by making the hidden assumption the topic of explicit discussion. At this point one can no longer ignore the different interests of different interpreters. When one admits that the surface hides power struggles, one also admits that it is impossible to

interpret from a neutral position. To interpret is, from the outset, to choose sides and to become engaged in the struggle.

Every text invites one to adopt a certain point of view, to look at the world in a certain way. Unless one complies to some extent, one cannot "follow" the text. Nevertheless, it is possible to step into the text, to follow its path, and then to step out again to regard the text itself critically and from a different angle. To illustrate this, we may return to the example of the story about the members of a household. Since the story is about a middleclass family, it is built on certain assumptions shared by members of the middle- class. Although the text may be severely critical of some aspects of middle-class life, the perspective required by the text is a middle-class perspective. In this case, it virtually overlooks the servants. To get to grips with the intention of the text, one has to read it through middle-class eyes. But having done so, one is not bound to accept this perspective as the final word. A working-class reader may reject the perspective suggested by the text and reread the text from the perspective of the servants. This is often called "reading the text against the grain".

By thus taking sides, the reader moves away from interpretation as a search for facts to interpretation as a critical practice. The question is no longer what *is*, but what *should be.* One could argue that such a reader is acting out of self-interest, but at least this self-interest is open and explicit.

Although there are a host of different currents and interconnections among the practitioners of the hermeneutics of suspicion, two main groups can be distinguished:

The one current sees the power struggle as an internal one. According to the various psychoanalytical theories, the human psyche is a scene of constant conflicts, although this is not apparent at the surface. To understand these conflicts and their causes, one has to examine the unconscious aspects of the human psyche (see 7.2).

The other main current sees the social world as the primary arena of conflict. The oppression of certain groups by others (which lies at the root of social conflict) does not appear clearly at the surface, because the ruling group also controls the production of ideas. The ideology that justifies the *status quo* is so embedded in the structures of the society that oppressors and oppressed alike accept the situation as "normal" or "natural". Interpretation as criticism of the dominant ideology unmasks the oppression and serves to change society itself in such a way that oppressed groups can come into their own. Marxists focus on the oppression of the working class by the capitalist ruling class (see 7.3), feminists on the oppression and marginalization of women by men (see 7.4), and African interpreters on the results of colonial oppression (see 7.5). More recently, ecological theorists and theologians have argued that *anthropocentrism* leads to the "oppression" and destruction of non-human nature (see 7.6).

The following other approaches are not dealt with in detail in this book:

- ❂ Materialist interpretation or ideological criticism

  These terms are sometimes employed as synonyms for Marxist interpretation, but sometimes indicate "post-Marxist" approaches that use Marxist insights without accepting Marxism as a comprehensive philosophical framework. Materialist interpretation emphasizes that products of the human mind (especially texts) do not originate, circulate and function within a separate world of their own, but are embedded in a material context. Ideological criticism emphasizes that texts, often in a hidden way, express the ideology and interests of a group and thus function in the power struggles within a society.

⚙ Ideological criticism from a Third World perspective

A variety of approaches that have their origin mainly in Third World contexts focus on the related ideologies of racism, colonialism and Eurocentrism. These approaches try to indicate how racist prejudices emanating from the dominant Western society have crept into the interpretation of texts like the Bible, how colonialism has imposed this system of values on people by force and how people's own social experiences and cultural values are still subjected to Eurocentric norms. In the field of interpretation, black theology and liberation theology address the problems of racism and colonialism. After all, the Bible provides a copy-book example of how a text that did not originate within the Western cultural world has been "colonized", subjected to Western rules of interpretation and used as an instrument in the service of racism (in the apartheid system, for instance).

7.2 Psychoanalytical approaches

7.2.1 Background and theory

The theory and practice of psychoanalysis originated in the field of psychology. Following Freud's pioneering work in this area, a number of schools of psychoanalytical thought have established themselves. Though they may at times differ fundamentally and vehemently, the various approaches are united in their emphasis on the *unconscious* aspect of psychic life. In psychology, psychoanalysis (Freudian) is distinguished from analytical psychology (Jungian); in the debate on interpretation, however, both Freudian and Jungian approaches are regarded as psychoanalytical.

For Freud and his early followers, psychoanalysis, as a theory about human psychic processes, served as a tool in psychotherapy. Nevertheless, this theory had (like Marx's) wide-ranging implications for all areas of life. In specific cases Freud himself indicated what implications his theory held for our understanding of history, culture and religion - and literary texts. In all these cases the theory of the psyche provides the key to a deeper insight into the phenomena in question. To grasp the role of psychoanalysis in interpretation, a familiarity with the basics of psychoanalytical theory is essential. At the same time it should be stressed that each school of psychoanalytical thought operates with its own complex conceptual framework, of which no more than a broad outline can be given here.

Of the various approaches, only those of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) and Jacques-Marie Lacan (1901-1981) are discussed here. Freud and Jung deserve attention as founders of influential schools of thought; Lacan is important for the role he played in linking psychoanalysis and the theory of the interpretation of texts.

(a) Freudian psychoanalysis

⚙ The unconscious

The cornerstone of Freud's view of the human psyche is the theory of the *unconscious*. What a person is conscious (aware) of at any given moment may be compared to the thin layer at the surface of a deep pool. While I am writing, I do not think of events in my childhood, the account I have to pay tomorrow or the meal I had last night. I may even be so taken up in what I am doing that I forget about my headache or fail to notice that I feel cold. For the moment, all these things are below the surface of my consciousness. Of course, I may become aware of these things again: they are not "lost" but simply temporarily hidden. According to Freud, these hidden "contents" are in the *preconscious, the layer of the psyche just below consciousness.*

What is in the preconscious is not in the conscious at that precise moment, but can be brought to consciousness relatively easily, for instance, by the memory.

At a far deeper level one finds the *unconscious*. The unconscious contains contents that cannot be brought to consciousness, or that can only reach consciousness under special circumstances. This "underground" of one's being cannot be known simply by referring to the contents of the conscious, yet it leaves its traces at the conscious level. The contents of the unconscious slip to the surface in dreams, in neuroses, in slips of the tongue and in works of art. As we shall see, however, these contents reach the surface only in a censored or "translated" form.

⚙ The psychic apparatus: id, ego and superego

According to Freud, the psychic apparatus of the adult consists of three components or "regions":

⚙ Id: The most primitive part of the psyche, the id, is present from birth and consists of blind drives (or instincts) that call for satisfaction without taking either rationality or reality into account. Freud uses the German "Trieb". In the official translations this has been rather misleadingly rendered as "instinct". In what follows, "drive", "urge", "instinct" and "instinctual drive" have been used interchangeably for the German "Trieb". Freud identifies two instinctual complexes in the id: the erotic drive (in a very broad sense) and the death drive. (Freud did not recognize an independent death instinct in his earlier work. Some modern Freudians deny the existence of such an instinct.) Both operate according to the pleasure principle and are unable to work out plans for achieving their own satisfaction.

⚙ Ego: The psyche therefore develops, starting at birth, another structure, the ego, to mediate between the drives of the id and the demands of reality according to the reality principle. The ego has no energy of its own, but "borrows" psychic energy from the id, the latter being, as it were, the dynamo of the psyche. The ego is, for instance, able to direct the energy of the erotic instinct, the libido, in a rational way.

⚙ Superego: The superego develops from the ego as the child introjects (takes into itself) the values of society, especially those of the parents. The superego confronts the ego with moral demands that resemble the demands of the id in that they take neither rationality nor reality into account.

Only the ego and the superego have conscious aspects. The bulk of the psychic apparatus lies in the unconscious.

⚙ Psychosexual development

According to Freud, people are psychically the same at a formal level: conscious, preconscious and unconscious, id, ego, and superego, erotic instinct and death instinct occur in them all. The process of psychic development, too, is in principle the same for all people, with the exception that the development of men and that of women take divergent routes at a certain point. Individual differences are the result of relatively minor differences in the way individuals pass through the stages of development. In particular, the critical transitions that a child should have made by the age of approximately six leave their marks on the personality.

The drives of the id, especially the erotic drive, provide the motive force of all psychic development. Various developmental phases represent different ways in which the energy of the erotic drive, the libido, is channeled. Heterosexual intercourse is but one of these ways. In the life of any person there are many "loves", which are all manifestations of the erotic drive.

At the very earliest stage the libido attaches itself to the ego alone. Freud calls this state of absolute, unconscious self-love *primary narcissism*. The libido is directed at processes that are experienced as pleasurable and at the organs associated with them:

- During the *oral phase*, pleasure is associated with the action of sucking while feeding, and with the mouth as the organ that enables this.

- The *anal phase* commences when the child gains control over its bowel movements and derives pleasure from exercising this control. The anus becomes the organ associated with pleasure.

- The *phallic phase* commences when the male penis and the female clitoris are discovered as organs that can provide pleasure. According to Freud, this is when the development of men and women starts taking different courses. Of adult sexuality there can as yet be no question: the pleasure is autoerotic. Once the newfound sexuality is coupled to the love for a person, the child enters the crucial Oedipal phase.

- The Oedipus complex and repression

According to Freud, the ego, from an early stage onwards, *cathects* ("occupies") certain psychic images, ones associated with pleasure, with libido. Thus *object love* appears alongside self-love. (Obviously the libido cannot cathect the objects themselves - the real mother, for instance. What is "occupied" is the psychic image of the mother.) For children of both sexes the mother, as the one who feeds them, is the object of the earliest and strongest love. In the Oedipal phase this originally unproblematic love suddenly precipitates a crisis.

The myth of Oedipus, a man who accidentally killed his father and unwittingly married his mother, reflects, according to Freud, the cardinal conflict situation in the development of the male child. At about the age of five or six the boy experiences a desire to possess his mother sexually. This desire of the id is opposed by the figure of the father, who acts both as bigger and stronger rival (the reality principle) and as representative of the moral values that forbid incest (superego). The child would like to murder the father, but both the superego and the reality principle stand in his way. Murder is forbidden and, in any case, the father is too strong.

In this phase masturbation is accompanied by fantasies about the mother. When this is forbidden (sometimes with threats of castration), the result is great psychic anxiety. The boy feels himself threatened with a total loss of sexual pleasure: both by his father with his moral rules and physical strength, and by his mother who chooses his father above him. (The corresponding complex in girls is sometimes called the Electra complex. Daughters experience a similar attachment to the father and an urge to possess the father sexually. Since few theorists feel that Freud's explanation of female sexuality is adequate, the matter is not dealt with here.)

The boy is unable to handle the resultant psychic conflict. His father is, after all, his role model. He wants to possess his mother as his father does and he does not wish to be castrated (= without penis = like his mother). Yet his father also stands squarely in the way of his ideal. As for his mother, she is and remains the object of his desire, yet she betrays him by preferring the father and by supporting the rules of the father.

Since this conflict cannot be dealt with, it is repressed into the unconscious - all aspects of infantile sexuality disappear from the conscious memory. *Repression* is not a conscious effort to banish a thought or memory, but an unconscious psychic process. On the one hand, repression buries a particular event or feeling so effectively that no effort of memory and no amount of reminding can bring it back to the conscious. On the other hand, the repressed

contents are not quite lost. They remain in the unconscious, from where they exercise a hidden influence on people's conscious actions.

After the Oedipal phase, the child enters a *latent phase*, during which there is no conscious knowledge of or interest in sexuality. Conscious sexual desire revives only at puberty - as adult, genital sexuality. In the case of more or less normal development the libido is now transferred to another woman (often one chosen as libidinal object because she resembles the mother in some way). The hatred for the father is partly turned into hero worship of the father through *reversal*, and partly *projected* onto other objects of hatred.

⚙ Psychic conflicts, repression and neurosis

Freud does not see psychic development as a tranquil process of steady growth, but as the result of a series of conflicts and challenges. Not all people resolve these conflicts equally successfully. For instance, the psychic conflict marking the Oedipal phase generally leaves people with psychic wounds or scars (*traumas*) that they carry throughout their lives. How badly scarred the particular individual will be depends partly on hereditary factors, partly on environmental factors. The values and practices of the society, but particularly those of the parents, may favour or hamper "normal" development.

The same factors influence the other phases of development. If the circumstances are unfavourable - for instance, if the parents are too strict or too permissive - the transitions are not made successfully. The person remains *fixated* at a specific level, although this may not be apparent. The unconscious problem areas are, as it were, covered by the conscious, only to surface much later in crisis situations.

The psychic phenomena known as neuroses and psychoses are, according to Freud, invariably the results of problems during infancy. He does not deny that the crises of adult life may play a contributing role, yet this role is simply to reveal the hidden wounds of the past. It is on account of these wounds that the person is unable to deal with the crises of adult life. Although a person may have no memory of certain events during her childhood, she is never completely rid of them.

Here it becomes apparent how revolutionary Freud's notions of the unconscious and repression are. One would expect that the events that most deeply influence one's life would also be those most firmly fixed in one's memory. But Freud's argument is that precisely those psychic conflicts that left the deepest scars are repressed and therefore remain unconscious. Therefore any explanation of a person's behaviour that focuses only on the contents of the conscious and preconscious layers of the psyche is bound to be misleading. The ego allows into consciousness only what it feels it can deal with; what it cannot handle is at once the cause of psychic problems and what is not allowed into consciousness.

The task of the ego is extremely difficult at the best of times. The ego must constantly and simultaneously deal with the instinctual drives of the id, the moral taboos of the superego and the demands of reality. Like a traffic officer at a busy intersection, the ego has its work cut out to prevent tragic psychic traffic jams and fatal psychic collisions. Should the ego be burdened with problems from the past as well, collisions become inevitable. According to Freud, nobody can hope for more than a workable compromise between these opposing forces. Nobody is quite "normal" - we all have some neurotic traits.

⚙ The return of the repressed and the defences of the ego

Although Freud speaks of "contents" that are repressed, he regards the repressed material as something active, something filled with energy. What is repressed constantly presses upward,

as it were, to reach consciousness and the (unconscious) ego constantly has to press it down. This battle never ends. No matter how hard the ego fights, the *return of the repressed* cannot be prevented completely. The repressed material, however, is not allowed to surface in its original form. The unconscious ego acts as a censor that prevents any recurrence of the intolerable tension that led to repression in the first place. The repressed therefore reappears at the surface in a reworked form, for instance, in dreams, slips of the tongue, neurotic symptoms and imaginative writings.

There is, as it were, a compromise between the repressed drives and the ego censor. The repressed material is allowed to surface on condition that it surfaces "in disguise" and in a non-threatening form. Dreams can be dismissed as mere dreams and writings as mere fictions. Moreover, even in dreams the drives appear in a "coded" form, so that they cannot easily be recognized for what they are. Nevertheless, what is allowed past the censor reveals the underlying tension - a tension that is only partially and temporarily relieved in dreams and works of art.

This account of the return of the repressed answers an important question that Freud's theory has to face: If something is in a person's unconscious, how can that person - or anyone else – become conscious of it? The answer is that the unconscious material does return to the level of consciousness, although its disguised or coded form makes it impossible for us to recognize it immediately. If, however, one has grasped the code, one can see through the disguise. One can, as it were, learn the secret language in which the unconscious expresses itself.

The compromise involved in the return of the repressed does not solve all the problems the ego has to face. The ego has to deal with the instinctual drives, the demands of society and the realities of life, while keeping certain things repressed or censoring their expressions. In the face of these problems, the ego has developed certain standard defence mechanisms. These allow for a release of psychic energy and a relieving of psychic tension. Again, knowing how these ego defences operate helps us to interpret people's behaviour.

We cannot discuss all the defences of the ego here, but an important mechanism that the ego uses to deal with the tempestuous desires of the id, on the one hand, and the stern demands of the superego, on the other, is called *sublimation*.

- Sublimation involves directing the libido to goals that are deemed praiseworthy in terms of the norms of the society. Art, science, religion and other expressions of culture originate in this way. Often the language in which people discuss these things betrays the hidden sexual background. Artists talk of art as their "mistress". For Christians, Christ is the "Bridegroom".

- Sublimation is not, however, a panacea. The desires of the id cannot be circumvented completely by means of this mechanism. Freud believed that the combination of the rigid demands of Christian ethics and the high level of cultural life in modern societies places people under intolerable psychic pressure. Our vaunted "civilization" has failed to make us happy, for it was achieved at the cost of the satisfaction of instinctual desires. Therefore Freud regards neither religious nor secular cultural values as worthy of unqualified approval.

- Analysis and therapy

Obviously Freudian analysis cannot take a person's account and explanation of her problem at face value. Such products of the conscious will not directly reveal the unconscious roots of the

problem. The purpose of analysis is precisely to bring the unconscious tensions to the surface, where they may be confronted and - at least partly - resolved.

As we have seen, this is possible because the repressed material appears at the surface in a *systematically* distorted form. Dreams, slips of the tongue and spontaneous comments (made without thinking) are not random or senseless. Though they are not immediately meaningful, the trained analyst can interpret them. The person (*analysand*) is asked to recount his dreams, to say whatever comes to mind, or to make snap associations. The therapist (*analyst*) interprets the data and tries to help the analysand to gain this insight about the meaning of the data for himself. Freudian analysis is fundamentally an interpretative process.

It is a great mistake to think that it is a simple process. Overly simplified accounts sometimes leave the impression that interpreting dreams, for instance, is a matter of knowing a list of symbols and their meanings ("X always stands for Y"). Although there are indeed some common patterns, the analyst practically has to learn a new "language of the unconscious" for each individual analysand. The pattern or code becomes clear only after very many analytical sessions, in which the analysand tells about her childhood, recounts dreams, makes free associations and in other ways provides data.

This process takes place in a circumscribed and controlled setting of acceptance. In this loaded atmosphere the analysand is able to live out the problem in miniature, as it were. Freud called this process, by which the whole problem manifests itself in the analytical situation, *transference*. At the start there will be resistances to the uncovering of the threatening material: the analysand may blame the analyst for his problems or project his desires onto her. These very resistances, however, provide the analyst with clues about what is happening in the unconscious. Finally, analysand and analyst cooperate to bring the unconscious contents to consciousness. (Because the analyst is also human, counter-transference cannot be ruled out. The analyst too can act out her problems in the therapeutic situation. Freud believed that counter-transference should be avoided, but modern theorists believe that this is hardly possible.)

(b) Freudian textual interpretation

❀ Dreams and texts

Freud attached special importance to dreams as indicators of unconscious tensions. The method he developed to analyze dreams and the underlying theory can, however, also be applied to texts. After all, Freud himself subjected people's stories about themselves (a type of text) and even written texts to this form of analysis. In what follows we may thus regard "dream" and "text" as interchangeable terms.

As we saw, the repressed material does not appear directly in the dream. The content of the dream as it is present in the conscious and available for recounting, the so-called *manifest content*, conceals the unconscious content, the so-called *latent content*. The myth of Oedipus is a rather exceptional case, for there the manifest content and the latent content (love for the mother and hatred of the father) virtually coincide. But even there the truth is partly concealed: Oedipus does not know that the man he kills and the woman he marries are his father and mother respectively. More often the latent content appears in a thoroughly distorted form. Nonetheless, the distortion is not random but systematic; therefore someone acquainted with the mechanisms of the ego as censor will be able to dredge up the latent content.

❀ Condensation, displacement and overdetermination

The main mechanisms at stake here are *condensation* and *displacement*.

- *Condensation* depends on the idea that the dream is a type of summary of the latent content. Certain items in the manifest content are loaded with more than one meaning, so that words and images function ambiguously. On the other hand, a key element in the latent content may appear in several guises in the manifest content. In "Jack and the beanstalk" for example, the mother is represented by the cow that has to be sold, the giant's wife, and also the hen that lays the golden eggs.

- *Displacement* is the process whereby an element in the unconscious is connected to another element - one that appears in the manifest content - by a chain of associations. The associations are sometimes transparent to all, but in some cases they depend on personal experience and involve seemingly irrational jumps. Thus the figure of God in a dream may (in a Christian society) understandably refer to the human father, but the fear of "marks" might also be a disguised reference to the father if the father's name happens to be "Mark". In a further process – what Freud calls secondary revision - the word "marks" may be replaced by the word "stains", which in turn demonstrates how manifest elements may be *overdetermined*. Stains as signs of guilt (guilt-stained, the stain of sin), stains as marks and thus as the father (Mark), and a recollection of a time the child was forbidden some pleasure for fear that she would stain her new dress - all of this could interlock to indicate one problem: a fear of the father with his moral laws that has been internalized and now stands in the way of the satisfaction of desires.

- The split self and the dream or text as compromise

The dream or text is not the product of a single, centred "self". Conscious and unconscious factors, id, ego, and superego, all play a role. It is vital to note that unconscious desires and the ego as censor, though opposed to each other, nevertheless both contribute to the forming of the manifest content. The ego censor distorts and transforms in order to prevent the unacceptable from reaching the surface, but at the same time the desires distort and transform themselves in order to subvert the censor and reach the surface after all, albeit in encoded form. The resultant text or dream is thus a *compromise*. From the point of view of the ego, the unruly desires of the id have been (partially) subdued; from the point of view of the id, the strict regulating function of the ego has been (partially) subverted.

- Reading and writing, transference and counter-transference

The therapeutic situation creates the space within which unconscious problems crystallize. The same thing may happen in the situation of writing or reading. The author who says "My writing is my life" may, ironically, be telling the truth without realizing it. Through the process of transference she may, as it were, be putting her whole psychic life on paper. The manifest content, the "message" or "purpose" of the book, would not reveal this secret. It is only when one examines certain "chance" elements - choices of words, metaphors, themes and symbols - that the unconscious drives behind the "urge to write" are exposed.

Thus the reader is able to analyze the author, using the tools of psychoanalysis. The reader, however, may also get caught up in the reading process. A reader who claims that he "has found himself" in a certain book is telling the story of counter-transference. This reader has projected his own unconscious conflicts onto the text and has thus read the text "through the spectacles of his unconscious".

Modern psychoanalytical interpretation holds the view that this invariably happens. There can no longer be talk of a single, "correct" reading. Each person reads with the conscious, rational part of the psyche, the part that employs conventional, "acceptable" reading strategies, but

only up to a point. Beyond that the unconscious takes over and covertly leaves its imprint on the reading process, an imprint that would differ from person to person.

❀ Texts, desires, and drives

Freud's view that the energy of the psyche is derived from the id implies that all expressions of the human psyche are powered by the instinctual drives of the id. Even the "highest" creations of humanity - art, science, religion, and the like - are products of the way the libido is channeled, displaced or repressed. Texts, too, bear the traces of desires that could find no other outlet. The urge to read or write and the pleasure we get from these processes are linked to our sexual and destructive drives. When we say we find reading exciting or relaxing, we are talking about sexual excitement and sexual release – in a displaced form. When we find a satirical book "satisfying", we are giving vent to our destructive drive – at a distance.

To interpret texts psychoanalytically is to follow the traces of our erotic and destructive drives. Most approaches to interpretation focus on meaning – on what we can know, understand and fit into a rational scheme. Interpretation along Freudian lines denies that meaning and reason have the last say. Reading – and interpretation as a form of reading – is also about dealing with desires that are ultimately non-rational, about the way we circulate, rationalize and otherwise come to terms with these desires.

(c) Jungian psychoanalysis

❀ The collective unconscious and the libido according to Jung

Carl Jung, a pupil and erstwhile confidant of Freud, broke with Freud on two key issues of theory: the nature of the unconscious and the nature of the libido. Besides the personal unconscious of Freud, Jung recognized an *impersonal collective unconscious.* (Not that Freud's view was that simple. Often he does grant a role to inherited factors present in the unconscious. His postulate of the Oedipus complex is, as it were, a theory of a single archetype.) The impersonal collective unconscious is formed though the inheritance of patterns of thought and action that belong to the human race as a whole or to specific human groups.

Because the contents of Freud's personal unconscious are largely (not wholly) repressed tensions and conflicts, they pose a constant threat to the ego. Jung's collective unconscious, although it is not without threatening aspects, contains much that can help the ego in its development. Freudian analysis seeks to bring the unconscious contents to consciousness to eliminate psychic problems; Jungian analysis does the same, but with the purpose of stimulating personal growth.

In Jung's view the *libido* is a life energy that is not restricted to the sexual sphere and that operates in a variety of mutually independent urges. As energy (here Jung uses the language of physics), the libido can undergo displacements and transformations without retaining the marks of its past. For Freud, libidinal energy, however it is displaced, remains linked to the sexual drive. For Jung, libidinal energy is simply psychic energy that may be used for a variety of purposes. It is neutral in the way that energy in physics is neutral. When, for instance, kinetic energy is used to generate electrical energy, the resulting energy is electric energy, not "displaced kinetic energy".

❀ Psychic development according to Jung

The implication for psychology is that it is no longer possible to explain people's various urges as sublimations of sexual desires. When people feel the urge to create or to reflect, it is not because sexual desires have been directed to these ends, but because there are independent

creative and reflective drives. Moreover, Jung's view means that answers need not always be sought in the past - in infantile fixations and repression. When a person seems to be "stuck in the past", the reason may be an unresolved conflict in infancy, but it may also be that the person is unwilling to face a new challenge.

Jung takes this view because – unlike Freud – he does not see psychic development as a process that is, in principle, completed at an early age. Psychic development remains possible in later life and a return of themes from the past may signal new challenges that have presented themselves. The "symptom" does not merely have an origin (in the past), but also a purpose (in the present). As a consequence, Jungian analysis does not primarily try to confront people with their past; it seeks to help them realize their potential for growth.

In the process of personal growth a person is assisted by the collective unconscious. After all, each individual's conscious experience is very limited, but the collective unconscious is the residue of the collective experience of millions of people.

❁ Archetypes

According to Jung, the conscious and the unconscious are not enemies. The collective unconscious with its primal images and thought patterns often comes to the aid of the conscious. For instance, Jung points out that scientists sometimes find answers to their problems in dreams or through "chance events". In these cases the unconscious, being less bound to current methods and thought patterns, came to the aid of the conscious.

Jung calls the "primal images" and "thought patterns" of the collective unconscious *archetypes*. Archetypes are, so Jung maintains, *not* innate ideas or symbols, although one gets to know them only through ideas and symbols (they are, after all, *unconscious*). In themselves they are contentless, formal *potentialities* that open certain doors and close others. In practice, to be able to talk about archetypes at all one has to work backwards from their concrete expressions to a "nucleus of meaning". Only then can archetypes be (loosely) named: the father, the mother, the child, the animus, the anima, and so on.

Archetypes are neither persons (one's father) nor mental images of such persons; they are parts of one's own psyche. Thus the anima represents the female in the man; the animus the male in the woman. The "that" of the anima in the man is archetypically determined: all men have it as part of their collective unconscious. The "what" (content) in the concrete, individual case is co-determined by personal experience: each man interprets the archetype partly in terms of experience. The "how" (relationship with it) remains open to change and development: for some men it is a threat, for others an ally, for still others a master.

❁ Autonomous complexes and archetypal patterns

Some archetypes give rise to *autonomous complexes*, that is, parts of the psyche that act as virtually independent subjects. Examples of these are my *persona* (the image of myself I wish to project), my *animus/anima* (my self as a member of the opposite sex), my *shadow* (my evil alter ego). The unconscious tension between various autonomous complexes is one of the causes of psychic problems. For example, the man who wishes to present an excessively macho image and who rejects all traits associated with femininity experiences a clash between his persona and his anima.

Archetypal patterns manifest themselves in symbols, motives and themes that occur universally in human creations. Jung supports his argument for the existence of the collective unconscious by showing how these archetypal patterns crop up across the boundaries of time, space and culture. One could explain this by referring to tradition or cultural influence, but

such an explanation is not always plausible. Jung concludes that such archetypal patterns must be deeply rooted in the human psyche and must serve some important purpose.

These symbols, images and themes occur particularly frequently in areas of life that are considered especially significant: in religion, in art, in dreams (regarded as very significant in many cultures) and in myths. This provides further confirmation of their importance. How is it that such archetypal patterns can – as they often do - give people a sense of peace, of wholeness, of courage, or of energy? It cannot be that they teach us something (at the conscious level), because they do not provide any new information. Jung concludes that they help to bring the personal unconscious in contact with the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious reacts to the archetypal patterns in a way that is not always explicable to the conscious subject. By enabling them to draw on the resources of the collective unconscious, these patterns people help people to handle their own psychic tensions better.

❋ Integration and individuation

Freudian analysis aims primarily at achieving a workable compromise between the various forces at work in the life of the individual. Jungian analysis serves the process of *integration with a view to continued growth*. The different autonomous complexes have to be brought into balance. Moreover, the potential hidden in the unconscious must be recognized and utilized. Jung does not deny that the unconscious contains threatening elements, but believes nevertheless that confronting such elements equips one to deal with the challenges of life. In one's shadow, for instance, one meets one's own potential for evil. This does not by any means imply that this potential should be given free rein. Rather, the meeting with the evil in oneself should help one not to judge oneself (or others) too harshly.

The ultimate goal of psychoanalysis Jung calls *individuation*. The person who attains this has achieved a successful personal synthesis of the archetypes and autonomous complexes in her unconscious. This "wholeness" enables the person to live as a fully individual subject who is nonetheless in touch and in harmony with society, since the archetypes do not belong to the individual alone.

The impression that Jung's approach disposes too easily of the conflicts indicated by Freud is a mistaken one. The path of growth is arduous and many resistances bar the way. People easily become imprisoned in one aspect of their psychic lives and refuse to explore other possibilities. The person who becomes the slave of a particular self-image, for example, the minister who cannot stop acting like a minister, is a typical case. Only some attain individuation and then only through struggle and effort.

Here we see the archetypal element in the "quest stories" that have been so popular in all ages and cultures. In these stories the hero has to overcome many seemingly insurmountable obstacles to attain her or his goal. Quest stories prepare us for the struggle and the dangers we have to face to reach individuation.

(d) Textual interpretation according to Jung

The above clearly indicates that Jungian "interpretation", whether of persons, dreams or texts, focuses on the archetypal patterns and symbols in them. The purpose is not, however, primarily to trace these symbols back to their "origin" and meaning. In essence, the symbols and patterns communicate emotions, rather than rational content. Or better still, they link the conscious with the unconscious level where neither reason nor emotion (in the normal sense) operates. The idea that archetypes express *potentialities* is of importance here. The archetypes open up a series of possibilities; they do not establish certain fixed meanings.

The right approach in investigating archetypal expressions is to follow them along their many routes through a process of *creative amplification* rather than to "clarify" them reductively. Creative amplification involves viewing a particular theme, symbol or image from all available vantage points in order to reveal all its diverse possibilities.

Jungians frequently use material from different eras and cultures - texts, myths, drawings and so forth - to illustrate how archetypes function in people's lives. The archetypes, as we saw, belong to the *collective* unconscious and are thus not confined to one person or group. In creative amplification the individual experience or text is brought into a dialogue with the collective experience of the human race.

At the same time one achieves closer contact with one's own unconscious and the potential it holds. The insight gained thus is not, however, something that can be fully and rationally verbalized. Jung deliberately set himself against Western rationalism and gave generous recognition to practices that have been scorned as unscientific and "primitive" in the Western world: magic, alchemy and shamanism. According to Jung, these practices often draw on an instinctive sensitivity to people's psychic needs, a sensitivity lost in rationalistic societies. Thus the interpretation of texts along Jungian lines - like interpretation along Freudian lines - is not aimed at an intellectual grasp of "the meaning of the text", but reminds us of the non-rational underground of our rational, conscious world.

In its practice Jungian psychoanalysis bears some resemblance to the midrash method and deconstruction. Jungians too would be inclined to clarify a particular story by telling several other stories. They share with deconstruction a sensitivity to intertextuality and the openness of texts to creative play (although in both cases they set certain limits).

(e) Lacanian psychoanalysis

Lacan, "the French Freud", forged a link between Freud's insights, semiotics (the theory of sign systems), and modern linguistic theories. In Lacan's work the distinction between psychoanalysis as psychological practice and psychoanalytical textual interpretation disappears. The psyche is structured like a language and can therefore be treated as a type of text; a text can be seen as a type of psyche, having its own conscious and unconscious.

On account of his complex conceptual framework and his provocatively elusive style, it is almost absurd to try to summarize Lacan's ideas; the more so since Lacan would not recognize something as univocal as "Lacan's ideas". The following summary remains inadequate - as all interpretations are, according to Lacan.

⚙ The mirror experience and the imaginary order

According to Lacan, we live at the intersection of three orders: the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. The child is originally a chaotic bundle of impressions and sensations (psychically), without any fixed unity or identity. There is no way in which the child can perceive itself as a separate, unified subject. The child then enters the *imaginary order* by discovering itself as a whole in a mirror image (literally or metaphorically). The mirror image provides a unitary image (it is "me" in the mirror), but it is an *alienated* and *imaginary* unity. Thus the subject as a unified subject finds its origin in the imagination (and the image) and through what is really an "other" (mirror image).

This "other" through which "I" am, is simultaneously in a complex sense the *mother*. I am I because of desire for/of the mother (in French *désire de mère* means both). The mother is, as it were, the mirror in which I find myself as a self, because this mirror accurately reflects

my desire for the mother in the form of her desire for me. In this sense the child's identity is not that of an autonomous self, but that of a *dyad* (a two-in-one) composed by mother and child.

The seemingly natural unity in which the desire for and the desire of the mother are completely complementary is, however, an illusion. Just as the image in the mirror is not me but an image of me, so the dyad is not a reality but a product of my imagination. I imagine the dyadic unity because I feel incomplete in myself, because my desire (simply by being desire) indicates that I am not whole. If I were a completed, self-sufficient being, I would have no desire. Desire and the sense of lack of being (*manque-a-être*) go together. The phallus becomes the signifier ("image") of desire and, simultaneously, of lack (in as much as it reminds me that I cannot be whole without the other).

❀   The Oedipal phase and the symbolic order

In the Oedipal phase the illusion of the mirror stage is shattered when the father enters the scene. The illusory unity-in-duality disappears when the "no" and the "name" of the father (in French *non du père* and *nom du père* sound the same) appear. The rules of the father are simultaneously the rules of language: there is proper behaviour and things have proper names. Thus the child is introduced into the *symbolic order* within which signs (signifiers) replace signifieds.

"Replace" implies the *absence* of the signified (meaning). Desire can now be *named* but can, by the same logic, no longer be fulfilled. Put differently, the symbolic order as social order imposes its rules on desire and thus castrates us with words. Just as the desire for/of the mother must, according to the rules (the moral system of rules), be indefinitely postponed, so it goes with all signs in their linguistic regularity ("rule-boundness"). They represent without making present. The signifier does not open the way to the signified (meaning), but simply refers you to other signifiers in the same system. Every time you try to pin down a signified, it slides away under the signifier, leaving another signifier in its place.

The symbolic order provides the child with an identity, a unity that replaces the dyadic relationship with the mother. Simply put, I can now *identify* myself by using the word "I". The word "I" is quite separate and different from the words "mother" and "father", but the word neither expresses nor gives me access to any deeper unity or wholeness. "I" is merely the word assigned to me in the order of words (and I share it with all others who also call themselves "I"). Similarly, my social identity is the place assigned to me in the social order, without reference to my desires or wishes. Finally, my subjectivity, far from being the stable depth of my being, is also imposed on me by the symbolic order. I become a *subject* (supposedly an autonomous source of value, meaning and action) by being *subjected* to the rules of language and the rules of society.

Here and elsewhere Lacan strings ideas together by means of metaphorical and associative links. The order of language, the social order and the structure of the psyche are not logically identical, but they are analogous and terms from the one order may be transferred to the other orders. Similarly, the mirror is both a real mirror and the mother, and the relationship with the mother is *imaginary* in the way that the mirror provides an *image*. But, one may ask, what do these metaphors, analogies and associations of terms from different fields have to do with *real* relationships? Lacan might answer that we simply have to use the resources of the language we have and this language is figurative to the core (see the next section). We do not have access to any language that is free of the figurative, nor to any reality outside language.

❃ Desire and language

Beneath the signifiers (the level of language) desire persists as the signified. The repressed (imaginary) desire becomes the unconscious, which is not in the psyche, but rather between the subject and the other. After all, in the imaginary order the unity of the self depends on the other (mirror image and mother). The unconscious desire is desire *for* the other in order to be whole *through* the other.

From the unconscious emerge the figurative strategies of language, namely *metaphor* and *metonymy*. Following Roman Jakobsen, Lacan views metaphor and metonymy as equivalents of Freud's terms *condensation* and *displacement*. The repressed desires use these strategies to thrust themselves to the surface, despite the rules of language. The unconscious, created by language (the symbolic order), itself has the structure of a language.

It follows that language, like the subject (conscious and unconscious), shows a split. The conscious ego cannot deny its own underground and the rules of the superego cannot prevent the return of the repressed. Similarly, in language the meanings/desires of the unconscious undermine the planned, "intended" meanings of the conscious user of language. The definitions and rules of dictionaries and grammars cannot bind the expressions of language to univocal meanings. Language is shot through with metaphor and metonymy, the intentions of the conscious author/reader notwithstanding.

Here the Freudian compromise surfaces again. The rules of language "castrate" and "bind" the subject to the symbolic order. The characteristics of the symbolic order are absence (of the object of desire) and deferral (of the satisfaction of desire in "final meaning"). The expressivity of language, however, subverts the rules of language through metaphor and metonymy, thus hankering after the imaginary order in which the "other" guarantees one's illusory unity. In this respect a text is structured like a psyche, because a psyche is structured like a language. The text, like the subject, is no centred unity.

❃ The real order

Where does the real order fit in? According to Lacan, the real order cannot be known or discussed, since it lies outside language. The symbolic order operates with the conventional, the imaginary order with the illusory: neither deals with reality. All we can say of the real is that it is that order that makes the functioning and interaction of the other two possible. To attempt to say more is to slip back into the symbolic order (which, in turn, is subverted by the imaginary order, even in its own field). The real order is like the screen upon which the images appear - a screen that is not itself visible because the images cover it.

The real may also be thought of as the ultimate object of desire, the Other (with a capital letter) that promises wholeness of self and full satisfaction, as long as one remembers that the real is permanently out of our reach. "The real" as signifier then stands precisely for the absence of what we desire.

This description of the real order, though negative, does have a function. It reminds us that neither the imaginary nor the symbolic order is ultimately "reality", though both constantly make this claim. In psychoanalysis and textual interpretation we can never say "this is the way things really are". The unified, centred subject and the unified, centred text are both in principle beyond our reach. Any attempt to give precedence to one possibility - author or reader, analyst or analysand, conscious or unconscious - or to plaster over the cracks would be misguided.

Understandably, a common criticism of Lacan has been that his theory leaves little room for fundamental change. Everything may be said, read or interpreted differently, but "the more things change, the more they remain the same". Lacan himself admitted that the problem of absence or lack (*manque*), of unfulfilled desire, is only identified, not solved, in his theory.

7.2.2 Jonah in the light of psychoanalysis

(a) Jonah in the light of a Freudian approach

The book of Jonah seems unsuited to classical Freudian analysis, since overt references to erotic drives are absent. One would, however, certainly be tempted to call Jonah neurotic and, according to Freud, neurosis has a psychosexual cause. Fingert (summarized in Lacocque and Lacocque 1981:26f) argues that Jonah's hatred of Nineveh is hatred of his mother who chose his father (God) above him (Jonah). The mother appears in several guises - as Nineveh, Tarshish, the ship and the fish. The salvation of Nineveh means that Jonah has relinquished his ambivalent feelings towards the mother.

Does this force a sexual meaning on an "innocent" text? Perhaps, but it is striking that the father (God) and the son (Jonah) are conspicuously present, while the mother (and all female figures) is conspicuously absent. Are the feelings about the mother/woman too threatening? Then one would expect to find the mother/woman in concealed form somewhere in the text. Now the candidates - the city, the ship and the fish - are all represented by feminine words in the Hebrew. The city, being a round, enclosed "container", is a fitting metaphor for feminine sexuality, and Jonah *enters* both the ship and the fish, as into a womb or in sexual intercourse.

How can the book of Jonah be interpreted along these lines? On the face of it, the main characters in the story are Yahweh, Jonah and Nineveh. It would thus seem that Nineveh is the mother. But Jonah feels no love for Nineveh; his love is for another city, Jerusalem (his own people). In the manifest content this love does not become explicit. Jerusalem is referred to only once - obliquely - when the temple is mentioned in Jonah's prayer (2:4). Even then the desire emerges from the sphere of the unconscious (from the depths of the sea). Clearly the love for the mother (Jerusalem) has been repressed to the unconscious. The mother can now appear on the surface only as the hated city (Nineveh). The conscious ego denies the love for the mother (Jerusalem) by reversing it and turning it into hatred towards the mother (Nineveh). The commission to preach against the city reflects the demand of the superego (= father = God) to renounce his love for the mother (Jerusalem). The demand is twofold: to leave the beloved city (Jerusalem) and to set himself against the hated city (Nineveh). At least, this is how Jonah interprets his commission. If the mother is not permitted to be the object of the libido, she must become the object of the destructive instinct.

Jonah, under the influence of the id drive, refuses. Unable to ignore the demands of the superego completely, he finds a compromise at the level of the conscious ego. He flees - away from the mother (Jerusalem), but also from the father/superego (God). Jonah's "deep sleep" may be seen as a regression to the very earliest stage of psychic development in which thought is regarded as omnipotent (thought creates the world). To both the beloved mother (Jerusalem) and the hated mother (Nineveh) he opposes the *fantasized* mother (Tarshish, for Jews the practically mythical "ends of the earth"). In his fantasy world Jonah is still able to find pleasure in the mother. The sleep incident probably indicates erotic dreams about the mother.

Jonah is, however, unable to dodge reality for long. The captain, the vigilant ego, wakes him with a reminder of the stormy wrath of the superego (previously evoked by masturbation?). In 1:9

and 1:12 we see how the unconscious surfaces by means of the ambiguities of language. Jonah confesses that he respects (or serves) God. The Hebrew *yara'*, which means "to fear" or "to respect", expresses the ambiguity that marks the son's relationship with the father according to Freud. His confession of guilt in turn hints at the nature of his guilt in a covert way: "I am a knower" (literally in the Hebrew). The Hebrew "know" (*yada'*) is also used of sexual intercourse.

The theme of fear (forms of *yara'* – fear - are used repeatedly) indicates more than fear of the father. Forms of *gadol* (big) also crop up often and point to the sexual fear or anxiety of the child in a world of adults. The desire for the mother is accompanied by the fear that the child will simply prove too small and will be swallowed up, as Jonah is in the fish and in the ship. This fear is at the same time the fear of rejection - Jonah is thrown from the ship and vomited (!) out by the fish. Jonah's every attempt to enter the mother (Tarshish, the ship, the fish) ends in failure. Not surprisingly, the mother begins to assume a monstrous form (the fish). At this stage Jonah reacts to the rejection by identifying himself with the demands of the superego/father after all, thus consigning the (now hated) mother (Nineveh) to the destructive instinct.

He interprets the commands of the superego as a total condemnation of sexuality. When he does "enter" the city, his purpose is destructive rather than erotic. The mother, symbol of seductive feminine sexuality, has to be destroyed. His message of destruction, in Hebrew literally "overturning" (*hafekah*), mirrors the reversal (overturning) of Jonah's love for the mother at the conscious level. This allows us to understand Jonah's rejection of Nineveh's repentance (turning around).

The repentant Nineveh is still not the object of his desire (Jerusalem) and yet it is no longer "the enemy". Jonah is far from ready for a mature relationship with the mother, a relationship in which the mother is no longer the object of either the erotic or the destructive urge. To make matters worse, there is mutual acceptance between the father (God) and the mother (Nineveh). The father (his superego model), who had recently (in Jonah's view) declared the mother and, for that matter, all sexuality taboo, now accepts the mother (Nineveh) as sexual partner. No wonder Jonah feels cheated by the father/God. "Isn't this what I thought?" (4:2). The whole game was a plot hatched by the father and the mother to exclude Jonah and to castrate him psychically.

Since both the mother, as object of the erotic urge, and the father, as source of moral demands, have failed him, Jonah withdraws from both (4:3,5). He *decathects*, that is, he withdraws his libido from objects and returns to a state of narcissistic regression (the state in which the libido is directed at the ego, before object love sets in).

In the last chapter Jonah finds himself in a fantasy world once more - the shelter he builds is also feminine in the Hebrew, but it is a small and lowly dwelling compared to a city. The castor-oil plant is a phallic symbol that probably indicates masturbation here.

The final disillusionment dawns when the worm destroys the plant and the sun beats down on his head. This signals the disintegration of his neurotic (or even psychotic) fantasy world in the confrontation with harsh reality. Jonah is not able to rejoice for long in his narcissistic, autoerotic little world. Is the worm another phallic symbol (as it often is), or is it, as the counterpart of the phallic tree, the female clitoris (the Hebrew word is feminine). Perhaps both are equally apt. The "little worm" of the father overcomes the mighty "tree" of the son, for the former is real, the latter an illusion. At the same time the mother, though "defective" (without phallus), has managed to castrate the son psychically. The libido, beaten on all fronts, sounds the retreat and the death instinct, which had already surfaced previously (1:12, 4:3), is left in possession of the field.

Whose psyche have we just analyzed? A historical Jonah's, the author's or the reader's? Who knows! As a matter of fact, it would be equally easy to present an interpretation portraying Jonah as a latent homosexual with anal-retentive and sadomasochistic tendencies. After all, according to Freudians, anal fixation, homosexuality, and sadomasochism are often linked.

The key would still be the city/mother, specifically Nineveh, the oppressive city. The dominating mother hen-pecks the father to such an extent that the boy's sexual identification is disturbed. This would be the source of Jonah's fear and hatred of the city/mother. The father in turn is prevented from becoming a strong superego model - Jonah considers God too lax in his demands on Nineveh. The son builds up an obsessive code with an excessive emphasis on "purity" (in this case, racial purity), but also loses control over his aggressive drives.

Other characteristics of this personality type are seen in Jonah's obsessive feelings of guilt in 1:12 and his vacillation between withdrawal and aggression. Jonah wants to choose his father's side against the dominating mother (although at first he fears to do so openly), but only in order to reject the mother for a homosexual world of "the boys". To reform the mother is certainly not his aim. And so forth.

Such speculative interpretations are always questionable. The supposed "clues" in the text do not remove the suspicion that anything can be proved by such means - if you know beforehand what you wish to prove. It is unlikely that Freud himself would have hazarded an interpretation based on such shaky evidence.

(b) Jonah in the light of a Lacanian approach

The advantage of an approach such as Lacan's is that it concentrates on the text and its ambiguities. That many meanings may be attached to one item in the text is no problem, but rather a confirmation that there is no single, centred text or subject. In the following discussion only certain possible outlines of such a reading are indicated.

One could start by looking at the ostensibly "intended" meaning of the text, the plea for openness towards the "(m)other" - the city of Nineveh. The apparent stumbling block is that this other is an evil, hostile other. The proposed "solution" is that the other should divest itself of its evil through repentance. The reader is first softened up a little by the repentance of the sailors, whose otherness is not so outrageous. In both parts of the story God's grace comes to the rescue, first of Jonah, then of Nineveh.

But at what level does the reconciliation take place? "The *word* of Yahweh came to Jonah ..." According to this word (3:3), Jonah goes to preach in Nineveh and as a result of this word Nineveh repents. Similarly, the sailors fear Yahweh (1:10) only on account of Jonah's words (1:9). Change and reconciliation take place at the level of the symbolic order. Community is created by the acceptance of a communal sign system.

We find, for instance, that the sailors start praying like Israelites (1:14) and enter the symbolic world of sacrifices and vows (1:16). In exactly the same way the king of Nineveh suddenly starts talking like a dyed-in-the-wool theologian (3:7-9). This all happens when the regulating order of the Father, of Yahweh's Name and his "No!" (to Nineveh's actions) is accepted. The "word of reconciliation" is not at bottom a word of mutual recognition and equal partnership in dialogue; it is a word based on communal submission to an authoritarian order. It is a matter of shared shackles.

Two aspects of the text hint at this shadow side. In chapter 3 it would seem that the people of Nineveh make a praiseworthy, free choice. In the structurally equivalent chapter 1, however, it

is clear that the sailors have no real choice. The storm as the word of Yahweh brings obedience through fear. The word that wins over is backed by the word that overawes.

In 3:7 the ambiguities of language show how the symbolic order as a chain of authority (in a double sense) operates. The submission to the word/authority of Yahweh becomes effective in Nineveh through the word/authority of the king (and his nobles). The change takes place "by *decree* of the king". The Hebrew could also mean "according to the king's *taste*". The selfsame decree forbids people and animals to *taste* anything (the same Hebrew root), that is, to have any taste of their own! The impression is left that the rules of the symbolic order - the ready-made meanings to which they would bind the signifiers - are no natural givens. They depend on the caprice of the rulers, who use rules to rule the choices of their subjects out of court.

No wonder that Jonah resists this order. He cannot reach the "other" he desires by this route. At the critical moment, when Nineveh's enmity seems to disappear, it transpires that the desired state in which the love for and of the "other" coincide, has not been attained. "And the people of Nineveh believed *God*" (3:5). Within the symbolic order all contact with the other is *mediated* (thus deferred) contact.

In a double sense Jonah's "success" in Nineveh failed to confirm his integrity. On the one hand, his "*call*" (*qara'*) to Nineveh (3:4) evoked no *corresponding* echo - Nineveh's "*call*" (*qara'*) is directed at God (3:8). On the other, the order of words that he *call*ed to his aid turned against him, owing to the ambiguity of language. The "overturning" (*hafekah*) that he *call*ed down on Nineveh turned out not to be the overturning of destruction, but the contrary (*hefek*), the turnabout of repentance. God re*call*s his decision - the "laws" of the symbolic order apply only as long as they are to the taste of the rulers - and Jonah finds the integrity of his *call*ing *call*ed into question. Both his *call*ing (as prophet) and his *call*ing (to Nineveh) seem un*call*ed for.

The ingenious readers who imagine that they have thus subverted the "intended" meaning of the author and who prefer to choose Jonah's side (the unconscious and its desires) should take heed. The text has not finished with them. The Jonah-position cannot simply be identified with the unconscious. One does not dispose of the symbolic order that easily.

Jonah's attempt to flee to the "obscure object of desire" - Tarshish, the unknown (m)other - fails and must fail, for here too the access is a mediated (deferred) one. The ship and especially the ship's fee (1:3) undeniably point to the symbolic order (the monetary sign system) in which the signs are ambiguous and the arrival is deferred. What should have been the ark of salvation becomes a ship of disaster and Jonah's efforts run aground. The imaginary order is after all a world of dreams, a world of the deep sleep, in which one cannot really live. The all too mundane other, the ship's captain, quickly wrenches one from it, and the sailors demand a *word* of explanation.

Nor does Jonah set himself against the chain of words as such in chapter 4. He merely wants to pit *his word* against Yahweh's word (4:2). In other words, his rebellion is not against the *father role*, but against *this* father whom he wants to replace in order to be father himself (Oedipal). His refusal to be *call*ed to account by Yahweh this time (he does not answer the question in 4:4) is but an apparent withdrawal from the world of signs, rules and words. On his own he simply rebuilds his own world of signifiers, of good and evil (for example: plant = good, worm = bad). Indeed, his miniature garden of Eden, his "paradise regained" with its single tree, does not lack its own miniature serpent. Jonah ends up with the rest of the human race after all.

A more penetrating analysis à la Lacan would undoubtedly also look for the reason why the fish is given both a male (*dag*) and a female (*dagah*) name and why the "name of the Father" is *not* always the same, since different divine names are used. The question is whether we can really do

anything at all about the chains of words, except bury them under a fresh avalanche of words. In Jonah's opinion only death can free us.

Yahweh's last words provide a suggestion that may not be acceptable to Lacan (but who knows?). It concerns mercy or empathy (*hus*). It is striking that Yahweh invokes this and not faith ('*emunah*), a word of which the etymology suggests the world of firmness and certainty. It is Yahweh's mercy that offers salvation, not the certainty of his word, nor the firmness of Nineveh's faith in it (3:5). But is this a way out or simply another way, one of many, to signal the presence of desire and the absence of the desired in language, a confirmation that our empathy is a sympathy, a "suffering together", born of a shared frustration?

(c) Lacocque and Lacocque's reading of Jonah

I shall not offer a Jungian reading of Jonah. Readers are referred to Lacoque and Lacocque's *The Jonah Complex.* The two Lacocques, father and son, Old Testament scholar and psychologist, draw on a range of theological and psychological sources, but at key points they take a Jungian course (without, however, mentioning archetypes).

7.2.3 Observations and evaluation

- Probably the most significant contribution of psychoanalysis has been that it has drawn attention to the unconscious drives and motivations lying beneath the surface of the ostensibly rational, ordered world of consciousness. This has two implications for interpretation.

  - Firstly, it means that a text should be approached with suspicion, even and especially when all seems clear and rational. The notion of the unconscious implies that neither author nor reader is a centred, unified subject. There are always at least two "I's" and two texts.

  - Secondly, it alerts us to the irrational and apparently confusing aspects of texts. The loose ends or obscure elements in texts that are either forced into a reasonable pattern or ignored in normal interpretation become pointers to the unconscious of the text. That this is not how we usually read reminds us that readers too are divided subjects. The reader's unconscious ego, in the service of the superego, tries to repress the unacceptable, the chaotic, the ruleless.

- In its Jungian form, in turn, psychoanalysis points to the positive contribution that the non-rational (rather than the irrational) - as it crops up in texts in the form of archetypal patterns, symbols and themes - can make to psychic transformation. To be captivated by a text is, at this level, to recognize a challenge to growth.

- In the absence of a unified subject, one must ask in whose service interpretation stands.

  - For Freud it is the ego that needs to be supported in its arduous struggle to maintain a rational balance between the drives of the id and the demands of the superego. In spite of contradictory postmodernist readings of Freud, this therapeutic motive seems to dominate throughout in Freud's work.

  - For Jung the aim is the integrative process of individuation in which conscious and unconscious, individual and community, are brought into harmony.

  - For Lacan it is a matter of recognizing and accepting a split that renders any attempt to master reality from one pole or the other illusory.

- A problem is that all discussion of the unconscious and the irrational takes place in conscious, rational categories. How does one become conscious of what is by definition unconscious? It

can only happen in terms of a theory that is and remains highly speculative. When Freudians find traces of infantile neurosis in a text and Jungians discover archetypal patterns in the same text, they are following their respective theories. Why should we accept these particular rationalizations of what they admit to be irrational? In some respects psychoanalysis itself is a religion demanding faith.

7.3 Marxist approaches

7.3.1 Background and theory

Human history has been marked by oppression and the protest and struggle against oppression. *Marxist theory* attempts to chart this history of oppression, conflict and change, using the conceptual framework and analytical categories developed by Karl Marx and his followers. This requires a thorough grasp of each phase of development in a society, which can be gained only when the roots of social life, the hidden causes of conflict, have been laid bare. At the same time *Marxist praxis* employs all available means (including theoretical analysis) to bring about change in the society so as to eliminate oppression and conflict.

Such a comprehensive project requires a complex and subtle theoretical framework, one to which this brief introduction cannot do justice. In fact, among Marxists themselves there are many differences of opinion, so it is wise to talk of "approaches" in the plural here. (Marxism has often been the target of crude generalizations by its opponents. The ardent supporters of Marx, however, have also often been guilty of oversimplifications and misunderstandings, so that the polemics against what is called "vulgar Marxism" have become part of the Marxist theoretical debate.)

Marx and his early followers did not focus on the interpretation of texts. Nevertheless, Marxism gradually developed its own approach to the interpretation of texts, since texts and their interpretation undoubtedly play a major role in society. Their interpretative approach is, however, embedded in the broader theoretical framework that cannot be understood without a grasp of the key concepts of Marxism.

(a) Basic concepts in Marxist theory

* Historical dialectic, theory and practice

   Marxist analysis views social phenomena in a radically historical light. Ideas, laws, institutions and practices cannot be understood or adjudged in terms of timeless categories. They function – positively or negatively - in specific historical contexts. Each context again has a specific place within a broader historical context. Marxists use *dialectical analysis*, a method based on the identification and analysis of fundamental contradictions and tensions in a particular society, to get a grip on history. In his use of the term dialectic Marx was influenced by Hegel, who saw dialectic as a dynamic, historical process.

   The fundamental contradictions (often overlooked in non-Marxist historiography) provided Marx with the key to the understanding of history as a process based neither on timeless, self-evident principles, nor on a random play of chance. The fundamental contradictions in a society at a specific stage help one to understand both the complex conjuncture of elements in the society and the constant developments and interactions in the society. Marxists reject the type of analysis that would study aspects of a society in isolation or in a static state.

   That Marxists study societies and their history in detail does not mean that Marxists seek neutral facts. Because they wish to change the world, Marxists reject a purely theoretical

approach. Theory serves practice and is itself a change-bringing endeavour - a theoretical practice. Marxist analysts are aware that they cannot step outside history to gain an objective overview of it; instead, they are, also in their theorizing, themselves actors in history. Moreover, they are convinced that one's practical involvement in the struggle against oppression is an asset (not a liability) in the search for a more adequate theory.

⊛ Materialism and social labour

Marxist analysis starts with the concrete, the material: people produce to fulfill their needs - they must eat before they can think. In production, material people interact physically with a material world to meet (first) their material needs. Marxism is, indeed, materialism. Yet these material interactions and relationships have a certain history. Productive labour changes both the material world and the people engaged in it. If I plant now, I can eat later and, still later, think. Admittedly, people are determined by their history and environment (they are material beings that must eat and reproduce), yet people also make their history, their environment and themselves through productive labour.

From a "purely material" base, through productive labour, humans developed a "spiritual side". "People shall not live by bread alone" says the Christian ... and the Marxist. The difference is that the Christian intends to say something about the being (or essence) of people; Marxists intend to say something about their history. People today (and for a long time) need more than food. For Marxists the "spiritual side" remains rooted in the material world, for no "idea" or "God" has come from outside the historical process to tack a spiritual tail onto material people. Instead, matter itself has developed to a "higher" form.

Concrete productive labour is *social labour*. As solitary beings people would have remained stuck at the stage where each is barely able to meet his or her most pressing needs. By its very nature, reproduction is social. As the possibilities of production were developed, new social relationships emerged, just as complex chemical compounds are formed by different combinations of basic elements (even two forms of pure carbon, graphite and diamond, have quite different properties). The modern individual, in her very "uniqueness", is a product of social relationships. The theory that people are socially determined (and actively determine their social world) does not negate individuality. Rather, it is the social order that reduces people to mere types - black/white, female/male, literate/illiterate, and so on. Only when social role and individuality are not posed as opposites can people come into their own as individual, social beings. According to Marx, this can only happen in a socialist society.

⊛ Revolutionary social dialectics, mode of production and class struggle

Productive social labour has up to now always involved struggle and contradictions. First, people won the battle for survival in the dialectical relationship with nature through the social organization of labour. Then, having overcome many natural obstacles, people started dominating one another. A new dialectic, one between employer and employee, master and servant, oppressor and oppressed, appeared. The Marxist concept of dialectic implies a quite specific type of interaction – one that involves tension, antagonism and ultimate revolutionary change. Water in a closed container will evaporate and condense as the temperature changes. Although there is an interaction between the gaseous form (water vapour) and the liquid form, both remain forms of water. In the Marxist concept of dialectics, one pole (thesis) confronts another pole (antithesis) in an intense tension, till the tension is resolved in a wholly new given (synthesis). (Hegel and Marx both use the untranslatable German word "aufheben" for the resolution of dialectical contradictions. The German word implies both a canceling and a

lifting to a higher level.) The two poles thus do not remain in permanent interaction, nor does the one pole gradually overwhelm the other. From the very tension something new is born.

Put in concrete terms, oppressor and oppressed are indeed in interaction: the one cannot exist without the other. Of a peaceful coexistence, however, there can be no question. Nor can the tension between oppressor and oppressed be resolved by minor changes in the pattern (more or less oppression, a transference of some people from the one group to the other). Only when there are *no* oppressed will there be no oppressors, and vice versa. This requires a wholly new, a revolutionary, ordering of society. Marxist theory is a theory of *revolutionary dialectics*. In practice, a revolution usually (perhaps always) requires violence, since the concrete advantages the oppressive system holds for the oppressors directly correlates with the disadvantages it holds for the oppressed. The oppressors cling to their position with as much determination as the oppressed show in their struggle to free themselves from oppression.

According to Marxism, oppression does not occur by chance, as the result of the coincidental wickedness of some individuals. It is in fact built into the very structure of class societies and is the result of the specific *mode of production* in the particular society. The concept "mode of production" refers to the combination of the *means of production* (labour force, technology, and so on) and the *relations of production* (the way labour is socially ordered).

As long as a certain group controls the means of production and determines the relations of production, there will be competing classes in the society. Between the various classes (groups that have different relationships in terms of the production process) a *class struggle* rages. At a certain stage - when the current relations of production come into conflict with the available means of production so that further development of the production process is hindered - the internal contradictions in the mode of production reach breaking point. Class struggle passes into revolution, bringing about a new mode of production and a new set of relationships among people.

Since productive labour lies at the root of all societies, each society's mode of production, the so-called *economic base*, determines the nature of the society. All social phenomena are, in the last instance, dependent on the economic base. The laws, philosophies, religions, art forms and so forth make up the *ideological superstructure*. These "products of the mind" do not descend from an independent spiritual sphere or a world of pure thought, but are (in a complex way) products of the base.

⚙ Ideology and false consciousness

The superstructure is not, however, simply a reflection or reproduction of the base. On the contrary, the dominant ideology often conceals and distorts (Marxists say *mystifies*) what happens at the base. Even when it presents a mystified image (and precisely then), the ideology remains an expression of the real tensions at the base. Though the ideological products of a society are complex and even contradictory, the dominant ideology, seen as a whole, is also the ideology of the ruling class. Therefore the dominant ideology will ultimately serve the interests of the ruling class by protecting the status quo (though this may not always be apparent at the surface). Free and fierce theoretical discussions may, for instance, be encouraged in a specific society - to act as a safety valve that would cripple revolutionary action by creating the impression that correct theory in itself will provide the solution.

Most Marxists agree that an ideology is not derived *directly* from the mode of production. Although any ideology ultimately has its roots in the economic base, ideology and base do not quite follow parallel lines of development. The ideological superstructure can also react back on the base. Nor is ideology simply an intentional fraud perpetrated by the dominant class

to protect its position. Members of the ruling class often truly believe their ideology, because they themselves are (on account of their upbringing) products of their class position and class ideology. Their *false consciousness* becomes, as it were, the spectacles through which they see the world. Since the ruling class also controls the means of intellectual production (schools, universities, newspapers, and so on), it may easily appear to them (and to members of the working class) that their intellectual world, their ideology, is *the* intellectual world.

The working classes, on the other hand, are not only economically exploited; they are also ideologically neutralised. Most of them cannot compete because they lack adequate (or any) schooling. The few who rise through effort and sacrifice are allowed to do so only on the condition that they accept (internalize) the dominant ideology. A number of them even enter the ranks of the ruling class. These exceptions are held up as "examples" to other workers, but, being few, they make no difference to the basic structure of the society.

All the same, the fundamental contradictions and tensions in a class society cannot be suppressed completely. The emphasis on competition in a capitalist society, for instance, prevents the ruling class from forming a united front at all times. The safety valves that the ruling class are forced to provide - free theoretical discussion, co-option of some workers into the ruling class, and the like - mean that "dangerous" or "subversive" ideas may find their way into the dominant ideology. One might compare here Freud's view on how the repressed contents of the unconscious make their way to the surface.

(b) *Marxism and the interpretation of texts*

⚙ Text production and ideological criticism

Literature, specifically religious literature, belongs to the ideological superstructure. Indeed, in modern societies the written word is the prime vehicle of the dominant ideology. But the production of texts (material objects) is also part of the productive social labour in a society. Books are written from a social situation for a social situation - they are embedded in society.

The typical questions of historical-critical interpretation are refined, expanded and posed more pointedly by Marxist interpreters. Who writes? Under what circumstances? For whom? With what purpose? These old questions receive a new edge in Marxist interpretation. Since authors are not independent, neutral "creators of meaning", one has to ask about the class position and class interests of the author. The same goes for the audience. From a Marxist perspective one would also ask: Who within a society has the leisure to write? How is the society structured to stimulate the production of certain types of text? Who controls the publication and distribution of texts? How is the consumption of texts institutionally regulated in a society (think of handbooks at universities)? When you start studying these questions, it becomes clear that the production and consumption of texts cannot be divorced from the social and historical processes in the particular society.

Since texts are the vehicles of ideology, the "meanings" and "values" attached to them cannot be taken at face value. Texts are not "innocent"; therefore the problems that a text presents at the surface may be a deceptive point of departure for the interpreter. A Marxist reading often reveals how a text is rooted in its ideological context by looking at the unstated presuppositions behind the text and the all too deliberate "silences" in it. The "other" of the antithesis often appears indirectly, "between the lines".

The introduction to this section used the example of a book from the apartheid era in South Africa in which all the characters are whites to show how a text can obscure a fundamental

conflict within a particular society by simply ignoring it. Similarly, many books simply presuppose certain social relationships, institutions and practices; slavery, feudalism, capitalist production, a hierarchical class system, and so on. Precisely when these factors are not considered – critically or otherwise – in the text, their "absence" may influence the entire framing of the text, the questions it asks and the answers its proposes. For instance, a text may invite readers to praise a servant's act of *loyalty* to his master, while the same act may, from the servant's point of view, reflect the servant's complete *dependence* on his master. Marxist analysis would point out the discrepancy between the perspective of the master (presented in the text) and that of the servant (not presented in the text) and show how class positions based on economic factors influenced these perspectives.

Marxists have no more faith in "centred" subjects than Freudians do. Many of them would say (following Althusser) that the author as subject is at certain points *interpellated* by the dominant ideology. In brief, this means that the concrete author is as it were interrupted by the claim of ideology and becomes a subject (or is subjected) by taking an ideological stance. But many Marxists (following Bakhtin) also argue that certain texts are *dialogical*. In such texts no single voice or ideology dominates the text; different voices speak within the same text.

Texts that negate the fundamental dialectic in a society serve an ideological function in that society. On the one hand, they deny or justify the underlying economic relationships and power structures in the society, which appear, if at all, only as "self-evident" or "given" in the text. On the other, they help form the mental apparatus of the readers. The readers are influenced to look for the solutions to the problems of the society within the framework offered by the text. Authors are not always fully aware of this, for their own thoughts have already been ideologically moulded.

Marxist interpretation thus seeks to bring to light the interests a text serves in practice, by indicating how the text functions within a broader ideological framework.

⚙ Interpretation as revolutionary praxis

Marxist interpretation does not deny that the interpreter is also a concrete person with class interests. On the contrary, Marxism deliberately wants to use the critical practice of interpretation as a means of engaging in the class struggle. Interpretations, like texts, are always on the side of either the oppressor or the oppressed.

The implication of this for the practice of Marxist interpretation is that Marxists cannot blithely juxtapose a plurality of "meanings" or possibilities of meanings. The ambiguity of linguistic signs is not denied, yet value judgments are not ruled out either. Marxists are concerned primarily about the reality of oppression and not about abstract "possible meanings". In the world of ideas all sorts of interpretations may be equally "interesting"; in the concrete context of clashing class interests and inequality, every interpretation involves the exercising of power and is thus subject to positive or negative evaluation. Unlike some postmodern interpreters, Marxists cannot completely evade the question of *correct* or *adequate* interpretation (although Marxists are more concerned about correct practice than about correct theory).

Terry Eagleton (1983:210f) summarizes this point as follows: Marxist interpretation is not in the first place a method of interpretation. Marxists may use a variety of methods, some not Marxist in origin at all. What does typify Marxist interpretation, is the *purpose* for which particular interpretations are used.

⚙ Meaning in historical perspective and the complexity of contexts

For Marxists the "meaning" and "value" of a text are not eternal, universal categories: a text acquires value or meaning in quite specific historical contexts. Indeed, the same text may, at different times and in different societies, acquire totally different values and meanings. For this reason, socio-historical analysis generally plays an important role in Marxist interpretation. In the case of texts from the distant past, especially, one has to distinguish between the ideological role the text played then (at the time of writing) and the ideological role the text acquired for later (also present-day) readers.

Marx's associate Frederick Engels argued that Christianity was at its birth a progressive, revolutionary movement with a strong socialist slant. Later, however, Christianity became a powerful state religion and served as protector of the *status quo*. Whether or not one accepts his historical analysis, one has to ask the type of questions he asked. Is a biblical text that was originally the manifesto of a marginalized minority still "the same text" when it functions as a rule enforced by a powerful elite?

In all cases the interpreter must guard against a facile labeling of phenomena that does not take the dialectical processes within the society into account. Revolutions are not always progressive and dictatorships are not always reactionary. A text that might have had a progressive impact in its own time may today carry reactionary implications (and vice versa). Even the author's acknowledged ideological stance does not disqualify or validate a text. According to Lukacs (1964), the "reactionary" Balzac and Tolstoy were better able to expose the problems of their times than were their more "progressive" contemporaries. (One sometimes gets the impression that "dialectical analysis" can be a way of justifying personal preferences. In the case of Lukacs, one can assume that his "findings" were influenced by Marx's predilection for Balzac and Lenin's for Tolstoy.)

Under the influence of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser (in particular), modern Marxist theorists have become sensitive to the complexity of developed capitalist societies. In such societies it may be misleading to talk about one unified economic base and one unified ideological superstructure. Within one encompassing economic system (capitalism) various partially independent ideological "worlds" (sub-ensembles) have developed, each connected to its own specific relationships of production, its own dialectics and class struggle. The varied ways in which these sub-ensembles interact with one another and are influenced by different aspects of the production process create *conjunctures* that cannot be analyzed by means of a simple base-superstructure model. In different situations one person may be the oppressed at one moment, the oppressor at the next.

Moreover, most capitalist countries now tolerate a variety of ideologies, including ones hostile to capitalism. One can no longer talk of a ruling class *dominating* an oppressed class by force and through a single "ruling ideology". Instead, the ruling group exercises a *hegemony* (Gramsci) based on the prestige and confidence of the group and its ideas. This prestige attracts a large number of *subalterns* who willingly follow the lead of the hegemonic group. In the analysis of texts one cannot play off "oppressor" and "oppressed" against each other in a simplistic way. One has to consider the intricate ways in which a hegemonic ideology co-opts subalterns and maintains itself against rival ideologies.

For the interpretation of texts this meant that a sharper focus on the unique dynamics of textual production and textual consumption was needed. If one bears in mind the quite specific conjunctures within which each text is written and interpreted, one cannot expect that every text should address the problematic of the society as a whole. It is the task of interpretation to

lay bare the quite distinct forms of ideological struggle within which *this* text is embedded and to consider the constraints and possibilities inherent in certain literary traditions - those of genre, current aesthetic values, publishability and the like. Engels had already recognized that works of art yield less easily to Marxist analysis than do, say, laws, since art is less purely ideological.

In this way Marxist interpretation sidesteps the accusation that it imposes a uniform pattern on all texts and that it negates the unique nature of some texts by means of historistic or economistic reduction.

7.3.2 Jonah in the light of Marxist approaches

Because Marxists hold that meaning emerges within a concrete historical and social context, a Marxist interpreter of the book of Jonah would first try to place the book historically. The following assumptions could serve as point of departure (Marxists would admit that such historical reconstructions are open to debate):

◉ The book was written in the late Persian period or the early Greek period - while Israel was subject to colonial rule.

◉ The author belonged to the educated upper layer of Judaean society and wrote primarily for this class. Note that the class position of the historical Jonah (or of the Jonah of the text) is not necessarily important.

◉ The author was influenced by the wisdom tradition which was prevalent in Ancient Israel, but was not necessarily a wisdom teacher himself.

◉ At the surface at least, the book deals with the relationship between Jew and pagan.

These assumptions are not arbitrary, nor are they the products of specifically Marxist analysis. In practice, Marxists use the results of historical-critical studies as points of departure in their reading of the Bible. These assumptions make the following Marxist interpretations of the book of Jonah possible:

(a) A crude Marxist interpretation of the book Jonah

A very crude approach would be to take the apparent universalism of the book at face value and to identify it as a progressive tendency. God loves everybody, pagans are also human, reconciliation between people is possible, and so on. One could even point out that the last verse, with its emphasis on the "proletariat" of Nineveh (the "hundred and twenty thousand who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand"), breaks through the existing class structure. Even earlier (Jonah 3:5) all people "from the greatest to the least" were included in the act of repentance. Have excessive nationalism, racial hatred and the oppression of one people by another not always been favoured weapons in the arsenal of the ruling class? And isn't it the dearest wish of the ruling class to direct the antagonism of the oppressed outward, turning class struggles into national struggles? And who but the small circle of rulers ever benefits from imperialist wars? So: workers of Israel and Nineveh unite! There is nothing to separate you. This reading turns Jonah into a prophetic book for Marxists as well, one that looks forward to the reconciliation of all people in the socialist order.

The problem with such a reading, one that does not deserve to be called "Marxist", is that it has no secure moorings in text or context and offers no proper analysis. The "solution" drops from heaven, yet partly it remains stuck in heaven, for the repentance of Nineveh remains a fantasy - if such a thing ever happened in Nineveh, it left no historical traces. Class differences are not really

eliminated; they are confirmed up to the last verse. "From the greatest to the least" (3:5) in this context means "everybody", yet the expression reveals how the dominant ideology imposes itself in and through language. The author, who might be subjectively "innocent", uses an expression that shows clearly how in this society a phrase for "everybody" presupposes class differences. "Everybody" is differentiated into "lesser" and "greater". This is the dream of the advantaged classes: a harmony, a "peaceful coexistence" at a spiritual level, in which people still "know their place". From this perspective the reference to the "simple souls" in the last verse is paternalistic rather than liberating.

(b) A vulgar Marxist interpretation of the book of Jonah

Arguments such as these could form the basis of a somewhat better substantiated reading. Such a reading would at least use finer distinctions and would anchor the text better historically. The question about the power base from which the book of Jonah was produced (in the late Persian or early Greek period) becomes crucial. The following deliberations bear on this issue:

- The author of the book of Jonah probably did belong to the upper stratum of Judaean society, but in a situation in which their power and privileges were relativized by the overarching Persian (or Greek) rule. This stratum of the population experienced a threat from above (rather than from below). In such a situation the local privileged classes had to compete for the favour of the real rulers. They might also have been internally divided on how best to maintain and stabilize their position. Here there can be no question of a uniform dominant ideology. In such situations various elements of older ideological patterns are reactivated and reinterpreted according to the specific interests of the different groups.

- For instance, groups that faced a virtually complete loss of status and privilege might have sought the cooperation of the working class in order to regain political power through a "patriotic war". For such groups terms such as "own identity and culture" and "the pagan yoke" would have been significant ideological markers. We know of a Messianic-apocalyptic movement at that time that wanted to reinstate the David monarchy by force. Members of the David dynasty and their supporters would have felt at home here and would have appealed to some elements of the royal ideology (cf. Psalms 2 and 110) to bolster their claim.

- Others who still had a power base (albeit diminished) would have striven to make their particular power base ideologically central. The priestly-theocratic movement with its power base in the temple service fits here. This group (priests and their hangers-on) could have used the relative independence that Jews enjoyed in religious matters to turn the temple into a source of influence and wealth for themselves.

- *Exclusivity* would have served the interests of both these groups, whether as a stimulus to revolt against foreign rule or as confirmation that the "true identity" of Jews was bound up with their unique religion.

- The author of Jonah fits into neither of these groups; we have to look for other possibilities. No doubt there were people who benefited from the situation because the existing relationships of power gave them freer play. For such people foreign rule would not have been a disaster. This group, a middle class between rulers and workers, might have contained merchants, officials, wisdom teachers and even some landowners. For various reasons these people would not necessarily have suffered under foreign rule, either economically or in status. Merchants, for instance, might have enjoyed better trading opportunities; official who co-operated with the new rulers might have improved their status vis-à-vis the traditional figures of authority. The professional ideology of wisdom teachers valued openness to the new, so they might have

found the more international atmosphere stimulating. Landowners would in any case not have welcomed a destructive war of liberation.

Although we cannot be sure, we may accept as a working hypothesis that the author of Jonah belonged to the bureaucratic class and that he ("she" is unlikely here) had been prepared for his task in the wisdom schools.

According to this analysis, the vaunted universalism and openness of the book of Jonah conceals a sordid little power struggle within the closed circle of the privileged. Behind the explicit theme of antagonism against non-Jews lurks the antagonisms among various privileged groups of Jews and the antagonism between workers and the rulers. The patience and grace of God conceal the concrete problems of the bureaucrat who has to keep everybody happy and cannot afford to make enemies. No wonder the author leaves the Jonahs in his audience the option of "realizing" that the practice of openness and tolerance is the religio-ideologically correct thing. The readers have to be won over, not antagonized. Both Jonah and God appear as "classless beings", yet a number of incidentally mentioned details reveal the reality that the text tries to conceal.

Apart from those mentioned above, note that:

- ❀ it is accepted that Jonah is able to pay for a long voyage (1:3)
- ❀ Jonah is approached by the captain, not by ordinary sailors (1:6)
- ❀ it is assumed that the revolution in Nineveh can come only from above, "by the decree of the king and his nobles" (3:7)
- ❀ "all" (4:11) finally benefit, but the crucial decisions rest with the "great ones"

Because the ideological bondage of the book renders it incapable (it is not a matter of "unwilling") of even seeing the central problem in the society, the solution remains unrealistic.

This reading is a better example of how Marxists would deal with a text. The speculative element cannot be held against Marxism; in the circumstances (lack of data) all readings that take history seriously will include an element of speculation. Nevertheless, one could call this approach vulgar Marxism. Class position and ideology are assumed to have such a direct correlation that ideology is a more or less clear reflection of economic and political interests. As a result the text is reduced to little more than an instance of a dynamic that might well have been identified *without the text*. The question of whether a workers' revolution would have been a progressive (or even a possible) option under existing conditions is not examined. One could argue that the imperialist system was still able to contribute to the development of the possibilities of production (by spreading knowledge and technology) and that the alternative to imperialist oppression was simply a return to more stagnant local oppression. It is vulgar Marxism that invites the accusation that Marxism is economic determinism and that its application to literary products involves an unwarranted reduction.

(c) A more sophisticated Marxist interpretation of the book of Jonah

The objections raised above need not apply to a more theoretically sophisticated Marxist approach. Modern Marxist approaches recognize that ideological products bear a complex relationship to the dominant ideology and the economic base. Even at the time that Jonah was written, society had developed complicated ideological formations that functioned alongside one another virtually independently. Adequate interpretation demands that we account for much more than mere class interests.

One should, for instance, recognize that the generalizing, "unrealistic" (even utopian) features of the book fit the specific genre. The ferment within the wisdom tradition of the period (to which Job and Ecclesiastes bear witness) should be taken into consideration. Verses marked as central by the structure of the text deserve attention; so too the fact that it is an "open text". Thus the details of the text that disappeared in the vulgar Marxist interpretation come into their own again. Without challenging all aspects of the vulgar Marxist analysis (the class analysis may be allowed to stand), such an analysis may reach quite different conclusions.

Since such a reading would be complex, only the barest outline can be indicated here:

❀ First, it should be noted that the opposition Jew/pagan is codetermined by the opposition oppressor/oppressed from the outset. It is because he has to go to the "blood city", Nineveh, that Jonah tries to flee to Tarshish (equally foreign). The opposition is presented schematically as a result of the genre.

❀ Secondly, it can be argued that the opposition oppressor/oppressed is not "lifted" in any idealistic way. Although the representation is schematic, it is clear that only a revolution in Nineveh's praxis, an about-turn that explicitly involves the rejection of oppression (*hamas*), saves the day. This is not a universalism that "accepts" everything, oppression included; changed practice is the condition for reconciliation.

❀ The rhetorical turns in the text also show that this is no simplistic plea for tolerance. The opposition Jew/pagan, implicitly present from the first verses, is also undermined from the very first verses by the opposition good/evil. The latter opposition is explicitly kept before the eyes of the readers throughout the text by means of word play. Not only is there no direct correlation between good/evil and Jew/pagan; the former is not a static opposition. Through transforming action, evil can turn into good and vice versa.

❀ In the narrative pagans are willing to engage in transforming action. In chapter 3 a series of actions by the people of Nineveh (3:5-9) is followed by the key verse 3:10, which uses forms of *'asah* (do, make) three times to emphasize the *act*uality of the change. Similarly, in 1:5-16 a series of actions by the crew finally changes their lives. Although the actions may be misplaced (in the eyes of the reader) to start with, it is only in and through the dynamics of their actions that progression becomes possible.

❀ By way of contrast, Jonah is astoundingly passive from the start. Even his "activity" in chapter 1 is flight, an attempt to avoid engagement. On two occasions (1:9 and 3:3-4) he does act and with great consequence too, but in both cases one has the impression that he becomes involved only when he has no other option. For the rest he prefers the spectator role or the role of the one to whom things happen. He lies asleep during the storm (1:5), he is questioned (1:8,10), he is cast into the sea (1:15), he is swallowed and vomited out again (2:1,11), he becomes angry (4:1), he sits down "to see what will happen" (4:5), he becomes glad (4:6), he feels faint (4:8). No fewer than three times he chooses to die - the height of apathy.

❀ The result of this passivity is that his experience of salvation does not bring any thorough transformation - as do the actions of the people of Nineveh. He is a victim even of his salvation.

❀ God, however, is constantly active and set on change. This becomes abundantly clear in 4:1 where God's word and Jonah's word are contrasted. Jonah's word simply recognizes a fixed state of affairs. The translation "is this not what I thought?" (literally: Was this not my word?) typifies Jonah's word as a mere idea, one that does not even have to be expressed. Such a word remains without effect. Jonah knows certain things (cf 1:12), but his reaction is to throw in the

towel. God's word steps into the ring to become engaged in the dialectic that brings change. For this very reason God's word is not a static, unchanging word (4:10). God's word is neither the (theoretical) denial of oppression nor the (theoretical) recognition of oppression; it is the *negation* of oppression that enters into the historical process to "lift/cancel" oppression, and that is in this process necessarily itself "lifted/cancelled".

❋ Jonah's resignation is not, however, an ahistorical personality trait. It belongs to the situation of being oppressed. Something of this becomes visible in the play on the forms of *yara*](fear, respect) in chapter 1. No reason is given for Jonah's flight, but readers can easily supply one. Who wants to fall foul of the mighty Nineveh? Jonah, as representative of the oppressed, is intimidated by the apparently overwhelming superiority of Nineveh, so that his fear (*yara'*) of Nineveh renders his respect (*yara'*) for God inoperative. His flight is a flight into the inactivity of theory, the theory he later (4:1) holds up as the reason for his flight. Of Jonah *yara*] is used once only: in the key verse 1:9 where he says of himself that he serves (respects) Yahweh. These words ring hollow, just as Jonah as the centre of the narrative remains a hollow centre. His unspoken fear of Nineveh gives his spoken respect for God the lie.

❋ Transforming action takes place around the hollow centre. The sailors are also afraid (1:5), but their fear spurs them on to positive action to save lives and by this route leads them on to respect for God (1:16). In this sphere of respect lies their marked respect for Jonah's life (1:13,14). On the other hand, by 4:8 one feels that Jonah has lost all self-respect. Whereas the crew conquers fear, Jonah is conquered and dehumanized by fear. The fear syndrome of the oppressed brings a knowledge (1:12, 4:2) of hopeless passivity. This can be countered by a "perhaps" (1:6) or a "who knows?" (3:10), which spurs on to action and leaves room for change.

❋ The open ending suits this. The reader is invited to abandon the spectator role and take an active part in writing the story. Instead of a fear-reaction that would impose a closed ending on the readers, the author, out of respect for the readers, risks leaving the decision to them.

Such a "Christian-Marxist" reading would probably be acceptable to Marxist atheists should "God" in the text be seen as a symbol of human potential. Marxists, Christian or not, would obviously want to say more. What made such a text possible at that time? Each individual text is born of the convergence of many lines - economic, political, and ideological. One can only surmise that the process by which the middle class was beginning to establish itself as a relatively independent and active class played a major role in the origin of Jonah. This would help to explain why this text can be reactivated today - by a new rising class.

Readers are also referred to Terry Eagleton's interpretation of Jonah, "J.L. Austin and Jonah" (1989). Eagleton, a Marxist literary critic, also regards the question of effective action to be central to the book, but he approaches the matter differently. His purpose is not to give a "standard" Marxist interpretation, but to enter into a debate with critics of the deconstruction school (for example De Man and Hillis Miller) about the possibility of meaningful action. The result is a provocative reading that is in many ways an inverted mirror image of traditional readings. Nevertheless, he touches on a problem deeply rooted in both the Marxist and the Christian tradition: how can a call to effective action be reconciled with the consciousness that action is never independent, but always determined by forces that control the individual?

7.3.3 Observations and evaluation

❋ As the examples show, there is no standard "Marxist method" of interpretation (just as there is no "Christian method"). A reading by a Marxist (or from a Marxist perspective) cannot be

constructed solely by the tools of Marxist theory. Marxist readings regularly use a number of reading strategies that are not specifically Marxist. They sometimes focus on particular features of a text (as Eagleton does), without thereby pretending to say all that can be said about the text from a Marxist perspective.

❈ Thematically, Marxism introduces certain concepts that, although not exclusively Marxist, often receive insufficient attention outside Marxist circles: ideology, production, classes, and so on. In Marxist interpretation these concepts are systematically employed; they are seen in their interrelatedness according to Marxist theory. Nevertheless, caution is taken to avoid thoughtless schematicism; the interaction of the elements must be placed within historically changing frames.

❈ Methodologically dialectical analysis typifies Marxist interpretation. Dialectics may, however, operate at various levels. The contradictions and oppositions explicitly presented in the text cannot provide adequate data for dialectical analysis. Correctly used, dialectical analysis is not a way of reducing texts to schematic abstractions, but rather a way of exposing the historical concreteness of each text, its determinate (in both senses) nature or materiality.

❈ Marxist interpretation is engaged (committed) interpretation. This means that the interpreter interprets on the basis of a particular commitment, but also that interpretation is itself a form of engagement, an active theoretical practice with determined and determining results.

❈ The Marxist emphasis on concreteness and commitment in interpretation cannot be ignored by Christians simply because Marx and most early Marxists were atheists. Biblical interpretation that yields only abstract truths and that ignores the biblical call to action and commitment is as useless to Christians as it would be to Marxists. It is not surprising that theologies of liberation often follow Marxist models in their interpretative practice.

❈ One problem remains to dog Marxist approaches (and all approaches that employ a hermeneutics of suspicion). If texts cannot be trusted to speak for themselves, it can only mean that the interpreter "knows better". What is the source of this superior insight? The vast majority of Marxist theorists stem from the class blinded by false consciousness - according to their own theory. But even those who may claim to have reached their insights through their "own experience of oppression" face a question: Does a systematic suspicion not exclude the possibility that a text may say something to shake the confidence in that experience? Must Marx and one's own experience not be read with suspicion as well? A person who approaches everything with suspicion is well protected against deceit, but may also be shut off from surprising new insights.

7.4 Feminist approaches

7.4.1 Background and theory

Among reader-centred hermeneutic approaches to the Bible, feminist hermeneutics draws diverse and often extremely emotional responses. These reactions often cloud reasonable evaluations of the nature and content of the field, as many people cannot discard their own emotional reactions to the mere word, *feminism*. To a certain extent, this is understandable, because feminism has a complex and diverse history - broader than biblical hermeneutics.

So, what is feminist hermeneutics? Does it imply some of the above-mentioned ideas or none at all? To define feminism is no easy task, as it is an extremely diverse concept. Even self-proclaimed

feminists sometimes disagree on the nature and implications of feminism. Broadly speaking, feminism hinges on one assumption: the assumption of *equality*.

(a) The assumption of equality

> A feminist broadly speaking, is one who seeks justice and equality for all people and who is especially concerned for the fate of women – all women – in the midst of "all people." Such a definition means that issues pertinent to racism, classism, and ecology, as well as peacemaking, are part of the purview of feminism. Yet the perspectives are extremely varied, even when the focal subject matter is limited to the Bible and theology. – *Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*

In its core, feminism is convinced that men and women have equal intrinsic value. One may respond to this by saying: So what? What is the problem with this statement? Is anyone still arguing that women have less value than men? Feminism indeed argues, with strong statistics to support it, that women are (still) treated as though inferior to men in many respects; a shared experience of oppression reveals this *assumption* of equality. There is the argument in studies of gender relations that an imbalance in power sharing can be identified in various cultural contexts.

This imbalance is also identifiable in various fields of study, such as hermeneutics. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and African traditional religions, as well as most other religions that study ancient (oral or written) texts central to their religious praxis, all have long patriarchal histories. The same is true of the history of academic study. Scholars of feminist hermeneutics argue that these authoritative, sacred texts have been interpreted in such a way as to marginalize women and to, thus, confirm their inferiority in comparison with men. This leads to yet another curious debate in the field of hermeneutics that is central to the feminist argument. In this debate, the central question is whether objective scholarship is at all possible.

(b) The problem of objectivity

> One's social location or rhetorical context is decisive of how one sees the world, constructs reality, or interprets biblical texts. – *Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*

As a major model of socio-critical or contextual hermeneutics, feminist hermeneutics regards objective study as impossible. No person, whether male or female, black or white, can read any text, or study any object or phenomenon, as though lacking personal experience, context or conviction prior to such a study. At the outset, your context or interests determine your chosen subject matter or field of study, and your scholarly background determines your method of study. Your personal loyalties determine the desired result or outcome of your studies; you go to great lengths to accomplish your goals, if they are at all reasonably possible.

Consequently, that which, over several centuries, was considered as "objective" study has now been exposed as androcentric (male-centered, European) subjective scholarship. Together with this realization, further questions must be asked: Did hermeneutic scholars use specific texts, consciously or unconsciously, to validate their own domination of others? Did they use selected passages as instruments of power, domination and social control? In this sense, feminist hermeneutics has strong liberation tendencies, seeking to expose so-called objective scholarship as ([un]intentional) self-validation and legitimizing the subordination of people from contexts other than their own.

It is important to note that feminist hermeneutics not only denies the objectivity of orthodox/traditional scholarship, but also that of its own. The idea is not to promote an atmosphere within which any interpretation is deemed equally acceptable on the grounds that no person

can be objective, but new questions and criteria are brought to the table on the basis of which different interpretations can be evaluated. Schüssler Fiorenza, for instance, advocates an ethic of *responsibility* towards the historical and rhetorical contexts of biblical texts, as well as an ethic of *accountability* pertaining to the ethical consequences of one's interpretation. Since feminist hermeneutics is so diverse, all feminist scholars do not necessarily accept these criteria. Such diversity plays a major role in the further discussion of the topic. Let us now more closely examine some of the possible positions within feminism.

(c) A multitude of feminist perspectives

As we have seen, the viewpoint of feminism is not easy to describe precisely, because it consists of so many different aspects. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of major trends within feminist thinking. In the next section I will describe four such possibilities, focusing on each position's strong and weak points.

❀ Liberal feminism

Basically, liberal feminism accepts the political and economic status quo, but advocates and promotes a fixed idea of equal access for qualified women to its ranks. This is the kind of feminism that had its peak in the 1960s. It still retains the Enlightenment's confidence in democracy and humanity's (reasonable) thinking. Liberal feminism is a thoroughly white middle-class movement that advocates individual autonomy. A mature adult is a financially independent working person with (what is mainly seen as) traditional male characteristics. Therefore, for these liberal feminists, a human utopia could best be envisaged as a state in which men and women, psychologically and behaviourally, are the same – tough, or soft, when needs be, and no longer the slaves of sex-role stereotyping.

Yet, liberal feminism has played an important role in women's coming of age, helping them take responsibility for their own lives, and exposing apparently neutral patterns of thinking as largely androgynous (white, male, middle-class). Although liberal feminism rightly emphasizes the common humanity of men and women, it tends to underrate the distinctions between the genders and still tends to rank traditional male values higher than female values. It underestimates the depth at which patriarchy (the assumption that regards male as normative) operates in society and over-estimates the ease with which rational discourse could bring justice for women.

❀ Socialist/Marxist feminism

At its heart, Marxism is a social theory of conflict. It considers the whole of society to be corrupt. For Marxists, class conflict is primary in the battle of the sexes. Following this model, Marxists view the oppression of women largely in terms of class. Therefore, the emphasis is on economic oppression, injustice and little else. Marxists regard a mature person as a revolutionary who strives to hasten the birth pangs of a new socialist state, even if this entails violent behaviour. Even among liberal believers, few would probably conform to this violent position.

Their strong point would be that they regard the depth of corruption in society extremely seriously, although they blame this mainly on the class system inherent to capitalism.

❀ Radical feminism

Radical feminism is easy to stereotype, but difficult to define. This is because it emphasizes a large number of different elements, and its followers are often spread among various divergent groups, including liberal and Marxist feminists. These women speak out actively against

their experiences of male abuse in order to reclaim their own humanity. By this criterion, a great many radical feminists would never consciously refer to themselves as feminists. Quite a number of these women still belong to congregations in which male leaders still proudly proclaim a so-called biblical view of gender roles. Radical feminism differs from Marxist feminism in that it views the latter as naïve by reducing women's oppression to class oppression. The basic dividing line is not between capitalists and workers, but between men and women as members of different sexual groups. Patriarchy, not capitalism, is to blame for societies' problems. Radical feminism, then, reminds us of the seriousness of the oppression of women.

At a theological level, however, women's own inherent sinfulness is not regarded seriously, and it may be understood as saying that, generally, men sin more against women/men than women sin against men/women. However, their emphasis on the abuse of women is an eye-opening reality that cannot be ignored.

⚙ Post-radical or "differentiating" feminism

This relatively new element of feminism chooses to celebrate female uniqueness, rather than advocate traditional male values. It does not approve of aggression and prefers interdependence to independence. Therefore, it rejects any fixed idea that maturity in either sex is constituted by traditional male values. The emphasis is on valuing each other's uniqueness, rather than conforming to some unilateral blueprint obsession of how a mature person should look and act.

The special value that post-radical feminists give to traditional female qualities truly is a strong point. However, it runs the risk of creating a new way of stereotyping the sexes when differentiating between them. It would appear as though the notion of the uniqueness of one sex compared to the other leaves little room for individual female uniqueness. Therefore, it misses the important point made by liberal feminists that no person conforms precisely to only traditional feminine, or masculine, values.

These four are not the only strands of feminism, and, in fact, few feminists are ever solely one type. Most feminists combine some of these aspects to best suit their situation. Of course, this poses the difficult question: How does feminist hermeneutics view the Bible and other religious texts from a patriarchal background?

(d) The authority of religious texts in different feminist perspectives

As is the case with feminist thinking in general, diversity is the key word when viewing religious texts in feminist theology. I shall, therefore, briefly list some of the possibilities, without discussing them in detail. The Bible, as Christianity's primary authoritative text, will serve as a case study.

There are some feminists who view the Bible as irretrievably patriarchal and even useless for the liberation of women. They regard it as nothing more than a weapon for the oppression of women. Therefore, they hold a rejectionist view toward it and, quite often, against religion in general. To discuss this view is relatively pointless; these women seldom participate in biblical hermeneutics.

There are also feminists who recognize the formative value of religious texts, although they are not blind to the patriarchal bias in these texts. They may choose a revisionist stand on the subject, acknowledging the religious importance of these texts, while rejecting those sections of the texts that they believe cannot be remedied by rereading them in order to liberate women

from oppression. This approach is partly to rewrite the oppressive parts in order to diminish this aspect.

Loyalism is another important option for feminist hermeneutics. Loyalists still hold the Bible as an authoritative text and optimistically believe in it as the Word of God, if it is interpreted 'correctly.' A correct interpretation will thus be one that specifically meets with their approval!

Reformists distinguish between the patriarchal dimension of the text and its theological value, choosing to view the latter, not the former, as authoritative.

Liberation feminists, along the same lines, choose to focus their attention on justice for the poor and oppressed in the text, and they use the Bible as an instrument of liberation.

When examining feminist viewpoints on the Bible's authority, it is important to note that no feminist hermeneutic is only a feminist hermeneutic. They all have different denominational backgrounds, which also influence their view on the subject.

(e) Diverse hermeneutic perspectives

Just as feminist scholars integrate their own diverse denominational backgrounds into their approaches, they also have diverse hermeneutic perspectives, depending largely on their scholarly background. They, therefore, use well-known hermeneutic models, but ask uniquely feminist questions from within these models.

In historical criticism, for example, feminists examine alternative historical constructions so as to include the work of women in the establishment of early Christianity. Focusing, for example, on the women, whom Paul praised for their leadership within the church (cf. Romans 16), exposes the bias in traditional historical criticism that ignores these accounts in their historical constructions. Hebrew Bible scholars, such as Athalya Brenner and Carol Myers, also apply this constructive technique.

In literary criticism, the following two major trends have developed among feminists: narrative criticism and reader-response criticism. In narrative criticism, the construction, characterization, portrayal and image of women are revealed to indicate how ideological rhetoric functions.

In these different criticisms, feminists make use of semiotics and structuralism (Mieke Bal), archaeology (Carol Myers), ideological criticism (Renita Weems), and virtually all other interpretive tools used by biblical scholars in general.

(f) Feminist hermeneutic reading strategies

What then constitutes a reading as feminist? What do feminist scholars do to distinguish their readings from androcentric readings? In the next section, I shall explain how feminists use feminist reading strategies when reading religious texts. I shall again use the Bible as a case study.

❀ Rereading classic texts to deny the subordination of women

Dealing with those texts that have been used throughout the history of the church to sanction the subordination of women is one of the most essential functions of feminist reading strategies. They do this by rereading these texts in order to deny the sanctioning of the subordination of women.

❀ Reading a contra-text, to show the equal value of men and women

The balancing of texts that seem to affirm the subordination of women, by refocusing on texts that deny this subordination, is an important strategy for feminist readers. For instance: when

reading Ephesians 5:23 that seemingly subordinates women, they also read Galatians 3:28 that explicitly states that we are equals through the work of Christ, regardless of our social status or gender:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 – NIV).

◉ Reading for liberating theological themes

This strategy simply entails using broader theological themes and applying these to women's issues. For instance, the prophetic call for justice for the poor, especially for widows and orphans, is also regarded as an appeal for justice for women, because women comprise the greatest statistical number of what today is called the poorest of the poor. (See Jonah below for a further example.)

◉ Pointing out discriminatory translations

Biblical translations are not unbiased in relation to women's issues. For instance, for many centuries Phoebe was regarded as a deaconess, rather than as a deacon as she is called in the Greek (Romans 16:1), because translators were uncomfortable about giving her such authority in the church!

◉ Feminist hermeneutics as ongoing retranslation

In fact, the whole process of feminist hermeneutics is that of retranslation, which entails all the elements that encompass feminist hermeneutics.

When asked what feminist hermeneutics involves, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza responded by saying that it comprises four types of hermeneutic tasks:

◉ *A hermeneutic task of suspicion*, because white males mostly generated the knowledge, inherited from other hermeneutics.

◉ *A hermeneutic task of remembrance* in the construction of women's roles in our religious traditions, throughout history.

◉ *A hermeneutic task of proclamation* where this inclusively constructed past links up with our present context to form new creeds.

◉ *A hermeneutic task of imagination* is also called for, so that contemporary women can express their empowering traditions that relate to ritual, prayer and other creative forms.

7.4.2 Jonah, read through feminist eyes

Throughout this text, we have explored the book of Jonah as an example of various hermeneutic strategies and viewpoints, we shall now also do so, pertaining to feminist hermeneutics.

The absence of women in the book of Jonah would seem to make it virtually impossible to construct any feminist reading of the book. As this book has hardly ever been read to explain or dictate gender relations, it seems to be of little interest from a purely feminist perspective. However, as pointed out above, no feminist hermeneutic is ever purely *feminist*. Depending on their scholarly background and denominational viewpoint, feminist readers may still read the book of Jonah due to other interests. When focusing on broader theological themes within the book of Jonah, it seems that the book carries a very important message of hope, which could also benefit feminist readers.

The story of Jonah tells of a prophet who was sent to an evil, wicked city. It was so bad that the prophet had no hope that the city would ever listen to his call for repentance. Therefore, the

prophet tried to flee from God. God used the prophet's disobedience to also convince a group of sailors that God is the supreme Being, Creator and Lord of land and sea. When the prophet realized that he could flee from neither God, nor his calling, he attempted the impossible: to convince Nineveh of its sinfulness and to call it to repentance. A true miracle then happened - this entire evil city indeed repented. Even the animals were dressed in sackcloth and cried out to God, who responded with compassion and forgiveness.

But, the prophet was greatly displeased. He knew from the outset that God is a God of mercy and that God would forgive the city. Nevertheless, to Jonah, this seemed unjust. Could any repentance ever equal the injustices committed by this city? So, God put Jonah to shame by the wilting of the plant under which he rested. Jonah was humiliated because he pitied himself and wished mercy only for himself.

From a feminist perspective, this is a story of hope, proclaiming that even the most cruel, merciless transgressors against God's divine justice can repent. Feminist prophets do not work in vain; there is hope - even rapists, wife-beaters and paedophiles can repent! With God, even the seemingly impossible becomes possible.

For most feminist scholars, identifying with Jonah across gender has further implications than only hope for the seemingly impossible repentance of transgressors. When identifying with Jonah in his divine mission, we must also identify with him when examining our own expectations. Are we willing to share divine mercy and forgiveness with those who trespass against us, or do we regard such mercy as unjust? Do we claim God's mercy and forgiveness only for ourselves, or are we willing to share it?

Thus, by examining its broader theological themes, the book of Jonah attains meaning, encourages hope and self-critique among feminist readers, in spite of the book's lack of female characters and gender relations.

7.4.3 Observations and evaluation

The underlying principle for a critical feminist hermeneutic is that women are fully human and are to be valued as such - *Denise Ackermann*

This is the bottom line that underscores all feminist readings. As explained above, this implies that all people are equal, regardless of race, class or gender. Therefore, these readings strive to promote equality and representing this in the available options when people need to make choices. Indeed, gender, race or class should not be the determining factors that deny one certain choices.

Due to the diversity within feminism, it is difficult to evaluate the hermeneutic movement much further than the evaluation in the above discussion. Therefore, each reading must be assessed according to its own merits. The question now remains: How can one determine the merit of a reading? What are the criteria for judging a reading?

From a feminist perspective Schüssler Fiorenza's above-mentioned criteria make sense; that is, to advocate an ethic of responsibility towards the historical and rhetorical contexts of a text, as well as an ethic of accountability relating to the ethical consequences of one's interpretation. Furthermore, any reading should create or edit meaning in the life of its readers or audiences. The proof of the pudding lies in the eating.

7.5 African hermeneutics

7.5.1 Background and theory

Perhaps the first thing to say about African biblical hermeneutics is that "it" is not one thing and that it is in the process of being defined. In fact, readers of this book must face up to the task of characterizing African biblical hermeneutics. While there is a vast body of African biblical and theological scholarship, and while there has been some attempt to *prescribe* what African hermeneutics should be about, there has been little interest in analytically *describing* the reality of African biblical interpretation.

The Bible is now an African book, though few Africans forget that the Bible was brought among us by missionary and colonial agents and was often used against African culture and religion. And even when black South Africans had embraced the Bible, they found their white South African brothers and sisters using the Bible against them in the guise of apartheid.

The postcolonial context is thus the background to all African biblical hermeneutics, though I accept that South Africa is postcolonial in a particular kind of way. Another more positive way of saying this would be to say the dominant strand in African biblical hermeneutics is to use the Bible to reclaim what missionary and colonial forces have denigrated and destroyed. This is the broad context, I would suggest, against which we must reflect on the methodological impulses that characterize African biblical hermeneutics. In this chapter we shall begin with these methodological impulses and then we shall consider how they apply to the book of Jonah.

(a) Methodological impulses in African biblical hermeneutics

I have deliberately used the word "impulses" rather than a more definite term like "models." Again, African biblical hermeneutics has not been self-conscious. The legacy of colonial struggles and our postcolonial contexts probably contributes to this lack of self-conscious reflection on method and theory. Most Africans have been too busy engaging with the Bible in concrete situations of the struggle for survival, liberation and life, whether they wanted to or not, and so opportunities for reflection have been few.

Furthermore, African biblical hermeneutics is inseparable from African theological hermeneutics, and so most African biblical scholars have found themselves being drawn into theological reflection before they have had time to process what they are doing with the Bible. Our African contexts have demanded that the Bible be of some use, and this is the realm of theology. African biblical scholars have not been able to seclude themselves in their universities and seminaries; ordinary African Christians have dragged them from the corridors of the academy, willingly or not, into the streets of the real world and demanded that they serve them with their academic skills and resources.

One must remember too that the Bible came to most of Africa not that long ago. While the Bible has been present in the Northern parts of Africa throughout its formation, Western, Eastern, and Southern Africa have only had the Bible for about three to four hundred years (see Sundkler & Steed 2000). Unfortunately, the forms of African biblical hermeneutics developed in the Northern regions of Africa, particularly modern day Egypt and Ethiopia, have had little impact on the rest of the continent (see Loubser 2000). Those of us living south of the Sahara have had to forge our own biblical hermeneutics, and the ingredients which have gone to make our forms of biblical hermeneutics have yet to be adequately explored. Here I shall attempt a preliminary analysis.

- Ambiguous presence

As I have already indicated, the Bible is an ambiguous presence in most of Africa. The legacy of its partnership with colonialism lives on. And yet from the very earliest encounters of indigenous Africans with the Bible, the Bible was perceived as "an object of strange power" that might be potentially useful for Africans if they could control it. Some African scholars have emphasized the damage done by the Bible's presence in Africa (see, for example, the analyses of Maluleke and Mosala), while others have emphasized its potential to recover and revitalize what has been damaged by colonialism and even to correct destructive aspects of traditional culture (see, for example, the analyses of Bediako and Sanneh).

In terms of a general hermeneutical orientation to the Bible, African hermeneutics in South Africa and its immediate southern African neighbours is characterised by a hermeneutics of suspicion, while in Africa further north of the Limpopo River there is a hermeneutics of trust (see also below).

- Text and icon

The Bible, we must remember, was brought among oral peoples. Most African societies had no textual tradition, and so the Bible was initially perceived as one more object among the many that missionaries, traders, explorers, settlers and colonial officials carried with them. Like so many of the objects associated with whites, the Bible, like the compass, gun, watch, telescope, etc. was seen to be an object of "strange power" (see Comaroff & Comaroff). The Bible, in other words, was not initially a text, but an object with power, in the eyes of indigenous peoples.

This appropriation of the Bible by Africans, as an object of power, persists into the present. As Tinyiko Maluleke (2000) reminds us in an essay:

"In some parts of Africa, the dead are buried with the Bible on their chests, and the Bible is buried into the concrete foundations on which new houses are to be built. In many African Independent Churches it is the physical contact between the sick and the Bible that is believed to hasten healing."

But the Bible is also text, and as text the Bible is read and interpreted by African Christians in a variety of ways, as we shall see below.

- Translated 'text'

Any historical account of African biblical hermeneutics would need to recognise that when the Bible came to be known to Africans, it was introduced orally and only partially. The first bits of text would have been heard rather than read, and certain portions of the Bible would have been preferred by the missionaries over others. What impact this oral and partial engagement with the Bible had for Africans requires further research. There are two related aspects to this research. First, we need to analyse how missionaries interacted with the Bible and what texts they chose to read and proclaim as they moved amongst indigenous Africans. Such analysis would help us to understand why certain parts of the Bible were translated into local African languages before others. Indeed, the whole process of Bible translation deserves careful attention in any study of African biblical hermeneutics, because every translation of the Bible into an African language (or for that matter, into any language) is an interpretative act. Fortunately, the history of Bible translation in Africa is well documented (see, for example, the descriptions of Schaaf 1994, Wendland & Hachibamba 2000, and Mojola 2000), indeed, it could be argued that Bible translation is the dominant form of African biblical hermeneutics – I shall say more about this below.

Second, we need also to analyse what indigenous hermeneutical resources there were for working with text, whether oral or literary. Africans, of course, had their own rich oral tradition and their own interpretative resources for working with this tradition. They would have brought these resources to their interpretation of the oral and textual Bible.

Africans would also have watched the missionaries very carefully, noting how the missionaries used the Bible, and so in addition to their own indigenous resources, they would have learned and appropriated some of the interpretative strategies of the missionaries. These emerging "neo-indigenous" hermeneutic strategies also require further research.

So there is much we do not know about African biblical hermeneutics in its earlier stages. But we can document more fully recent developments in African biblical hermeneutics, particularly the ways in which African biblical hermeneutics is manifested in African biblical scholarship.

❖ Textual interpretation

It is useful here to introduce an important distinction in hermeneutics. Any act of interpretation that has to do with text has at least two related (but distinct) components. All interpreters come to the Bible (or any text) with two sets of interests, what may be called interpretative interests and life interests (see Fowl 1990). Interpretative interests are those dimensions of the text that are of interest to the interpreter, while life interests are those concerns and commitments that drive or motivate the interpreter to come to the text. Concern for the environment or women or race or class or culture would be good examples of what I have called life interests. Life interests come from our experience of the world and from our commitment to the world. With such interests we come to the Bible to hear what it has to say concerning these things.

Interpretative interests are different, and specifically concern those dimensions of the text that interest us as readers. So, for example, some of us are interested in the historical and sociological dimensions of texts, others are interested in the literary dimensions of texts, and still others are interested in the thematic or symbolic dimensions of texts. While there is no necessary relationship between interpretative interests and life interests, some scholars have insisted that certain life interests are best served by having certain interpretative interests. So, for example, Itumeleng Mosala has argued that concerns for racial and economic liberation in South Africa require attention to the sociological and historical dimensions of the biblical text. In my response to Mosala, I have argued that other interpretative interests can also address these life interests (see West 1995). This is not the place to debate the connection between interpretative interests and life interests; I simply want to point to this useful distinction.

I point to this distinction because it helps us to properly identify the characteristics of African biblical hermeneutics. With respect to interpretative interests, interests to do with the different dimensions of the text, African biblical hermeneutics has been dominated by historical and sociological concerns. African biblical scholarship has been strongly shaped by the historical-critical interests of western biblical scholarship, and this includes the full array of historical-critical methodology: text criticism, form criticism, source criticism, and redaction criticism. African biblical hermeneutics has also, more recently, embraced sociological forms of analysis. In other words, the socio-historical dimensions of the biblical text have generated the most interest among African biblical scholars.

The reason for this interest is probably due to two factors. First, most African biblical scholars have been trained in either Europe and/or America, where these interpretative interests have dominated biblical scholarship. Second, socio-historical interpretative interests give substantial attention to the religious and cultural contexts that lie behind the biblical text,

and it is these that resonate with the life interests of most African biblical scholars. By using socio-historical forms of analysis, African biblical scholars can have access to religio-cultural contexts in the biblical past that are similar to the religio-cultural contexts of the African present.

But socio-historical interpretative interests are not the only ones to be found in African biblical scholarship. With its strong alliances with African theology, African biblical hermeneutics does have a substantial interest in the thematic and symbolic dimensions of texts. Biblical themes of liberation and/or reconstruction, for example, have been particularly popular among African theologians (see Mugambi 1995). Literary interpretative interests too have a place in African biblical hermeneutics, especially in South Africa, with the most prominent examples coming from white Afrikaner structuralist interpretation.

To summarize then, African biblical hermeneutics has been dominated by socio-historical interpretative interests, though interest in the other dimensions of texts can be detected. Having said this, however, African biblical hermeneutics varies in how much weight it gives to the socio-historical realities of the text. In order to understand this aspect of African biblical hermeneutics we must move on to the African reader's life interests and analyse the role they play in African biblical hermeneutics.

⚙ The African reader's life interests

In terms of interpretative interests, African biblical hermeneutics is much like biblical hermeneutics in any other scholarly context; it is dominated by the historical and sociological dimensions of the text (see the other chapters in this book). What makes African biblical hermeneutics distinctive are the life interests that African interpreters bring to the text and how these life interests interact with their (predominantly socio-historical) interpretative interests.

African life interests lie at the centre of academic African biblical hermeneutics. This is probably the case for all forms of biblical hermeneutics (see Schüssler Fiorenza 1989), but African biblical hermeneutics is more honest than most and declares its life interests openly. In fact, African biblical hermeneutics is significantly influenced by an explicit methodological commitment that links life interests and interpretative interests. The most common way in which it does this is through what has been called a comparative approach. Comparative studies have been defined by Knut Holter (2002):

> "as studies whose major approach is a comparative methodology that facilitates a parallel interpretation of certain Old Testament [and New Testament] texts or motifs and supposed African parallels, letting the two illuminate one another. Traditional exegetical methodology is of course found here, too; however, the Old Testament [and/or New Testament] is approached from a perspective where African comparative material is the major dialogue partner and traditional exegetical methodology is subordinated to this perspective."

Comparative studies form the vast bulk of all academic African biblical hermeneutics, and can usefully be divided into three overlapping chronological phases. According to the chronology developed by the Nigerian biblical scholar Justin Ukpong (but in the words of Holter 2002),

> "an early reactive phase (1930s-1970s), which legitimized African religion and culture vis-à-vis the western tradition through comparative studies, was replaced by a reactive-proactive phase (1970s-1990s), which more clearly made use of the African context as resource for biblical interpretation, and eventually by a proactive phase (1990s), which

makes the African context the explicit subject of biblical interpretation."

In each of these phases, as Holter's formulation above acknowledges, there is an explicit dialogue between the socio-historical dimensions of the biblical text and the religio-social realities of African life. African biblical hermeneutics is, therefore, part of a wider historical movement in scholarly research with its interest in the historical and sociological; however, African biblical hermeneutics is also distinctive in that it overtly operates within an African post-colonial and post-independence context. Eric Anum of Ghana is therefore right, says Holter (2002) "when he argues that the comparative approach arose as a response to the negative concepts of traditional African culture and religion prevalent in colonial and missionary circles".

> "In sum, the comparative method arose as a response to a colonial conception of African Traditional Religion and culture on the part of missionaries who believed that African cultures were satanic and pagan and needed to be totally abandoned if Christianity was to thrive in Africa. Thus, what African biblical scholars tried to do was to identify similarities between the biblical world and African religio-cultural practices and to use their scholarly and scientific tools to show the relationship between African Traditional Religion and Christianity" (Anum 2000).

The dialogue between the socio-historical world of the biblical text and the religio-cultural world of African life is two-way. The comparative approach is not simply a strategy for validating anything and everything in the African religio-cultural world that shows some similarity with the socio-historical world of and behind the biblical text. The comparative approach is always evaluative. Ukpong (2000) identifies three types of evaluation:

> "The first approach seeks to evaluate elements of African culture, religion, beliefs, concepts or practices in the light of the biblical witness, to arrive at a Christian understanding of them and bring out their value for Christian witness. The historical critical method is used in analysing the biblical text. The belief or practice is analysed in its different manifestations and its values and disvalues are pointed out against the background of biblical teaching. ....

> The second approach is concerned with what a biblical text or theme has to say in the critique of a particular issue in the society or in the church's life, or what lessons may be drawn from a biblical text or theme for a particular context. It is similar to the first above but with the difference that in the first approach the contextual realities studied are assumed to be values or at least to contain values whereas in this one they are presented as liabilities to be challenged with the biblical message. The study involves analysing the biblical text and pointing out the challenge it issues to the context or drawing its implications for the context. Generally, historical critical tools are used for the study. ....

> In the third approach biblical themes or texts are interpreted against the background of African culture, religion and life experience. The aim is to arrive at a new understanding of the biblical text that would be informed by the African situation, and would be African and Christian. Historical critical tools are used in analysing the biblical text. The basis for this approach is the realization that any interpretation of a biblical text or theme is done from the socio-cultural perspective of the interpreter. Approaching a theme or text from an African perspective is therefore expected to offer some fresh insights into its meaning even though the tools of interpretation still remain Western."

Ukpong here neatly captures many of the methodological impulses of African biblical hermeneutics I have referred to above. First, African biblical hermeneutics is predominantly

interested in the historical and sociological dimensions of the biblical text. Second, African life interests are consciously and explicitly a part of the interpretative process. Third, African biblical hermeneutics is always aware of the ambiguous history of the Bible's arrival in Africa, and so is constantly attempting to assert itself over against the dominant discourses of western, colonial, and imperialistic forms of biblical scholarship.

Another feature of African biblical hermeneutics that is relevant, is that these life interests take slightly different forms north and south of the Limpopo. South of the Limpopo there has been an emphasis on socio-political life interests, while north of the Limpopo there has been an emphasis on religio-cultural life interests. However, after the liberation of South Africa there has been sustained dialogue and exchange across the Limpopo boundary, and so socio-political life interests are becoming more prominent in other parts of Africa and religio-cultural life interests have become increasingly important in South Africa.

Clearly African life interests play a prominent role in African biblical hermeneutics. Noting this fact, it is not surprising that a related methodological impulse in African biblical hermeneutics (as Ukpong goes on to acknowledge) is the presence of ordinary, non-scholarly, African 'readers' of the Bible.

⚙ Ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible

In an article which argues that inclusivity is a key characteristic of African women's biblical scholarship, Teresa Okure, a Nigerian biblical scholar, states that African women's biblical scholarship "is inclusive of scholars and nonscholars" (1993). Though she does not elaborate, I shall offer an exegesis of this phrase, attempting to delineate more carefully in what ways ordinary African "nonscholars" are constitutive of African biblical scholarship.

Okure is not alone in making this claim, and the claim is not restricted to an African *women's* approach. The inclusion of ordinary African 'readers' (literate or illiterate) of the Bible in African biblical scholarship is acknowledged, whether implicitly or explicitly, by most African biblical scholars. But what exactly this inclusion includes is not clear. I do not think that this is merely a nostalgic or romantic yearning for a lost naiveté, as it is in western literary biblical scholarship, where the scholarly reader imagines his or her scholarly self in this 'ordinary' role. African biblical scholars take real ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible more seriously and certainly acknowledge their real existence and presence. In fact, it might be argued that in certain important respects ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible partially constitute African biblical scholarship.

The most minimal sense in which ordinary African Bible 'readers' might be said to be a part of African biblical scholarship are as receptors of Bible scholarship. This is not as trite as it sounds. Designing one's biblical scholarship in such a way that it can be consumed by ordinary people is no small feat and takes considerable dedication and skill. While there are those, both African and others, who see their scholarship in this way, Okure is alluding to a form of engagement that is more mutual. Ordinary 'readers' of the Bible do not simply consume the product, they partially constitute both the process and the product.

A second way in which ordinary African Bible users might be said to be included in African biblical studies are as informers for biblical scholarship. In his discussion of 'cultural exegesis', Daniel Smith-Christopher (1995) delineates an area where ordinary 'readers' might have something to contribute to biblical scholarship. He notes that Latin American liberation theologians "have long talked about an 'exegesis of the poor'". He then comments that what Latin American liberation theologians "normally mean to suggest [by this phrase] is that the poor have a unique insight into the Bible ... because their socio-economic circumstances are

in some ways similar to the circumstances of those who drafted the Bible, or those spoken about in large sections of the Bible". But, he continues, most liberation theologians who use this and similar phrases turn out to be talking "about the use of the Bible for contemporary life and faith", what he calls "applied theology or *applications* of the biblical message".

The primary question for Smith-Christopher, however, "is whether the poor Brazilian peasants who read the Bible can give any insights into what the text means *for others besides themselves*, let alone whether their observations can actually guide a process of rethinking historical-critical reconstructions of past events". In other words, "Can the native American elder, the Indian or African student or scholar, give all of us new ideas about what the text *historically meant*?". The answer of African biblical scholars would be a clear and resounding "Yes". We have all had the experience of having ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible see things in and behind the text that we ourselves have not seen. And while the focus of Smith-Christopher and Ukpong may be on the historical dimensions of the text, where ordinary 'readers' do make a contribution, they also make contributions in their analysis of the text as text. To give an example of each, I have been in Bible study groups in which ordinary African 'readers' have alerted me to the socio-economic dimensions of the prayer Jesus taught to his disciples, where the first request Jesus teaches them to ask of God is for "the bread that is needed for that day" (Matthew 6:11) because, as these 'readers' recognised, Jesus understood the survival needs of the poor that he worked among; these same 'readers' have also taught me that the plot of the Joseph story (Genesis 37-50) is driven by the tensions of a polygamous household, where the action of the story is determined by who your mother is: Leah, Rachael, Bilhah or Zilpah (see West 1999).

While there is no doubt that ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible have furnished massive amounts of information of potential value to the biblical studies enterprise, this is a by-product of something more profound. Ordinary Africans are more than merely informants for African biblical scholarship. Again, I think that Okure is saying something more than this; ordinary indigenous African 'readers' of the Bible – most of whom are black, poor and marginalized – are *constitutive* of African biblical scholarship in some more profound sense.

A third way, then, in which ordinary African users of the Bible might be said to be included in African biblical scholarship is to make them and their contexts, in the words of Ukpong, "the subject of interpretation of the Bible". The biblical text is read for a particular people in a particular context, but it is not read on behalf of them, it is read with them. Here ordinary African 'readers' are integral to the scholars' work. Biblical interpretation is done as a collaborative act between scholars and nonscholars in which "the resources of the people's culture and historical life experience are used as complementary to conventional critical tools of biblical exegesis". "The goal of interpretation is the actualization of the theological meaning of the text in today's context so as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation".

There is no doubt that the African socio-cultural context is the subject of much African biblical scholarship, and that the African socio-cultural context saturates the forms of engagement between the African biblical scholar and ordinary African users of the Bible in his/her community. Included within the African socio-cultural context are both the particulars of specific African contexts, determined by careful phenomenological, socio-anthropological, historical, social and religious analysis, and general significant features that characterize the African world-view: a unitary view of reality, a divine origin of the universe and an integral connectedness between God, humanity and the cosmos, a sense of community in which people are because they are in relation to other people and an emphasis on the concrete and

pragmatic. Though not exhaustive, these features are common to most, if not all, African world-views (see Ukpong 1995). This third way makes the ordinary African 'reader' and her/his (usually his) context the subject of interpretation and African biblical scholars do their scholarship in this context.

In Ukpong's analysis, however, the emphasis is different with respect to what each of the partners brings to the collaborative interpretative process. Ordinary 'readers' bring their reality and biblical scholars bring their interpretative tools. This division of labour may characterize much of African biblical scholarship, but the boundaries are not always this clear. Ukpong (1996) himself mentions the important presence of "popular approaches to the Bible" and makes it clear that the ordinary African context provides both "the critical resources for biblical interpretation and the subject of interpretation" (2000).

Ukpong includes not only the socio-cultural context of ordinary African 'readers' as definitive of our (and African) scholarship, but also their "critical resources." This then leads me to my fourth and (for now) final way in which ordinary African Bible users might be said to constitute African biblical scholarship – through their interpretative resources. But while we can and do characterize the African socio-cultural context we still have some way to go in properly characterizing nonscholarly African critical interpretative resources. To put it differently, while ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible partially constitute African biblical scholarship in the ways reflected on above, what does this include by way of their dealings with the Bible as *text*? Their questions and experiences clearly do make a significant contribution, but what about their interpretative strategies with respect to the text, which is the scholar's domain of training and expertise?

In my own work I have stressed that we ought to allow the interpretative interests and strategies of ordinary African 'readers' to constitute African biblical scholarship. Unfortunately, there is no precision in African biblical scholarship as to the interpretative interests of ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible, though recent work is beginning to take up the task of characterizing their modes of reading (see Ukpong 2000 and Mijoga 2000). My own work in this area so far also makes an attempt, but succeeds only in sketching the domain of interpretative interests in rather broad strokes (see West 2002). I play with and explore a range of metaphors in an attempt to grasp some of the dimensions of ordinary Africans' engagement with the biblical text, arguing that ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible 're-member' a 'dis-membered' Bible, by means of "guerilla exegesis", by reading with the nose, by a process of "engraf(ph)ting", by "a looseness, even a playfulness" towards text, and, I would add, by "conjuring" with text and a hermeneutic of "strangeness". All of this is wonderfully suggestive and provides a host of impulses for digging deeper and becoming more precise. And, as I have said, African biblical scholarship is not averse to these textual resources of ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible, particularly on the countless occasions when African biblical scholars and ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible read together in the churches and communities.

But questions still remain. What explicit place do such interpretative interests and reading strategies have in the biblical studies context of the academy? Is there a place for the interpretative interests of ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible in the academy? It is for readers of this book to answer these questions.

Each of these methodological impulses contributes to the emerging field of African biblical hermeneutics. In the next section of the chapter we examine how these impulses impinge on African interpretations of the book of Jonah.

7.5.2 African biblical hermeneutics and the book of Jonah

I have done a preliminary survey of African published work on the book of Jonah. I have found that Jonah has been used as an analogy in Egyptian Coptic scholarship for key historical figures in the history of their church; that the first complete portion of Scripture published in Kimvita Swahili was the book of Jonah; that the first books of the Bible translated into Kiugunja Swahili were the books of Ruth and Jonah; that the book of Jonah has been used as a story with missiological implications by African scholars; that the book of Jonah has been used by those writing on African biblical translation as an example of stylistic matters in translation; and that ordinary 'readers' of the Bible in Port Harcourt, Nigeria indicated that first the Psalms and then Jonah were their favourite Old Testament texts.

I am not sure what to make of these scattered and preliminary findings. What is clear, however, is that the book of Jonah has been perceived by missionaries (and their African consultants?) to be an important book to translate into the vernacular and that at least some ordinary Africans surveyed have identified the book of Jonah as one of their favourite texts. We can also deduce from my cursory survey that African biblical scholarship has not written much on the book of Jonah, and where they have it has been in the areas of translation practice and missiology.

It might have been preferable to have based this section of my chapter on actual work that has been done by African biblical scholarship on the book of Jonah, but apart from the above I have not been able to find any. My comments on African biblical hermeneutics and the book of Jonah that follow are therefore suggestive rather than descriptive.

But I will begin by probing further my preliminary survey mentioned above. It would appear that both the missionaries that brought the Bible and those Africans who read the book of Jonah considered it to be significant. My guess is that their reasons would probably have been different.

(a) Jonah as post-missionary text

As I have emphasized, the Bible in Africa always carries connotations of its arrival in the hands of missionaries and colonial agents. What brought many missionaries to Africa was, of course, the desire to proclaim the gospel, though we cannot forget that for most of them this was intimately tied up with the proclamation of European civilisation. But, at least in part, they came with a missiological vision. Given this missiological vision it is not surprising that the book of Jonah would have been seen by some as an important book to be translated into African vernaculars, particularly when these vernaculars were lingua francas as is the case with Swahili. Languages spoken by more than one ethnic group more often are preferred for bible translation.

This missionary understanding of the book of Jonah as a book about mission has obviously been appropriated, at least in part, by African readers of the Bible. This is my first point about African biblical hermeneutics and the book of Jonah: the legacy of missionary understanding of biblical books lives on. African biblical interpretation is often in dialogue with the legacy of missionary imparted interpretations, whether they be the legacy of actual foreign missionaries or the missionary churches they established. So the African voice is an emerging one, and in its scholarly form it usually looks back over its shoulder, in dialogue with Africa's postcolonial biblical heritage. Ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible, as I have already indicated, are usually less constrained by the post-colonial legacy, particularly in African Independent/Initiated Churches, so it is perhaps here where we shall hear the African interpretative voice most clearly. In the next sub-section I shall consider why it might be that ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible in Nigeria have declared the book of Jonah to be one of their favourite Old Testament texts.

(b) Jonah and African life-interests

It is easy to understand why many ordinary Nigerian 'readers' of the Bible would favour the book of Jonah. Jonah mirrors, in a mainly non-condemnatory way, elements of the African world-view. African life interests are embodied in the book of Jonah.

In Jonah 1:4 the wind and the sea are agents of God, sent by God with a message for Jonah. The sailors recognise this, and immediately "were afraid, and each cried to his god." However, as in African communities, the message of God (or the gods or ancestors) is not always clear and has to be interpreted, and this is exactly what happens in this story. The sailors use their own efforts to try to save their ship, but as this does not help, they continue to look for a solution in the supernatural realm. Finding Jonah asleep, they rationally conclude that perhaps it is Jonah's god who is causing the problem. So they urge Jonah, "Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the [or that] god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish" (1:6).

One can understand why ordinary Africans would find this text so appealing. Here is an acknowledgement of different people having different gods, and of different people showing respect for the gods of others, something the missionaries did not do but which was a feature of traditional African life.

As the story continues, it resonates more and more with African life interests. Local gods and ancestors were meant to protect the community; if they were not protecting the community then there must be a problem in the community that needed addressing. This is what the sailors now begin to determine: what is the problem that lies behind this storm? In order to discern the problem they "cast lots" to identify which person is the cause of the problem (1:7). Again, in accordance with African understanding of such practices (like the 'throwing of bones'), they work! The casting of lots correctly identifies the problem. Jonah is now forced to explain the reason why he is the problem. Like the sailors, although they worship different gods, Jonah shares their world-view, and so accepts his "lot", his responsibility for the storm. That his god is "the God [god] of heaven, who made the sea and land" (1:9), only confirms the sailors' fears. A god who has control over the sea is surely a god to be appeased! So they respectfully ask Jonah what must be done, for it is his god that is behind the storm.

Once again we see remarkable respect for the gods and traditions of others here. The sailors do not want to anger this powerful god of Jonah's, accepting the reality that their gods are not the only gods and that there may be other gods that must be acknowledged and appeased. And even when Jonah replies that the only remedy is that he be thrown into the sea "for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon us" (1:12), the sailors do not want to offend Jonah's god, so they try to row for the shore in order to allow Jonah to disembark safely (1:13). Eventually, however, they are forced to recognise that Jonah's god will not permit this option, so they cry out "Please, O Yahweh, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Yahweh, have done as it pleased you" (1:14). (Though using the text of the NRSV in my quotations from the book of Jonah I have changed their "Lord" and "O Lord" to the Hebrew rendering, which, I would argue, more accurately reflects the naming of Jonah's particular god by the sailors.)

When the sea immediately becomes calm, once they have thrown Jonah into it, "they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows" (1:16). Here is a god of power that must be properly acknowledged by sacrifice and vows. For most Africans this makes perfect sense, and remains an important part of their lives, even if they are Christians (and even if they do their sacrifices 'by night'). Indeed, what is remarkable about this first chapter of Jonah is that there is no

condemnation whatsoever of people worshipping different gods and of offering sacrifices to more than one god.

The African world-view continues to find resonances in the text of Jonah in the next chapter (in the Hebrew text), with God sending "a large fish" to swallow Jonah (1:17). God and/or the ancestors/gods not only control elements like the sea and wind but also all creatures (including the large fish here and the worm in the final chapter). Furthermore, that a large fish could be commanded to swallow a human and that a human could survive in the belly of such a fish is acceptable to most Africans. Unsullied and unconvinced by the scientific world-view of the Enlightenment, Africans inhabit a world in which such things might and indeed do take place.

The shift in chapter 2 to the prayer of Jonah reinforces the view of Africans that one of the primary purposes of God (and/or the ancestors) is protection. But this prayer would also highlight one of the major tensions in African Christianity, a tension between the missionary message that African gods/ancestors are, at best, worthless and, at worst, demonic and the experience of African Christians of the presence and importance of local gods/ancestors in their communities. Jonah's prayer disparages those "who worship vain idols," stating that they "forsake their true loyalty" (2:8). Many African Christians, particularly those coming from evangelical churches, would agree, and yet even among these African Christians there would sometimes be doubt as to whether their traditional gods/ancestors are entirely worthless.

Chapter 3 of the book of Jonah continues to resonate with the life interests of Africans, especially the centrality of "herds and flocks" (3:7-8; see also 4:11) in the social and religious lives of the Ninevites. And all African Christians would rejoice that God is merciful to such people.

We can now see quite easily why the book of Jonah is one of the favourites of African readers (particularly in West Africa where religio-cultural life interests predominate). Like their other favourite, the book of Psalms, the book of Jonah speaks of a God who intervenes in human life, a God who guides and protects. Furthermore, the fact that neither the sailors nor the Ninevites are expected to abandon their religious activities would be welcome news to most African Christians. Having said this though, the tension in Jonah between the universalistic narrator and the more parochial perspective of Jonah himself would find resonances among many African Christians who find themselves torn between a respect for their inherited traditions and the legacy of the post-missionary missiological imperative to reject indigenous practices. Though these aspects of African Christian identity might at times be in tension – an as yet unresolved tension – they are both an integral part of who their practitioners are. The book of Jonah embodies and speaks to these tensions.

The work of Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako, already referred to above, provides some understanding of how African Christians have been able to integrate this tension, and their analysis may shed some light on the book of Jonah as well.

(c) Translation as the revitalisation of culture

Translation, in a technical sense, is a major enterprise on the African continent. Huge resources, both human and financial, are ploughed into this work and have been for many years. African translators, and their collaborators from other countries, are a significant pool of biblical expertise within African contexts. Many of them are highly trained biblical scholars and much of what they do is a form of biblical scholarship.

As already alluded to above, African scholars have argued that the Bible's presence in Africa, despite its colonial trappings, has been of considerable value. Perhaps the most famous argument

for this view has come from Lamin Sanneh. In using the term "translation" Sanneh recognizes that he is taking translation "beyond the narrow, technical bounds of textual work." He does this because, says Sanneh, "language is the intimate, articulate expression of culture," particularly in those societies "that have been less broken up by technological change" and so "have a more integrated, holistic view of life". The missionary adoption of the vernacular "was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism."

In a detailed and wide-ranging argument, which roots itself in a theological exegesis of the Pauline mission to the Gentiles, Sanneh (1989) sees

> "translation as a fundamental concession to the vernacular, and an inevitable weakening of the forces of uniformity and centralization. Furthermore, I see translation as introducing a dynamic and pluralist factor into questions of the essence of the religion. Thus if we ask the question about the essence of Christianity, whatever the final answer, we would be forced to reckon with what the fresh medium reveals to us in feedback. It may thus happen that our own earlier understanding of the message will be challenged and even overturned by the force of the new experience. Translation would consequently help to bring us to new ways of viewing the world, commencing a process of revitalization that reaches into both the personal and cultural spheres."

In short, and this is very short given Sanneh's detailed and careful arguments, the inherent translatability of the Bible – in both a narrow technical sense and in a more profound theological sense – provides the potential for the revitalisation of both the biblical message and receptor culture.

So, if we follow Sanneh, the very act of translating the book of Jonah would be an affirmation of much of African culture, as the previous sub-section suggests. In order to translate Jonah, African informants would have had to delve into their cultures to find words, concepts and experiences that matched the book of Jonah. My point here is twofold. First, existing and future African translations of the book of Jonah will embody rich resources for recovering aspects of African socio-cultural experience. The way in which, for example, "gods" in 1:5 is translated in a particular vernacular will say a great deal about the religio-cultural heritage of that African community. Second, African translations of the book of Jonah may provide fresh socio-historical and/or literary insights into the book of Jonah. Why, for example, does the book of Jonah end as it does with the awkward sentence (and this is a literal translation of the Hebrew)? "Yet should I not have compassion on Nineveh, that large city, which has more than one hundred and twenty thousand people, who do not know their right hand from their left hand, and many cattle as well?" (4:11) The awkward grammatical construction could have been avoided, but clearly the placement of the phrase "and many cattle as well" at the end of the sentence, an indication in Hebrew of emphasis, is significant. But what is its significance? Perhaps African readers, particularly those from socio-cultural contexts in which cattle play a central role, can comment.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the book of Jonah to the recovery of African culture is its very strong anti-xenophobic stance. God refuses to be intimidated by or to give in to Jonah's xenophobic attitudes. As I have argued, the book of Jonah assumes an attitude of respect towards "the other;" it is only Jonah's prayer where the gods of others are denigrated. Fortunately, Jonah's prayer, while being representative of Jonah's own xenophobic position, is not representative of the book of Jonah as a whole. What a wonderful message this is for our African continent which is wracked by ethnic intolerance and conflict.

7.5.3 Observations and evaluation: African contexts as the subject of interpretation

My discussion of the book of Jonah makes it clear that the contribution of African biblical hermeneutics is more at the meta-hermeneutical level. African scholars are as thorough as their western colleagues in working with the biblical text, employing the full array of biblical critical tools in analysing and interpreting the book of Jonah, though they would favour, I have argued, socio-historical interpretative tools. The main difference of African biblical hermeneutics is the alliance between academically trained biblical scholars and ordinary African 'readers' of the Bible and the readiness with which African biblical hermeneutics relates the text to the African context. Exactly what the contribution of ordinary African Christians is to the analysis of text remains to be analysed, but clearly they would have much to contribute to a reading of Jonah from their religio-cultural contexts. As I have shown with reference to the book of Jonah, this dialogue between ancient text and contemporary context is not uncritical. The text can and does have a voice over against the African context, critiquing and judging it. But the text also confirms and affirms the African context. Finally, the African context does, occasionally (and this happens more frequently south of the Limpopo than north of it) critique the biblical text, declaring it to be inherently damaging to African life interests.

7.6 An ecological hermeneutics

7.6.1 Background and theory

⚙ Since the 1960's scientists have been accumulating evidence of environmental destruction. Subsequently, a deep concern has been expressed - in the media and by scientists, poets and prophets from all over the world - regarding issues such as nuclear radiation, global warming, ozone depletion, population growth, acid rain, biodiversity, waste management, over-fishing, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, etc. The root causes of these pervasive and insidious forms of environmental destruction are economic. They lie in the industrial revolution of the 19th century, the unprecedented economic growth that subsequently ensued and in the current global culture of consumerism. Unlimited economic growth is clearly not possible on a finite planet.

At the same time, economic structures are dialectically related to religious convictions, dominant ideologies and worldviews. The ideological roots of the environmental crisis have been the subject of numerous debates in philosophy, religion and theology. These debates have led to a diffuse range of proposals for a more ecologically orientated worldview. The perspectives of Benedictine stewardship, Franciscan friendship, the "new cosmology", ecofeminism, "deep ecology", the "Gaia-hypothesis", indigenous wisdom, social ecology, the New Age movement and many others can only be mentioned here.

One contribution to this debate on the ideological roots of environmental destruction requires more attention. In a famous article entitled "The historical roots of our ecological crisis", published in 1967, the American historian Lynn White argued that the Christian tradition itself bears a huge burden of guilt for the worldview that has led to the present ecological crisis. White's article placed the blame for the ecological crisis squarely upon Western Christianity. His thesis is a variation on Weber's famous analysis of the relationship between Christianity and capitalism, i.e. that Protestantism has encouraged capitalism which, in turn, exploited nature. White argued that it is but a small step from the Christian notion of the dominion of man(!)kind over nature to the senseless exploitation of nature for human benefit. Compared to the emphasis on the sacredness of nature in most other religions, the Judeo-Christian

doctrine of creation has led to a "disenchantment of nature." Biblical religion has expelled the gods from the forests and streams once and for all. Moreover, the notion of "dominion" over nature gave impetus to the rise of Western science by encouraging empirical investigations of the "book of nature". White maintained that exploitative attitudes toward nature surfaced widely during the medieval period and that this was encouraged by the anthropocentrism of the dominant theology of the time. Christianity has given religious support to the notion that the world has been created primarily for the benefit of human beings. Modern science is an extrapolation of medieval natural theology while technology constitutes a realisation of the Christian notion of human mastery of nature. The Judeo-Christian tradition, and its typical vision of a better future, has had a lasting influence on the Western world, also through variants of this tradition such as Marxism and secularism. White therefore concludes that: "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt."

White's article soon led to a heated debate. Many have tried to refute his thesis by indicating some of its oversimplifications. Despite the perceived shortcomings of White's thesis, it almost single-handedly sparked the discussion of environmental issues in Christian theology. Since the early 1970's this has led to a wealth of publications on almost every possible theological theme. Numerous studies have tried to defend Christianity against White's accusations by retrieving the ecological wisdom in the Biblical roots of the Christian tradition and in its subsequent history, its doctrines and ethos, its forms of spirituality and praxis.

⚙ Until recently, the dominant approach of contributions to an ecological theology from within the field of Biblical Studies was shaped by two related factors. Many contributions were deliberately aimed at defending Christianity against the accusations of Lynn White and numerous other secular critics. Secondly, most contributions tried to retrieve some ecological wisdom from the Biblical texts. The assumption was therefore that the Bible can indeed offer profound ecological wisdom but that this has all too often remained hidden or implicit. The task of new exegetical studies is therefore to uncover such ecological wisdom.

In numerous contributions, Biblical scholars have offered a broad overview of Old Testament and New Testament perspectives on the environment. Typically, such overviews focus on a few favourite texts such as Genesis 1-2, the theme of the covenant (e.g. Genesis 6-9), the Sabbatical laws (e.g. Leviticus 25), Job 37-39, some of the Psalms (8, 19, 24, 98, 104), some prophetic texts such as Isaiah 9-11, 40f, 65, Ezekiel 36, Joel, Amos, some of the sayings of Jesus (e.g. in Matthew 6:28-30, 10:29-31), Romans 8:18-23, Colossians 1 and Revelation 21-22. The selection of these texts is quite understandable since they deal explicitly with nature or with a theology of creation.

The insights on ecological wisdom emerging from these contributions cannot be discussed in any detail. A few comments regarding the hermeneutical approach that is followed in this regard are important though:

⚙ The selection of some favourite texts may unintentionally reinforce the perception that ecology is indeed a marginal concern in the Bible. The focus may be far too narrow. It only relates to an aspect of creation theology or, more specifically, to the relationship (of stewardship?) between human beings and nature. A concern for the environment is one aspect of a Christian ethos, but it does not really belong to the heart of the Christian gospel. By contrast, a retrieval of the ecological wisdom in the Biblical traditions has to be doctrinally comprehensive. This implies that texts dealing with creation, providence, humanity, sin, redemption, the church, the sacraments and eschatological consummation have to be retrieved from an ecological perspective.

- Another way of broadening the scope of such a retrieval of ecological wisdom is to trace the Bible for references to the earth, mountains, hills, air, waters, rivers, soil, trees, animals, birds, insects, etc. It is important to read the whole Bible through ecological spectacles. This soon leads to the discovery that the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is "filled to the brim" with ecological overtones. The earth and all its creatures are intimately interwoven with God's loving care for humanity.

- At the same time, an ecological hermeneutics has to consider the suspicion that many Biblical texts do not escape from an anthropocentric bias. Together with liberation theologians and feminist theologians, ecological theologians have to come to terms with the discovery that the Bible itself does not necessarily support a particular cause, in this case, an ecological ethos. Many critics have argued that Biblical texts, more often than not, show a preoccupation with human well-being and that the interests of other creatures and the voice of the earth itself are as a result marginalized. This calls for a more critical hermeneutics in which it is not presupposed that the Bible must be "rescued" against environmental critics. All the evidence has to be taken into account for an investigation into the ecological thrust of a particular Biblical text. An ecological hermeneutics therefore has to operate not only with a hermeneutics of trust but also with one of suspicion.

- A critical ecological hermeneutics is adopted most notably and most radically in the "Earth Bible" project initiated by the Australian Biblical scholar Norman Habel (the chief editor of the project). This important and ambitious project will become a five-volume series, published by Sheffield Academic Press, in which an ecological hermeneutics is employed to interpret the Bible and to promote justice and healing for the earth. What does this imply?

In his introductory essay to the project, Habel explains that the widespread sense of environmental crisis has stimulated the emergence of a new "Earth consciousness". This is the awareness that humans are not in control of natural ecosystems but that all forms of life are interconnected and that we are deeply dependent on the complex web of relationships that allows life on Earth to flourish. The term "Earth" suggests the "living system within which we humans live in a relationship of interdependence with other members of the Earth community" Moreover, the sense of Earth community calls for "Earth justice", the call to resist the violation of ecosystems in solidarity with all the marginalized and threatened species and specimens. This emerging Earth consciousness invites and challenges us to revisit our religious traditions (and sacred texts) from the perspective of the Earth community. In the words of Habel, "This new Earth consciousness invites us, as (sic) members of the Earth community, to return to the bible, and in dialogue with the text, ascertain whether a similar kinship with Earth is reflected here." We have to "interrogate the biblical heritage to ascertain whether Earth is silenced, oppressed or liberated in the Bible.

The focus of the Earth Bible project is not merely a renewed interest in creation theology and the Earth as part of creation, but in the voice of Earth in the text itself. The Earth is not so much a topic in the text but a voice or (often marginalized) presence in the text that has to be listened to. In this way, Earth becomes a subject (with a voice in its own right) and not so much an object in the Biblical texts. This calls for a reflecting *with* Earth and not so much *about* the Earth, in the same way that feminist Biblical scholars would want to read the Bible in solidarity *with* oppressed women and not *for* them. Habel explains this point of departure in his introductory essay to the project:

> "(This) involves a move away from searching the text to study the theme or topic of Earth, as part of a creation theology or any other theology. Rather, we are identifying, as far as possible, with Earth or the earth community, as we converse with the text. We no longer

consider ourselves readers within the hierarchy of creation, but fellow members within the community of Earth. We are no longer reading as stewards over creation, but as kin, relatives within the Earth community. We no longer see ourselves as pilgrims *on* Earth, but as a species *in* Earth, beneath a common protective skin called the atmosphere."

The "Earth Bible" project therefore explores the Biblical texts from the perspective of the Earth, suspecting that the text and/or its interpreters may be anthropocentric and not geocentric. It asks whether there is a concern for Earth community in the text or whether Earth is being treated unjustly in the text. It attempts to retrieve alternative traditions that hear the voice of the earth and that value the earth more than as a human instrument. On this basis, the Earth Bible team have identified the following six guiding ecojustice principles for Biblical interpretation:

- *The principle of intrinsic worth*: The universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth;

- *The principle of interconnectedness*: Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival;

- *The principle of voice*: Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice;

- *The principle of purpose*: The universe, Earth and all its components, are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.

- *The principle of mutual custodianship*: Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners, rather than rulers, to sustain a balanced and diverse Earth community.

- *The principle of resistance*: Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.

The articulation of these principles helps to pose new questions to the Biblical texts. This may lead to the discovery of new concepts insights and dimensions embedded in the text that may not have been seen before. Does this not fall into the trap of reading one's own assumptions into the text? The Earth Bible team acknowledges this danger but argues that each interpreter approaches a text with a set of governing assumptions that often remain unarticulated and subconscious and that are therefore even more dangerous. The danger of reading into the text randomly may be avoided if the articulation of such ecojustice principles is done in conjunction with historical, literary and cultural modes of analysis.

The approach of the Earth Bible project may be clearly described in terms of a "hermeneutic of suspicion". Together with the approaches to Biblical interpretation derived from psycho-analytical theory, Marxism, feminist theology, liberation theology and indigenous theologies, a critical ecological hermeneutics articulates the suspicion that the Biblical texts and their interpretations have been distorted as a result of an anthropocentric bias that marginalizes other creatures and the voice of the Earth itself. It acknowledges that we as members of the human community have exploited, oppressed and endangered the existence of the Earth community. It therefore seeks to ascertain whether Earth and Earth community are silenced or liberated in particular Biblical texts. It wishes to allow the often marginalized voices of Earth to be heard again. And, as a "hermeneutic of retrieval", it seeks to discern and retrieve alternative traditions that would allow Earth community to flourish yet again.

- What, then, is an ecological hermeneutics? The use of the term "hermeneutics" in concepts such as a "feminist hermeneutics", a "liberation hermeneutics", or an "African hermeneutics"

is rather misleading. It is often simply used as a rough synonym for a particular form of theology. In this sense one may also speak of a "reformed hermeneutics", a "Lutheran hermeneutics", an "evangelical hermeneutics" or a "Pentecostal hermeneutics". At best, this use of the concept "hermeneutics" seems to acknowledge that a particular theological position informs and shapes one's reading of the Bible. However, strictly speaking, the concept "hermeneutics" should be used in the sense of a theoretical reflection on and an analysis of the process of interpretation (see *Angling for interpretation*, chapter 3.2). Hermeneutics itself is not primarily an act of interpretation; it is a reflection on interpretation. To use an analogy: biology is a reflection on life (bios); it is not primarily a form of life (although doing biology is of course also a very specific way of living).

The question is therefore whether proposals for an ecological hermeneutics have actually led to new methodological insights (i.e. at the level of hermeneutics) or whether this is simply a different way of reading the Bible (i.e. at the level of interpretation)? Perhaps it is too early to provide a clear answer to this question since there have been relatively few contributions on the nature of an ecological hermeneutics and (except for the *Earth Bible* project), these have been rather diffuse.

Nevertheless, one may argue that the emergence of an ecological hermeneutics promises to be hermeneutically comprehensive. This implies that it touches on every aspect of the process of interpretation. Following the seven guidelines for interpretation identified in *Angling for interpretation*, (Chapter 3.2) it is clear that new insights, also methodological insights, have emerged from attempts to reread the Bible from an ecological perspective. This may be illustrated with the following examples (focusing mostly on the famous text on human "dominion" in Genesis 1:27).

⚙ On the production of texts:

In his important work, *The Yahwist landscape: Nature and religion in early Israel,* Theodore Hiebert argued that Israel's nomadic desert origins and agricultural roots are reflected in the Yahwist motif of the desert oasis in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2). By contrast, the creation narrative of Genesis 1 assumes the threat of alluvial floods in Mesopotamia. It calls for order amidst the forces of chaos. Humans are to play a role in the establishment of such order (dominion). Hiebert's work illustrates that the production of a text has to be understood not only against its social and historical background. The impact of the material landscape on the production of texts should also be taken into account. The importance of geography and topography to demography has to be recognised.

⚙ On a literary analysis of texts:

Perhaps the most important contribution to literary analysis from an ecological perspective is the way in which Earth is recognized as a distinct voice that has been inscribed (and often marginalized) within the text. In literary terms, Earth (or more concretely waters, mountains, rivers, plants, trees, insects, birds and animals) should not simply be understood as a way of describing the narrative scene or context. Non-human creatures are actors that play an active role in history and that are influenced by human history. See the discussion of the Earth Bible project above.

⚙ On the history of reception of texts:

In his excellent book, The travail of nature, Paul Santmire analysed the "ambiguous ecological promise" of the Christian tradition. He counters both those critics who assume that the Christian tradition has little, if anything, to offer to ecological thinking, and those

who are overly eager to redeem the tradition. He shows that the history of interpretation of texts such as Genesis 1:27-28 is characterised by radical plurality and the impact of pervasive ideologies.

⊛ On the role of the contemporary context:

Larry Rasmussen's acclaimed work, Earth community Earth ethics, is one of the better theological assessments of the contemporary global context from an ecological perspective. The notion of "Earth community" has several connotations: a) it suggests that Earth is the common home for all religious traditions, b) it values the emphasis on community in the wisdom of indigenous cultures, c) it draws on the scientific rediscovery that inter-connectedness structures galaxies, all forms of life, ecosystems and human societies, d) it responds to the threat of the fragmentation of local community life all over the world, e) it calls for the fostering of sustainable communities. If the Earth is our only home (oikos), the task of the steward (the oikonomos) is not one of domination but of responsible participation in the one community of life. This illustrates how an analysis of the contemporary context can shape the reinterpretation of a text such as Genesis 1:27-28.

⊛ On the rhetorical context:

Theological responses to environmental destruction reflect the confusing and conflicting diversity of contemporary Christian theologies. Subsequently, several scholars in the field have tried to identify the dominant types of ecological theology. In her book, Gaia and God: Ecofeminist theology of Earth healing, Catholic theologian Rosemary Ruether proposed that a covenantal tradition and a sacramental tradition of earthkeeping may be identified. The covenantal type is popular among Protestant Christians and draws inspiration from the Bible and the covenantal tradition to emphasise a commitment for right relationships within the earth community. The sacramental type draws on the Bible and on patristic and medieval mysticism to speak to the heart, to inspire a vision of the sacred and to express an ecstatic experience of communion within the earth community. Although Ruether argues that these two types of ecological theology can complement each other, it is clear that the rhetorical context (e.g. Protestant or Catholic) will influence one's selection of appropriate texts, doctrinal keys and forms of spirituality to express an ecological ethos. In a rhetorical context with a strong sense of covenantal responsibilities, a theology of stewardship may flourish while this may be less prominent in a context with strong sacramental sensibilities.

⊛ On the influence of pervasive ideologies:

The discussion of the "Earth Bible" project above provides an example of a sensitivity to pervasive ideologies in the Biblical texts and in their subsequent history of interpretation. Another version of such a hermeneutic of suspicion is that of ecological feminism. Here, the interlocking dualisms of culture/nature and male/female are subjected to critique. It is argued that the same logic that legitimized patriarchal domination of men over women has been extrapolated toward the exploitation of nature in the name of (patriarchal) culture. These forms of domination are reflected in the Biblical texts. The assumed sacred authority of the Bible must therefore be questioned together with that of patriarchy.

⊛ On the spiral of interpretation:

How does interpretation actually take place? How do we manage to relate the message of the Bible with a particular context? Here the role of doctrinal keys has to be

emphasised. Doctrinal keys are comprehensive theological constructs that may be used to establish a relationship between the Biblical texts and a contemporary context. They play a crucial role in the identification of similarities (amidst differences) between the Biblical text and a contemporary context. They have a double function in this regard. They provide a key to unlock the meaning of both the contemporary context and the Biblical texts and simultaneously enable the interpreter to establish a link between text and contemporary context. Heuristic keys are not only employed to find similarities but to construct similarities, to make things similar (idem facio), if necessary. The scope of such interpretative keys is often quite comprehensive: they purport to provide a clue to the core meaning of the contemporary context as a whole and the Biblical text as a whole.

Such interpretative keys are usually derived from core Christian beliefs. The doctrinal key of "liberation" may serve as an example. The confession that "God is a Liberator" is used in liberation theology as a doctrinal key to link Biblical texts (stories on how God liberated people in the past) with particular contexts of oppression today. In this sense a new theology would indeed lead to a new form of hermeneutics because of the introduction of a different doctrinal key.

The controversial term "stewardship" illustrates the use of such doctrinal keys with reference to Genesis 1:27-28. The word stewardship does not appear in the text itself. Nevertheless, it has become a very common key to interpret the meaning of the Hebrew words *kabash* ("subdue") and *radah* ("have dominion"). In his influential study, *The steward, a Biblical symbol come of age,* Douglas John Hall (1990) develops a theology of stewardship that suggests that we human beings are responsible for the whole earth, that we are together responsible for the whole earth, that this responsibility includes the non-human as well as the human world, that this responsibility must seek to express itself in just and merciful political forms and that this responsibility must be exercised in the light not only of the immediate situation but of the near and distant future as well. It is clear that "stewardship" functions here as a hermeneutical key to relate the Biblical text with ecological responsibility within the contemporary context.

The many criticisms that have been raised against such a notion of stewardship (e.g. that it is too hierarchical, too managerial, too androcentric and that it portrays God as an absentee Landlord) suggest that doctrinal keys also have to be subjected to a hermeneutics of suspicion.

7.6.2 Jonah in the light of an ecological hermeneutics

Commentators on the book of Jonah are unanimous in their appreciation of the graphic nature of the narrative in Jonah. The weal and woes of the main character, Jonah, are closely tied up with elements from the world of non-human nature. The narrative is picturesque because of the abundant references to that which is earthly and concrete. Look at the following examples:

- Cosmology: heaven (1:9), dry land (1:9, 2:10), earth (2:6), mountains (2:6), the sun (4:8);

- Geography: Nineveh (1:1, 3:1f, 4:11), Tarsish (1:3, 4:2), Joppa (1:3), the temple in Jerusalem (2:4,7);

- Forces of nature: the sea (1:4f, 9), the storm at sea (1:4f) and calm at sea (1:15), the scorching desert wind (4:8), sun and shade (4:5,8);

- Food (3:7f) and drinking water (3:7);

- Life cycles: three days and three nights (1:17), living and dying (2:6, 4:3,8f), dawn and dusk

(4:7,10), being asleep and being awake (1:5-6), eating and fasting (3:7f), sprouting and withering away (4:6-7);

⚙ Plants: sea weeds (2:5), the cucumber plant (4:6f); and

⚙ Animals: the big fish (1:17, 2:1,10), the many domesticated animals in Nineveh (3:7, 4:11), the worm (4:7), and humans (sailors, citizens, the king and his counselors).

It can hardly be argued that these aspects have been neglected in interpretations of the book of Jonah. However, it may be said that the acts of human beings have been privileged and that the role of non-human creatures have often been reduced to that of merely providing the background or stage where the drama between God and human beings has played itself out. In terms of the principles identified by the Earth Bible project, the voice of Earth is suppressed in this way. The question is whether this suppression of the voice of Earth is evident in the text itself and not only in the interpretation of the text?

The most obvious starting point for a retrieval of the ecological wisdom in the book of Jonah is the reference to Nineveh's many animals in the rhetorical question that concludes the narrative. This question expresses God's remarkable mercy that extends not only to human beings but also to their domestic animals. The animals and natural forces are indeed intimately involved and incorporated in the drama of creation, providence (the role of the fish in 1:17, 2:10), human evil (1:2), divine judgement (the storm, the wind, the desert wind, also the role of the worm in 4:7), repentance (the animals that were expected in 3:7 to fast too) and the expected final restoration (4:11). God's shalom is aimed at establishing a comprehensive sense of well-being that includes the whole community of creation. Jonah himself is reprimanded because he manifests a far too restricted understanding of God's mercy, i.e. presumably a mercy that is targeted at the oppressed people of Israel only.

This emphasis on the inclusiveness of God's mercy is clearly attractive to counter the many anthropocentric readings of the Jonah narrative. The question, though, is whether this inclusiveness is sustained in the narrative as a whole? Or are some of the non-human voices marginalized in the text? If so, how can these voices be retrieved for a contemporary vision of ecojustice?

It may be argued that the narrative use of motifs such as the big fish, the cucumber plant and the worm is predominantly instrumentalist. These motifs do not really introduce fully-fledged role players that are respected for their own integrity. Their roles in the narrative remain minor. These motifs are merely used to make the story more picturesque, amusing and pedagogically effective. One may also argue that only domesticated animals are mentioned. Does God's mercy not also extend to the wild animals, even those that are dangerous to humans? And what about the fate of the many birds, insects, smaller mammals, trees and plants if Nineveh were to be destroyed? None of these voices is mentioned in the narrative. The only plant that is mentioned in the text is scorched in the process of God's effort to teach a lesson to his reluctant prophet. Finally, the sea is regarded as a dangerous threat in the book of Jonah. There is little acknowledgement that the sea provided the habitat from which our forms of life originated.

These observations are perhaps overly critical. Not everything can be spelled out within the space of a short narrative. The dominant thrust of the book of Jonah is one of inclusiveness. It counters an exclusivist preoccupation with the interests of one nation, one culture, one person, one species. The vision is one of God's astonishing mercy that extends over the whole of creation. This mercy is perhaps epitomised in the motif of the great fish that appeared to offer unexpected (if uncomfortable) safety and protection to Jonah in his deepest hour of need. This mercy is not manifested at a distance; it is one that enfolds Jonah like a mother's womb. It is from this

nourishing and protective womb that Jonah emerged in order to meet the God of unfathomable mercy, again, in Nineveh.

7.6.3 Observations and evaluation

❀ An ecological hermeneutics constitutes an important new manifestation of a hermeneutics of suspicion. It argues persuasively that anthropocentrism should be added to the well-known list of ideologies that may distort Biblical interpretation: sexism, racism, classism, elitism, and colonialism. Moreover, it maintains that these ideologies are structurally related to one another in what ecofeminists have called "interlocking dualisms".

❀ At its best, an ecological hermeneutics offer an important new doctrinal key to understanding both the Biblical texts and the contemporary context, namely that of the ecological well-being of the whole earth community. Such a doctrinal key will remain limited unless it can be integrated not only with creation but also with the other aspects of Christian faith, namely providence, the place of humanity in the earth community, sin, redemption, Christian vocations and eschatological consummation.

❀ An ecological hermeneutics can indeed help to open our eyes to the role that Earth, mountains, hills, air, waters, rivers, soil, trees, animals, birds, insects, etc. play in the Biblical texts. These categories do not simply sketch the scene within which the drama of human salvation takes place. They are intimately involved in God's acts of salvation and liberation that touch the whole earth community.

CHAPTER 8

Where does this leave us?

8.1 Introduction

The great variety of exegetical methods dealt with in this book (and our list is by no means complete) indicate how scholars and learned Bible readers over the centuries tried to formalize their study of the biblical texts. As we said in chapter 1, these strategies have a critical function: they assist us in testing our initial understandings of biblical texts so that we might come to a more adequate interpretation.

But does a study of these methods really leave us with a better understanding of the Bible? The variety and complexity of the interpretative strategies seem to leave us with more questions than answers. Two sets of questions cannot be avoided:

- The first concerns the *choices* we have to make. Should we use all these strategies or should we select only the "best" strategies? How do we know which strategies are the "best"? Or should we perhaps school ourselves in one method and apply that to all biblical texts?

- The second concerns the possible *negative effects* of hermeneutical theory on Christian practice. Do these methods equip us to understand the Bible as a guide to Christian faith and living or do they turn the Bible into a playground for experts? Can the Bible still address ordinary Christians after it has been dissected according to sophisticated theories?

The next sections will deal with these two sets of problems without – for the moment – offering answers.

8.1.1 The problem of choosing an appropriate interpretive approach

This book may create the impression that biblical interpreters face a menu from which they have to choose an item. For instance, if they choose to interpret a passage with the tools of historical criticism, they cannot employ the tools of structuralism. Actually, practical interpretation virtually always involves a mixture of methods. A feminist interpretation of a psalm may include references to the genre (form criticism) and structure (structuralism) of the psalm and the interpreter may draw on textual criticism and cultural anthropology to help solve certain problems. Moreover, the feminist interpreter would also want to say something about her response as a woman (reader response).

Such a mixing of methods is not only possible but necessary, because no single method can possibly provide answers to all the questions that may arise when a text is read. Narratology helps one to get to grips with the formal features of narratives; it does not enlighten one about the cultural practices to which a particular narrative refers or help one to determine its purpose. Rhetorical criticism often depends on the correct understanding of a Hebrew or Greek phrase, but rhetorical criticism does not teach us Hebrew or Greek. Each method has its own questions and its own strategies for answering them; it necessarily ignores other questions and has no way of dealing with them.

No reading of Jonah in this book depended solely on the "method" that was used. Although each reading had a particular *focus*, other presuppositions entered into the reading process. The particular approach determined what would be in the foreground, yet this foreground could not

appear without a background. That is why the readings, though very different on the surface, are in some ways remarkably similar. Some of the "strange" readings (deconstructive, Marxist and feminist ones) have as their background more "normal" readings. One could call them specialized perspectives on such normal readings.

One could, therefore, try to solve the problem of choice by saying that it matters little what approach we choose. John Barton, having noted how often different "methods" lead to similar conclusions, concludes that "methods" are not ways in which we discover meaning, but ways in which we defend insights we have already reached.

Structural analysis has discovered the concentric structure in Jonah 1:4-16. The structure reveals that 1:9 is the focus of the passage and that one should compare the attitude of the sailors in verse 5 to their changed attitude in verses 15 and 16. But an ordinary, intelligent reader who does not notice the concentric structure is not likely to miss these points. Verse 9 contains Jonah's first words and is clearly important. The change in the sailors is hard to overlook. Similarly, a careful reader could conclude that the question at the end of the book is addressed to the audience without a theory of the implied reader. One could say the theory does not yield the conclusion, but merely explains it.

Sometimes all roads lead to Rome; sometimes different methods at least alert us to aspects that intelligent, attentive readers may overlook. Even readers with experience in analyzing modern literary texts may be baffled by some passages in the Bible unless they are informed about the customs and beliefs of the people of ancient Palestine, about the historical circumstances and about the specialized meanings of some Hebrew and Greek words. One could then conclude that each method has something unique to offer and that the appropriate strategy would be to add all the methods together to get "the full picture".

Unfortunately this does not work either, for sometimes different methods yield incompatible results. For instance, sometimes one has to decide whether a text is a compositional unit or, instead, composed of different, originally separate parts. In other cases one has to decide whether to amend a difficult verse (using the tools of textual criticism), to read it as it stands (applying, perhaps, literary criteria) or to regard it as a late editorial addition (redaction criticism).

In Mark 2:10-11 there is a problem that can be solved in different ways. At the beginning of verse 10 Jesus is talking to the scribes and says "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins." The sentence is not completed; instead, Jesus turns to the lame man and tells him to get up, take up his bed and go home.

One explanation is that the passage (2:1-12) contains two separate parts (belonging to different genres) that have been joined (source and form criticism). A miracle story (1:1-5a and 10b-12) has been expanded by inserting into it a dispute story concerning Jesus' authority to forgive sins (5b-10a). The joining of the two parts has left awkward breaks.

But the problem can also be solved by literary means. Jesus deliberately traps the scribes by raising the issue of sins first. The common view was that all sorts of diseases were the result of a person's sins. When the scribes question Jesus' authority, He demonstrates it by healing the man. The completion of the unfinished sentence in verse 10 is the act of healing. According to this view, the "awkwardness" is dramatically very effective.

According to a third (reader-response) view, it is not Jesus speaking to the scribes in verse 10a, but the author of the gospel addressing the readers in an aside. Yet another explanation depends on Greek grammar. "So that you may know" could also mean "Know then" (imperative).

Undoubtedly one has to use source criticism sometimes. When? Why, when a text is composed of different sources, of course! This argument is obviously circular, *but such circular arguments cannot be avoided in practical interpretation.* They are inherent in what some call the hermeneutical circle or the hermeneutical spiral.

Lacking absolute certainty, we try to give intelligent and informed answers to questions that arise when we read a book and, on basis of the better or worse answers we give, we offer interpretations of the book. Our interpretations are tested against interpretations offered by others. We may learn from those who have seen what we have overlooked or who are in some areas better informed than we are. They, in turn, may learn from us. The result is never absolute certainty, but it is often better informed interpreters – even when "better informed" means "less certain". In the end the circle comes back to me, requiring me to make decisions for which I and I alone have to take responsibility.

The problem of choosing among the available methods is made more difficult by the suspicion that complicated scholarly interpretations based on hermeneutical theories are beyond the reach of ordinary Christians and have very little relevance to their lives.

8.1.2 The dangers of academic theories of interpretation

Hermeneutical reflection on interpretation has for long been - mainly if not exclusively - an academic enterprise. Has this academic enterprise been of any use to "ordinary people" who strive to understand the Bible (and other texts) better? A typical academic answer would be that theoretical reflection on our practices helps us to improve our practical performance. For instance, in recent years we have become far more alert to the role of ideology in texts and their interpretations. Someone who has taken note of (for instance) feminist, Marxist and post-colonial theories will definitely be in a position to offer more balanced and rounded interpretations.

But the academic world has its own interests and ideological biases, although these are not often mentioned in academic writing. As a result, the works of academics are sometimes useless to outsiders precisely when they are most useful to the academic authors. In particular, academic interests and ideology may be at odds with the needs of Christian communities, for the following reasons:

⚙ *Academics strive for novelty; faith communities need continuity.* Academics are rewarded for producing "novelties" – new theories, new interpretations, new vocabularies. Christian communities do not always welcome interpretative novelties. How can we know what to do or believe if the Bible, our guide in such matters, is given a new meaning every few years?

⚙ *Academics prize creativity; faith communities need cohesion.* In the search for knowledge academics explore all available avenues, even if many of these turn out to be dead-end streets. They regard any "different" slant on a problem as *potentially* useful; therefore they tolerate a multiplicity of clashing views. Christian communities find the multiplicity of radically different interpretations problematic. How can we stand united in faith and action if each individual can pick the interpretation of the Bible that best suits her or him?

⚙ *Academics privilege criticism; faith communities have to be loyal to a calling.* Academics need the freedom to question all authorities (texts, authors, other scholars) critically. Without persistent, open-ended questioning, academic life would stagnate. By following authorities, we simply arrive where the authorities had arrived before us – we get no further. Christian communities should not be completely uncritical, yet they cannot pretend that they open everything to critical questioning. They are called to serve, not to judge, and their service involves a measure of unquestioning loyalty.

- *Academics speak to experts; faith communities have to address the world.* Academics demonstrate their expertise by mastering and using the technical terminology of their discipline. In doing so, they communicate effectively with other experts. In Christian communities the interpretation of the Bible cannot be restricted to a small circle of experts. Even if one argues that ordinary Christians should accept the guidance of trained teachers, the trained teachers still have to communicate with untrained Christians. Moreover, ordinary ministers or pastors, who also have to be trained in other theological disciplines, can hardly master all the specialized disciplines within biblical interpretation. The exclusivity of expertise that marks academic debates endangers effective *communication* within the community of faith.

    (Technical terminology endangers fruitful academic debate as well. In this book we have expressed reservations about the esoteric jargons of certain methods. Complex jargons all too frequently fence off the "private property" of small groups of initiates.)

- *Academics seek theoretical understanding; faith communities seek guidance for life.* Academics are paid to seek theoretical understanding on the assumption that better understanding will lead to better practice. But when academic theories remain contested, theorizing gets a momentum of its own in a "spiral of theory" that leads academics further and further away from any application. In their dialogue with other theorists, academic theorists lose all contact with practice. While hermeneutical theorists rightly stress that they can offer no final answers, Christian communities cannot postpone Christian living. Although Christians should certainly not assume that they have all the answers, their need for practical guidance is understandable.

- *Academics defer to reason; faith communities live by faith.* Academics offer, as best they can, reasoned theories of interpretation; they are neither expected nor able to deal with what goes beyond reason. Therefore they cannot, either as scholars or as Christians, supply theories of divine inspiration or the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Christian communities, living by faith, have to go beyond the strictly rational. Their very interest in the Bible arises from the faith that, in whatever way, God speaks to them through the Bible.

The different interests and needs of academic interpreters and interpreters within Christian communities sometimes lead to open hostility. Academics accuse ordinary Christians of being wilfully ignorant or naïve and Christians accuse academic interpreters of deliberately undermining their faith. But even those on both sides who sincerely wish to be academically responsible *and* to serve the church in their interpretation of the Bible find it hard to do justice to both sides.

8.1.3 The escape into various forms of exclusivism

The problems discussed above are not readily solved. Faced by a host of conflicting interpretations and aware of the hidden pitfalls in the interpretation process, ordinary Christians and even academics often feel powerless. Hermeneutical reflection held out a promise of deeper understanding and a wealth of meaning, but in practice it sometimes robs people of the sense of meaning they had before.

Some deal with this problem by retreating into a "safe" position of academic scepticism. They maintain a critical distance from all interpretations, even the ones they offer themselves, arguing that we should give up on the idea that we can ever understand any text adequately. Unfortunately, this apparently "humble" position cripples further thought and provides no guidance for action. It may even lead to a sterile cynicism.

Many others try to escape the problems by adopting a form of exclusivism. Although such people are (generally) aware of different interpretations and interpretative strategies, they close their eyes

to "otherness" in interpretation and stick doggedly to whatever line they have chosen. Convinced that they already have the infallible "magic key" to biblical interpretation, they refuse to listen to anyone who disagrees with them.

Certain magic keys mark specific Church communities. In some it is the particular church's tradition: the Bible "obviously" says what the tradition has always said. In other churches the key is the inspired (prophetic, visionary) leader, whose interpretation of the Bible is accepted without question. In other cases the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual believer provides all the answers – strange as these answers may sometimes seem to outsiders. In all these cases the possibility that elements of the truth may be found outside the restricted circle is ruled out. Why listen to the "worldly" theories of academics or the heretical opinions of other Christians who have not received the Spirit (do not keep the proper Sabbath, do not acknowledge the authority of the Pope, have the wrong view of Scriptural authority, etc)?

Academics are no less guilty. One sometimes still hears the claim that a particular method is the only "scientific" one, the only one that yields "objective" results or the only one that "conforms to the evidence". More often academics claim that their method is at least the best one or the one most in line with "current thinking"; other methods are "one-sided" or "dated". And even among academics some would say, more or less blatantly, that only those interpretations are worthy of attention that serve the particular cause to which they have committed themselves. Although academics are professionally required to take note of the views of other scholars, the cavalier way in which rival views are sometimes dismissed is disturbing. One gets the impression that crude labelling occasionally takes the place of reasoned debate.

Exclusivism is not the logical consequence of "being a church community" or of "being an academic community", but in both communities there are psychological reasons for embracing a form of exclusivism. Churches require a reasonably secure basis for their faith and practice and frequently find it in their own tradition or their existing practice. This natural reaction becomes exclusivist when the door is closed on all other voices. Academics cannot possibly make a detailed study of all the conflicting theories about and methods of interpretation. To some extent they are forced to specialize. Unfortunately, the temptation to exaggerate the importance of the "speciality" in which you have invested much of your working life is hard to resist. In "perfecting" your own method, you begin to neglect and later to dismiss other methods. What has implicitly been excluded as a natural result of specialization is later explicitly excluded as worthless, mistaken or inferior. Of course, academic debates continue, but they are restricted to the small circle of experts.

In the previous chapters we have indicated that schools of interpretation often diverge on the issue of meaning and its location. The methods discussed in chapter 4 share the view that meaning is a function of the *origin of texts*. Those presented in chapter 5 regard meaning as a function of the *relationships among linguistic elements within the text*. In chapter 6 we presented methods that see meaning as a function of the *interaction between text and reader*. All the methods in chapter 7, divergent as they are, are based on the view that meaning is a function of *hidden ideological (or psychological) constraints*. These different perspectives on meaning may be regarded as the kernels around which exclusivist groups (in the academic world) cluster.

Two theoretical constructs support the idea that these different perspectives on meaning are in essence mutually exclusive. Thomas Kuhn spoke about "paradigm shifts" to indicate the revolutionary changes that take place in the natural sciences from time to time. A paradigm is more than simply a theory; it is a way of seeing reality. When a paradigm shift occurs, scientists working in the new paradigm are, as it were, no longer dealing with the same world that older

scientists had dealt with. Paradigms are *incommensurable*, that is, they cannot be compared within the same theoretical framework. Kuhn himself says that to move from one paradigm to another is a process resembling a religious conversion – it happens to you. Those who talk of different perspectives on meaning as different paradigms are therefore inclined to say that it serves no purpose to debate with those whose paradigm differs from your own one. They would simply fail to understand you.

A similar construct is that of "turns". According to some scholars, the hermeneutical debates over the past centuries have been marked by certain "turns". During the modern era, scholars turned to the *world behind the text* and found meaning in the processes of origination (the historical methods). Later scholars turned to the *world of the text itself* and found meaning in texts as networks of relationships between textual elements. Still later a turn was made to the *world in front of the text* and meaning was located in the process of reception. Others, however, turned to what we call the *world beneath the text*, that is, the hidden world of psychological and ideological constraints.

In our earlier book we used the terminology of "turns" ourselves. There are, however, disadvantages to it. First, the impression is sometimes created that "turns" are natural events that one simply has to accept. If one has not made the latest turn, one is condemned to living in the past. Moreover, it is often subtly suggested that the latest is "naturally" the best. Secondly, it is often accepted that each turn is to a complete, self-sufficient "world". Those who turn to the world behind the text and those who turn to the world of the text (for instance) are like people exploring different planets. Their respective findings cannot converge, either in a complementary or in a critical way. Instead, each "world" is the private property of those who have chosen to explore it.

We question the assumption that different perspectives on meaning necessarily have to lead to exclusive, privatized practices of theorizing and interpreting. It is certainly true that specific perspectives have dominated certain historical eras, but we do not believe that either natural or historical determinism fully explains this. At all times there have been dissenting voices. Our essentially historical presentation in this book is not based on a belief that paradigms followed each other in neat succession or that the latest is invariably the best. It is also true that *in academic practice* the temptation to regard a particular perspective as absolute is great, but we are convinced that in their everyday lives people (including academics) employ different perspectives when they interpret. A theory that fails to account for the presuppositions on which people habitually act cannot be a *fully* adequate theory, even if it yields some brilliant new insights.

8.1.4 Where does this leave us as editors and authors?

It is easy to criticize and difficult to formulate constructive proposals. Having rejected the view that the different methods of interpretation in this book should be seen as mutually exclusive, we have to say what we believe their status is. We have acknowledged that theories of interpretation are influenced by reigning academic fashions and by broader climates of thought at different times. Moreover, traditions, interests and ideologies play a role in shaping fashions and patterns of thought. This cannot, however, be the last word.

Theories, however much they are influenced by other factors, respond to existing practices. Theories of interpretation are formalized accounts of the experiences and intuitions we have when we interpret actual texts. Methods develop from the reading process, and not the other way round. When we read biblical texts, certain questions arise and we deal with them as best we can. Later we formulate a theory to explain how we managed to answer certain questions or why we failed to answer others. On the basis of the formalized theory we adopt a particular

"method", believing that it will ensure a greater measure of success in our future practice. First comes the insight or experience mediated by a more or less informed decision made in response to a problem: I understood this problematic passage better when I placed the text in its historical context. Then we can formulate this insight into a theoretical construct: the meaning of a text is a function of the historical circumstances in which it was produced. Finally, this theoretical construct becomes an operative part of a method: whenever one reads a text, one should try to determine the history of its origin.

This view implies that methods of interpretation never precede the reading and appropriation of biblical texts. Long before scholarly methods are developed, people read the Bible and appropriate it as a meaningful part of their lives. When a method directs the attention to a specific aspect of a text (for instance, the historical context), it is because the practice of interpretation drew the attention to problems of historical distance. Of course, each reader does not go through the whole process of having a particular insight, formalizing it in a theory and applying it in an interpretive method. New generations of readers often simply take over the theories and methods formulated by earlier readers. This does not change the status of the methods; they remain the end products of a practice and not the necessary starting points without which no successful interpretation is possible. It is the need to appropriate (respond to) the biblical text that calls forth critical debates on method.

If this is so, there is no warrant for interpretive exclusivism, either in churches or in academic "schools". Our plea for open, critical debate on interpretation, one which does not automatically rule out of court some dimensions or aspects of the interpretive process, is based on the assumption that our practice may be better than our theories and that our existing practices already involve us in various dialogues with others. The search for a shared understanding requires openness, but does not exclude critical engagement. All hermeneutical theories and all interpretations are not equal, though even the worst ones are not *simply* bad. Instead, they are bad for very complex reasons that can be explored only in critical debate. In the next section we suggest that a form of multidimensional exegesis is needed to do justice to the complexity of both the biblical text and the interpretive situation.

8.2 Towards multidimensional interpretation

Multidimensional interpretation is neither a *new method* that replaces previous ones, nor a *super method* that attempts to integrate all the good points of other methods. It is, rather, an alternative *attitude* to exegesis. It can be called an approach to interpretation provided that one distinguishes between two meanings of the term "approach". An approach may be both a theoretical framework and the interpretive techniques to which it gives rise. The emphasis then falls on the theory and techniques that give us access to the meaning of texts. An approach may also be a perspective on texts, theories of textuality and techniques of interpretation. The emphasis then falls on the attitude with which the interpreter regards texts and the process of interpretation, on the communal human practice of gaining meaning from texts. Multidimensional interpretation is an approach in the second sense.

8.2.1 What is a multidimensional approach all about?

A multidimensional approach does not render existing exegetical methods superfluous, but requires a specific perspective on the variety of methods. This perspective may be summarized as follows:

⊛ Methods are not seen as indispensable keys without which texts would remain meaningless

to us. Instead, they are seen as more or less useful formalizations of techniques we all apply in our daily practice.

❀ This does not mean that we can dispense with specialized methods. Some texts, biblical texts for instance, are so complex that we need an array of methods, sometimes highly specialized ones, if we wish to do justice to them.

❀ Moreover, the process of interpretation involves so many dimensions that no single theoretical construct can describe it adequately. A plurality of hermeneutical theories is fostered to remind us that we have no secure theoretical starting point.

❀ Neither methods nor theories come into existence in isolation from human communicative practices. Interpretation and the reflection on it should therefore be practised with an attitude of communality and openness to dialogue.

In categorizing the various interpretive approaches in the different chapters, we have suggested one possible way of reflecting on the variety of possibilities available to interpreters. We have indicated that there are methods focusing on the production of texts, others focusing on the texts themselves, others focusing on the reception of texts and others focusing on unconscious psychic and ideological factors. Our categories indicate what the different presuppositions and foci of the different methods are, but they do not force us to choose one approach to the exclusion of others. Instead, they suggest the different ways in which texts may be said to be "meaningful" and thus show us what type of contribution each method can make to biblical interpretation.

We do not claim that our proposed categorization is "better" than other possible ones or that our approach brings us closer to "final" results in biblical interpretation. We are, however, convinced that a multidimensional approach helps us to avoid both exclusivistic claims and attempts to construct a vast integrative scheme that pretends to cover the whole field. It fosters an awareness of the interplay of forces in the process of biblical interpretation, an interplay that we cannot fully master "methodically". Because we possess no "hermeneutic key" or "master theory", we are compelled to enter into dialogue with others, admitting that the search for meaning is always a communal enterprise.

8.2.2 What view of biblical texts is implied in a multidimensional approach?

Since a multidimensional approach tries to respect the complexity of biblical texts, it has to take into account the following:

❀ Biblical texts are *ancient texts*. The Bible was not written by a single author at a specific time in the past. It is, far rather, a whole library of books testifying to an ongoing conversation spanning some 1500 years. Even the separate books of the Bible are not all monolithic – they were composed from different pre-existing oral and written sources, and underwent redactional changes through the centuries. To treat these texts as if they were written in our day and addressed to us is to disrespect the communities of faith and their members who composed these books as meaningful contributions to their debates and struggles.

We need a *historical consciousness* in our interpretation of the Bible, an awareness of a past as "another country" where "they do things differently". Although biblical texts were not written for us in the first place, the "pastness" of the Bible can become part of our present interpretive endeavours. We can enter into "dialogues with the dead" (Domnick LaCapra), thereby gaining some insight into their reflections on and struggles with God at different times and in different circumstances. To do so, however, we need methods that help us to come to terms

with the "pastness" of the Bible, that help us to describe this "pastness" without dissolving it. We cannot, therefore, dispense with historical methods.

❀ Biblical texts are *literary texts*. They reach us in a textual form, and therefore we cannot appropriate them in any way without coming to grips with their textual features: the languages in which they were written (Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, Koine Greek), their literary forms and structures, the literary conventions embedded in them, and so on. These texts do not communicate "ideas" or "content" except in and through their literary embodiment.

We need a *literary consciousness* in our biblical interpretation, an awareness of the ways in which the resources of language can be deployed to achieve a variety of "meaning effects". We thus have to study the conventions and rules that operate at different levels in the biblical texts: the linguistic and grammatical, the generic, the rhetorical, the structural and the aesthetic. We treat these texts with respect only by reading them against the background of these conventions. We therefore need exegetical methods that help us to describe the textual and literary features of biblical texts.

❀ Biblical texts are *religious texts*. These texts are the embodiment of the religious convictions and beliefs of the ancient faith communities that wrote them. They express the reflections of believers of many centuries on who God is and how God relates to human beings. Whatever the precise circumstances were that led to the writing of each individual text, the biblical texts collectively gained the function of conveying confessions of faith about God to later generations. When, during the continuing process of interpretation and reinterpretation, these texts were canonized, they became authoritative for the communities that adapted them as canon. That is, they were accepted and passed on as a regulatory expression of who God is and how God wants to relate to people. In this sense they remain, for certain faith communities, normative for theological reflection and ethical decision-making today. The texts therefore also have a "present" character. Whenever faith communities appropriate the biblical texts, the theological "presentness" of the texts is taken for granted. Thus it is a central conviction of Christianity that the Bible is the "living" Word of God.

We need a *theological consciousness* in biblical interpretation. This is obviously true for those who accept the Bible as their canon, but even those who hold different (religious or secular) convictions have to come to grips with the religio-ethical content of biblical texts. For instance, Christians and non-Christians have to take a stand on the ethical injunctions in the texts, respecting them as ethical injunctions. Christians, in particular, may expect that these texts should help them to formulate their own confessions of faith in God in that they embody God's revelation. Christians therefore also need exegetical methods that can assist them in identifying the living Word of God in the Biblical texts.

Undoubtedly this schematic presentation is still too simplistic; each heading covers a complex collection of possibilities. A multidimensional approach reminds us that treating the biblical texts respectfully involves asking at least three questions: Where do these texts come from? How (in what form) do they reach us? What are they about? It does not suggest that there is ever a simple answer to any of these questions. Moreover, it is always possible to apply a tactical reduction. It is, for instance, possible to read a particular biblical text *only* as an ancient record, a literary masterpiece or a call to action in the present. A multidimensional approach does not condemn such limited endeavours as useless, but reminds us that they are - deliberately or inadvertently – limited.

8.2.3 How does a multidimensional approach view the process of interpretation?

As we have said before, interpretation is too complex to be viewed from a single perspective only. An interpretation is not the achievement of an individual armed with a set of technical instruments, but a part of an ongoing, interactive process. "Meaning for us" emerges as various dimensions of the process – of which our own interpretive effort is one – interact. Biblical interpretation is an ongoing *reading* process. When I read now, my reading takes shape within the space marked out by previous readings, although not all the "dimensions" will always be used. For instance, if my reading of the Bible interacts only with the previous reading of a particular church tradition, it will appear rather "flat" or one-dimensional. A more "rounded" reading would take into account all the dimensions that are involved in the reading of ancient, theological texts. All these dimensions may be involved in the production of meaning, although some may exert a stronger influence than others. The following dimensions (at least) need to be considered:

- ⚙ The *texts* we are reading: According to one (rather naïve) view, interpretation is simply the interpretation of "the text" as it appears before us. Although things are not that simple, an interpretation that is not anchored in the textual features of the text will hardly be persuasive. As we have indicated, we cannot read the Bible as if it were a modern text, written by a modern author for a modern audience. We have to acquaint ourselves with the ancient languages, genres and literary and rhetorical conventions that made the biblical texts meaningful to their ancient audiences. Only if we attune our reading of the text to these features can we get a feeling for and an understanding of the "literary worlds" created by the texts.

- ⚙ The *contexts of origin or production* of these texts: Texts themselves are interpretations of the world, therefore texts bear the marks of their times of origin. For instance, texts are marked by the values, world-views and religious convictions of those who wrote them. They speak from a particular physical place (a geographical setting) and a socio-political location. When we read the Bible today, we enter into a conversation with the earlier interpretations that constituted the texts. Unless we remain aware of the contexts that gave rise to these interpretations, we lose the thread of the conversation.

- ⚙ The *reception* of these texts in *ancient times*: We are not the first readers of the biblical texts. These texts reached their present form over a period of roughly 1500 years. During this time, the faith communities by whom and for whom the texts were written were already in a conversation with the traditions, written and oral, that came to constitute the Bible. Because the whole of the Bible was not available to ancient readers at once, each new generation interpreted and re-interpreted the oral traditions and texts that were available and regarded as authoritative at that time.

  These interpretations were influenced by the changing contexts of the readers, just as the earlier traditions were. This process gave rise to new texts based on previous texts and traditions and to the editing of the existing texts to make them suitable for new circumstances. Thus, for instance, the corpus of historical material found from Joshua to 2 Kings is, in part, a collection and adaptation of older oral and written sources. This corpus itself was then "rewritten" some centuries later in 1 and 2 Chronicles. The writers of Chronicles used the earlier corpus, but they re-interpreted it from the perspective of their own time. The re-interpretation of Old Testament traditions in the books of the New Testament provides another, more drastic, example of the way in which biblical texts are in part the products of an interpretation of earlier texts.

  When we read biblical texts today, we are, wittingly or unwittingly, influenced by these earlier processes of rewriting and re-interpretation. We receive 1 and 2 Chronicles as a re-

interpretation of a previous interpretation. The meaning of these books does not simply lie "in them", but also in their relationship of similarity to and difference from the earlier tradition.

❀ The impact of the *canonization process*: Over time the ancient faith communities came to regard certain texts as authoritative for their faith and passed them on to next generations as such. This resulted in the formation of an authoritative canon, which included some texts and excluded others. For the Old Testament this process was more or less completed by 100 CE and for the New Testament by around 400 CE.

The closing of the canon had two consequences for interpretation. First, the process of re-interpretation, which did not stop, no longer led to the editing of existing texts or to the formation of new texts that could be added to the collection of biblical writings. A line was drawn between the fixed texts of the Bible and the various forms of interpretation of and commentary on the texts. Although new texts *on* the Bible are written practically every day, there can be no new texts *of* the Bible. Secondly, the biblical texts are now received (in Christian communities) with a presumption that they are authoritative. This presumption of authority consciously or unconsciously influences interpretation, even among those who challenge biblical authority. In brief, the question of biblical authority has become part of the interpretation process.

❀ Different *traditions of interpretation*: Since the canonization of the Old Testament (by the Jewish faith community) and the New Testament (by the early Christian church), various traditions of interpretation have developed. (Some of these have been described in chapter 2 of this book.) Already in the early centuries, there were two distinct approaches to biblical interpretation within the Christian church, the Antiochian and the Alexandrian approaches. The various schisms and splits within the Christian church further stimulated the development of different interpretive traditions. For instance, two significant splits, that between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1054 CE and the split from the Roman Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, led to distinct traditions of biblical interpretation. (We have outlined some of these developments in chapter 3 of this book.) But these are merely examples; essentially each Christian denomination developed its own approach, often depending on what the particular denomination regards as crucial to the message of the Bible as a whole.

When we interpret the Bible today, we cannot just ignore these developments. All readers of the Bible, even those who are not Christians, are influenced by one or more of the many traditions of interpretation. These traditions still "speak" to us (whether we are aware of it or not) when we engage in biblical interpretation.

❀ The *reception* of these texts *in contemporary contexts*: Interpreters of the Bible today, like their ancient counterparts who produced the Bible and who read the Bible before them, read the Bible in a specific context, not in a vacuum. Not only traditions from the past, but also current social, political, economic, and religious conditions influence them when they interpret the Bible. (We have dealt with some of these influences in chapter 7.) For instance, an academic interpretation today is not merely an interpretation of a text, but also a response to other interpretations current in academic debates of our time.

It is obvious from the above that no single exegetical method can get to grips with all the voices that make themselves heard when we interpret the biblical texts. Each individual method offers a description of one of these dimensions but necessarily neglects others. The complexity of the interpretive process absolutely requires the use of different perspectives and methods. This does not mean that biblical interpretation is an undisciplined process in which everything goes.

Although a multidimensional approach seeks to avoid those claims of truth and certainty that mark exclusivist interpretation, it does not imply that all interpretations are equal. Within each dimension there are criteria according to which interpretations may be adjudged. Using such criteria one could say, for instance, that a particular historical interpretation is fanciful, better than another or badly informed. Moreover, the interaction of the different dimensions provides further criteria for determining how adequate an interpretation is. Meaning, it may be said, is seen as a function of the interaction of all these different dimensions of interpretation. Meaning is not a "thing" located within one of the dimensions; it is the understanding and insight that emerges as we engage in an ongoing process of conversation in which each approach adds its voice. For instance, meaning should not seen as "my own understanding of the text", as if readers create meaning in isolation, or as "what is already in the text", as if texts in isolation are packages of meaning to be unwrapped. Instead, both readers and texts are complex entities, formed to a large extent by their relationships to what lies outside them. Derrida's notion of a network of "traces" is one way of describing this relational complexity.

If this is so, we cannot lightly dismiss any of the specialist theoretical constructs and methods described in this book, although they are not all equally useful in all cases and although we cannot integrate them in an overarching theory and method. We suggest, however, that these theories and methods should not be regarded as neutral tools but as voices that engage in a conversation. When we interpret the Bible, we are always already part of the conversation with others. In section 8.3 below we shall suggest that we need to read with others in a conscious and deliberate manner.

8.2.4 Reading biblical texts in a multidimensional way

We have stressed that the multidimensional approach is not a method but an attitude – what some may call a meta-critical attitude. Nevertheless, in our practical reading of biblical texts we need some rules of thumb. Where should we start? Some points of entry may undermine the multidimensional approach by tacitly eliminating some of the dimensions of the process and others may foster it. Without suggesting a set recipe, we suggest that interpretation according to the following model would keep interpreters aware of complexities:

❀ *Get acquainted with the* **textual dimension**:

It cannot be denied that our primary interface in the interpretation process is the texts themselves. One cannot interpret, multidimensionally or otherwise, without reading the texts (preferably in the original languages)! Furthermore, our access to other dimensions of the interpretation process is mediated by the texts themselves: we cannot talk about the "context of origin", for instance, unless we apply this to a particular text. As some scholars put it, the synchronic (that is, the features of the texts themselves) is logically prior to the diachronic (that is, the history of origin of the texts) in interpretation. Our first task is therefore to get acquainted with the texts and their textual features – their grammar, syntactical structures, genres, and so on. At this stage we need those specialized methods (mainly discussed in chapter 5) that deal with aspects of textuality. Insights from narratology, stylistics, literary criticism, form criticism, structuralism, and other related fields help us to appreciate the richness of the textual dimension. These methods cannot be used mechanically, but may further illuminate our existing understanding of the textual dimension. Thus narratology is useful only if we have already identified a text as a narrative. In this way we pay due respect to the fact that the Bible came to us as text.

⚙ *Get acquainted with the **intertextual dynamics** of the biblical texts:*

We have indicated above that biblical texts were produced in a long process of interpretation and re-interpretation. In this process new texts were based on older texts and traditions and existing texts were adapted and supplemented, thereby producing testimonies of faith and expressions of people's experiences with God in their own times. The biblical texts are therefore not monolithic; they reflect dynamic theological-religious discourses within the ancient faith communities over many centuries. In these discourses a rich diversity of both themes and voices became interwoven with one another. If we believe that we encounter God's Word in these texts, we have to accept that God's voice is revealed precisely in and through these intertextual dynamics.

Because biblical texts are not one-dimensional or "flat" entities, we need the results of those methods that explore the historical dimension of the Bible - the diachronic dimension of the texts. Methods such as tradition and redaction criticism, canonical criticism and social-anthropological criticism (discussed mainly in chapter 4) assist us in this regard. But we also need methods that help us to explore the persuasive, appealing character of the biblical texts, the ways in which texts respond to, modify or oppose other texts. In this respect rhetorical criticism can be of great help. Biblical texts as expressions of faith were produced and passed on to later generations in a context of contestation; they set up choices and seek to win over an audience for a particular option. In examining the appeal function of biblical texts, we pay due respect to those faith communities who address us through the texts, calling on us to join them in their decisions and choices.

⚙ *Extrapolate the intertextual dynamics of the biblical texts **via the traditions of interpretation** to the **contemporary contexts** of interpretation:*

The multi-faceted intertextual discourse found within the Bible can become the model for our interpretations of the texts for our own times. When we interpret the Bible not merely in our time but for our time, there is a temptation to apply the ancient texts directly to our situation. But this is neither possible nor wise. We are not the first to interpret these texts and, whether we know it or not, we are influenced by the long tradition of interpretation that precedes us. We should, consciously and explicitly, pay due respect to those fathers and mothers who read the Bible before us and appropriated it as God's Word to them.

By following this route, we also become aware of the complex pattern of continuity and change, re-affirmation and reformation, which is woven into the history of interpretation of which we are the heirs. We may, for example, note how the ancient translators of the Hebrew Bible and the Qumran community appropriated the biblical traditions for their own times and the Christian authors of the New Testament both appropriated and expanded these traditions to express their faith in Jesus Christ. We may also note what methods the early church and the Reformers (for instance) used to find meaning in the Bible for their respective times. Such an overview of the history of interpretation of biblical texts makes us aware of the part we have in the long process of extrapolating the inner and intertextual dynamics of the biblical texts themselves.

We should not, however, forget that our world differs greatly from the world in which the Bible originated and from the different worlds of our fathers and mothers who interpreted the Bible before us. We should, therefore, make full use of those methods that focus on the dynamics of textual reception (discussed mainly in chapters 6 and 7). We need to know what happens when readers read texts, how different perspectives or ideological stances influence interpretation. These insights help us to appropriate the biblical texts critically in a dual sense:

we learn to accept and negotiate the critical distance between our contexts and the original contexts of the biblical texts and we learn to subject to critical scrutiny our own impulses to appropriate (or reject) a certain interpretation.

A multidimensional approach that includes these phases helps us to escape the danger of exclusivism. It also helps us to respect to the texts themselves, the faith communities that produced the texts and interpreted them before us and the faith communities in our own times that seek to orientate their lives and serve God according to these texts.

Certainly, we do not claim that this approach guarantees "correct" interpretation, nor that it makes either guidance or hard thought superfluous. But we are convinced that it does some justice to the complex conversation that is always tacitly present when we interpret by reminding us of the plurality of voices within this conversation. Christian interpreters of the Bible may wish to go further to say we see in this conversation the working of God's Spirit through the ages – during the different phases of the production of the Bible, through all the earlier stages of interpretation and re-appropriation of the Bible, until today when we read these scriptures as the Word of the living God.

8.3 Bridging the gap between academic and non-academic readings

We have argued that the interpretation process is a complex conversation in which academic and non-academic voices, voices of faith and voices of doubt, are always tacitly present. We have also suggested that this "reading in conversation with others" that is now often implicit and unconscious should become a deliberate and explicit strategy. We recognize, however, that bridging the gaps between (for instance) academic and non-academic readers, academic readers of different schools and readers from different church traditions is no easy matter. Powerful interests will always seek to make biblical interpretation the domain of a selected band of scholarly experts or of a particular church hierarchy. What we offer here can therefore be no more than preliminary suggestions, focused mainly on the gaps between academic and non-academic readers.

In asking scholarly readers and (non-academic) Christian readers of the Bible to read in closer co-operation with one another, we do not expect either group to sacrifice its principles completely. It is, however, fair to ask both groups to consider their practices critically and to make a rough distinction between those principles that are fundamental to their existence and the tendencies that arise from unexamined pressures within their environments. Academic readers may, for instance, consider whether their commitment to rationality and open-ended enquiry must produce an endless stream of ephemeral novelties. Similarly, church communities may consider that precisely the principles that lie at the heart of the Christian faith include an awareness of human limitations and fallibility and that the story central to the Christian Bible is a potent warning against dismissing strange-sounding voices without a hearing.

If academic interpreters of the Bible have a right to be heard within Christian communities, they also have a duty to make themselves heard. If, as we have argued, interpretative theories arise from a practice in which we all engage every day, it must be possible to trace even the most exotic blossoms of theory back to their earthly roots. The task indeed is arduous, but surely not beyond the trained minds of scholars. If scholars were to think through their theories, not towards ever more sophisticated ones, but back to their roots in human practices, they might discover how often they are guilty of uncritical traditionalism in that they have absorbed from the academic environment ways of thinking and writing that make little sense.

Church communities have a right to state their needs, but they would do well to check how serious they are about these needs. The belief that guidance for Christian living can always take the form of simplistic recipes is based on a theoretical construct that is fully as unrealistic as the most absurd academic theory. If ordinary Christians really want to understand the Bible, they should be prepared to take the necessary time and make the necessary effort. If, however, they want quick and easy solutions so that they may devote more time to their other jobs and hobbies, they are setting a demand that is both unreasonable and uncharitable. Indeed, when Christians demand magic keys to biblical interpretation, they merely strengthen the false impression that scholars of the Bible are technologists engaged in producing labour-saving devices.

We do not suggest any form of "reading with others" is easy to accomplish or will yield spectacular results. The obstacles are formidable. Nevertheless, a determined effort should at least help ordinary Christians to see that when they read the Bible they are, wittingly or unwittingly, students and scholars. And it will help academic interpreters to see that, in spite of their training and knowledge, they are in many respects ordinary people trying to make sense of their world. Surely this is what enabled Gerhard von Rad, probably the greatest Old Testament scholar of his day, to communicate his insights to a broad public and Cornelis Miskotte, an "ordinary" minister, to pack his popular meditations with acute scholarly observations.

What we have said about scholarly and "ordinary" readers may also be applied to other adversarial groupings: different academic schools, different church traditions and different cultural groups. The attitude implied in a multidimensional approach does not lead to an indiscriminate blurring of all boundaries; it does involve a rejection of notions of identity based purely on exclusion. In the conversation about interpretation one has to make choices and these may amount to contradicting other partners in the conversation. What we regard as dangerous exclusivism actually circumvents the possibility of contradiction, because those "outside the fold" are never allowed a say. But once others are allowed a say, they may also be gainsaid.

Thus the attitude of non-exclusion has as its positive counterpart a willingness to interact with others, with the presupposition that true interaction, as opposed to purely formal "exchanges of views", has a critical edge. This critical edge comes to the fore in what some call empirical hermeneutics, that is, interpretive practices that issue in decisions about how to *act* on the basis of an understanding of a biblical text. In empirical hermeneutics the emphasis is neither on scholarly inventiveness nor on the maintenance or subversion of church tradition, but on the practical consequences of an interpretation. At this level both exclusivism and free-wheeling pluralism are ruled out.

How wide should we spread our net? Much as we advocate an *attitude* of non-exclusion and a *willingness* to interact, we caution against the idea that our practices can *ever* be all-inclusive or comprehensive. Our interpretive practices may include intercultural or ecumenical readings of the Bible, but "the whole picture" will continue to evade us. No human being or human group can enter into conversation with all other interpreters, past and present. For this reason we advocate "reading with others" not as the basis for a more complete theory, but as a reminder of the permanent inadequacy of our theories.

8.4 Where this book meets its boundaries

In this final chapter we have already moved beyond the promise of the book's title. Having dealt with "approaches to biblical interpretation" in the previous chapters, we have here touched on aspects of hermeneutical theory that pose different questions: What is the status of these different approaches? How do our interpretive practices affect our daily decisions? What attitude should

we adopt towards "interpreting the Bible"? In particular, we have, fairly hesitantly, touched on the issue of biblical interpretation within Christian churches. What do or should Christians expect when they read the Bible and what effect do these expectations have on specifically Christian practices?

In the pure world of theory these questions do not belong in biblical studies but in philosophical and theological hermeneutics. In the messy world of practice such distinctions are hard, even impossible, to maintain. Several of the "approaches" we have described (structuralism and deconstruction, for instance) are wedded to positions at the level of philosophical hermeneutics. Others, although they appear to be neutral instruments, have implications that cannot be ignored in philosophical and theological hermeneutics. Yet we have also advocated a conversation in which different expert voices are given a turn to speak, each according to its own competence. Therefore our suggestions in this chapter are like the first steps of an incomplete staircase: they point in a direction without quite reaching a destination. They stand on the blurred boundary where one project has to end and another has to start.

Yet our incomplete staircase points in a certain direction. In the absence of other reliable resources, we regard three qualities as indispensable to any interpreter who wishes to do justice to biblical or other texts. Because they spur us on to broaden our range of understanding and foster a critical openness, they are prior to other theoretical and practical considerations and to innate talents. They are:

- A fundamental trust in the ability of the word to communicate effectively in spite of the many and obvious derailments of our actual communicative practices;

- A sense of humour in the face of the incongruities and tragedies of our communicative situation;

- Above, all, a respect for and empathy with those who speak to us through texts and whom we address through our interpretations.

These qualities in themselves will not necessarily produce the cleverest, the best informed or the most creative interpretations. They will, however, provide a guard against interpretations smacking of either the assertive arrogance born of hubris, cocksure theorizing and excessive reliance on a supposedly infallible method and the dismissive arrogance born of resignation, fatalism and tawdry cynicism. They point, instead, towards a questioning that is not less humble for being persistent and not less persistent for being humble.

Most readers will, we hope, notice that in formulating the desirable qualities we have translated into a somewhat secular idiom Paul's saying that only faith, hope and love remain – and that of these three love is the greatest. Indeed, the Christian formulation is some ways superior to the secular one. It involves less, not more, mystification. For instance, it does not clothe "language" in borrowed garments of divinity, but allows us to see our words, with their power, as the distant descendents of the divine Word. What is more, faith, hope and love were never counted among the virtues, those "strengths of character" that one can acquire through habituation. They were always justly termed "theological graces" – qualities to which we have no natural right or access and that come to us as gifts outright.

EXERCISES

Exercise 1 (Classical strategies of interpretation – see Chapter 2)

Read the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-31 and try to answer the following:

⊛ Do you think there is a "deeper" or "more spiritual" meaning to each of the following elements in the story? What might the following elements in the story represent in terms of a "spiritual" allegory?

  ⊛ the father;
  ⊛ the youngest son;
  ⊛ the oldest son;
  ⊛ the property;
  ⊛ the far land;
  ⊛ the bean pods the pigs ate;
  ⊛ the robe;
  ⊛ the ring;
  ⊛ the shoes;
  ⊛ the calf;
  ⊛ the music and dancing;
  ⊛ the servant.

⊛ Do you think that any of the characters in the story is a "type" of God/Jesus Christ?

⊛ What point do you think did Jesus want to make by telling this story?

Exercise 2 (A modern era emerges – see Chapter 3)

Many modern-day debates on the Bible can be analyzed according to the criteria of the approaches discussed in this chapter. Although people debate the interpretation of the Bible in the 21st century, the structure of many participants' arguments in these debates can be traced back to the developments discussed here.

Apart from Jonah, the following biblical texts spark intense debates:

⊛ the creation accounts;

⊛ the Noah story;

⊛ the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Try now to construct interpretations for each of these biblical themes, according to the three approaches discussed in this chapter.

Exercise 3 (Historical-critical approaches – see Chapter 4.2)

Suppose that you are an archaeologists digging up *Tell Ikapa* on the southern tip of the African continent in the year 4980. One day you make an exciting discovery of a paper manuscript that was miraculously preserved through the years. The manuscript consists of a few loose pages, as well as a carton cover on which you can only figure out the word "Hansard" as well as the date "… June 2004". Two of the other pages have consecutive page numbers. Unfortunately some parts of

those pages are damaged. You can make out the following text on these pages (with the damaged parts indicated in square brackets):

"[…….] a great scandal. With all the corruption going on in this country, we cannot afford this. International investors will definitely not take the risk of pumping money into a country where the government is known […………………..] themselves.

But let me come to the latest scandal, Madam Speaker. How on earth can […………………] deny that they received any gifts for pushing through this weapon contract? Listen to what The […………] Town Times reports today: 'New evidence came to the light in the weapon scandal yesterday. Mr. Xolani Mtolo, senior executive official of the prestigious motor […………………] of South Africa, has presented the following document to The Cape Town Times: Dear Mr. Mtolo, We hereby order 7 […………………..] to be delivered to each of the following government officials: Mr. Peter Smith, Dr. Zandisile Mtata, Mrs. Evelyn Richards, Mr. Cyril Mangope, Mr. Adriaan van Reenen, Mrs. Thoko Mokaba, Mr. Eric Ramafatula. Our company can be billed for the expenses. Yours sincerely. Dr. James Edwards (Senior Executive Official, Armoury International).' Mr. Mtolo said that he wants to clear his company's name by presenting this document to the public. According to him his company treated this order as a normal transaction in which the recipients of the motor cars were clearly stated, as well as the billing address.' Madam Speaker, not only do the names correspond to those implicated in the scandal, but it also provides evidence for the involvement of Armoury International in this whole deal. This is certainly clear evidence that this story was not made up by some of the opposition members who want to score political points. It shows [……………..]"

In another part of the *tell* you also discovered one page of a Xhosa manuscript. This page was also damaged. After you have found somebody to translate the readable text on this page into English, you discovered that it corresponds to a part of the other manuscript that you have found.

Now try to answer the following questions:

⚛ How can the Xhosa manuscript help you to reconstruct some of the damaged parts in the English manuscript?

⚛ Do you think that the text existed as a unity from the start, or can you identify smaller units? If yes, is it possible to make an informed guess as to which part originated first, and second, and so forth?

⚛ You have consulted people who have made extensive studies of the English usage of that period in history. Do you think that they would be able to identify certain typical features of language that can assist you in determining the different literary forms involved in this text?

⚛ What were the typical life situations in which these literary forms presumably functioned?

⚛ How, do you think, did these different parts grow into a textual unity?

⚛ Do you think that you would be able to understand this text without knowing anything about its socio-economic or political context?

⚛ See whether you can determine with which aspects of historical criticism (discussed in section 4.2) you were dealing when you answered each of these six questions.

Exercise 4 (Historical-critical approaches – see Chapter 4.2.3)

⚛ Compare the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 respectively. Are any parts of the story told twice? Make a list of these repetitions. What differences in representation do you notice?

- How many animals of each kind was Noah ordered to take into the ark? Compare Genesis 6:19-20 with Genesis 7:2-3.
- The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are often called the synoptic gospels. This name derives from the practice of putting these gospels alongside each other in order to determine their similarities and differences. Biblical scholars have indicated (and it is even quite obvious for lay readers too) that many sections in these gospels are exactly the same. Try to figure out the history of development of these gospels by taking into account the following observations:
  - Matthew, Mark and Luke share many passages.
  - Matthew shares certain passages with Mark, but not with Luke.
  - Luke shares certain passages with Mark, but not with Matthew.
  - Matthew has certain passages that occur neither in Mark, nor in Luke.
  - Luke has certain passages that occur neither in Mark, nor in Matthew.

Exercise 5 (Historical-critical approaches – see Chapter 4.2.4)

Choose at random any ten psalms from the biblical book of Psalms (preferably some of the shorter psalms!). Read and examine them to see whether you can identify the *Gattung* of each psalm. Use some of the categories that were listed in section 4.2.4 above.

Exercise 6 (Canonical criticism – see Chapter 4.3)

- Try to find out how many books are included in the canon of each of the following religious communities:
  - Judaism
  - Coptic Christianity
  - Roman Catholic Christianity
  - Eastern Orthodox Christianity
  - Protestant Christianity.
- Why would you think these differences occur?
- What implications do these differences have for a canonical interpretation of the Bible?

Exercise 7 (Cultural-anthropological approaches – see Chapter 4.4)

The following diagram (taken over from *Angling for interpretation*) contains two sets of values presented in random order. The one set of values is typical of a modern, industrialized, urban world while the other set of values is typical of the first century (and of many traditional societies). Compare these two sets of values. Indicate in each case which of the two views is typical of the first century and which of the views is typical of the community in which you grew up. (This exercise should preferably be done in a multicultural group.)

1. When my partner and I reach retirement, it is our wish that ...	All our children and their husbands and wives and all our grandchildren must live with us in our home, so that they can look after us in our old age. We can think of nothing worse than to be alone in our old age.	All our children must be established in their own careers and they must each have their own homes. We can think of nothing worse than that our children should remain totally dependent on us and that they are unable to look after themselves.
2. When we reflect on what we regard as important in society, we would put the emphasis on ...	A person's family background, pedigree and origins are crucial. These determine our status in society. The community must care for one another as a group and ensure that the group interests are given priority over and above the interest of any particular individual.	Each person's own achievements, progress in life and personal qualities are important, regardless of his family pedigree. It is the responsibility of each individual to care for and pursue her own interests, and society should be organized in such a way that she can actualize her full potential.
3. We regard the following virtues as important ...	Stability of character, capacity to persevere, due respect of status, concern for the well-being of family, friends and neighbours; skill in warfare and courage in battle; satisfaction and fulfillment where everyone's personal position is respected and their rightful standing in the group is maintained.	Self-sufficiency, personal happiness, business and entrepreneurial competence, success and material affluence, fulfillment of oneself and one's ideals.
4. Society must be structured on the basis of ...	Our drive to manage people and circumstances in such a way as to ensure the end result of maximal personal happiness for us all.	Our drive to maintain our family and our community and to ensure that we do nothing that would disgrace us in the eyes of our family and community.
5. Ethical decision making should be based on the following:	It is ethically unacceptable and morally wrong to question the right of our leaders to exercise control over our whole lives, to think for us and to make our decisions for us and to ensure that we live exactly as they want us to.	It is ethically unacceptable and morally wrong to question the right of any person to think for herself, and to make her own decisions on how to live.

6. *Our view on politics are that …*	Political parties should be organized by people who share similar convictions and uphold the same ideals; everyone is free to join or leave such a political party by his own self- determined choice.	Politics is only intended for the most important people and the most prominent families; it is they that must decide what they want and the rest should fall in line. Ordinary people view politics essentially as a conflict between different groupings, each of which is concerned only with its own particular interests.
7. *I feel that wealth and power …*	Derives directly from my family's status and where we come from. If we happen to belong to a rich and important family it is taken for granted that this position should be maintained for centuries. Anyone else who wants to try to become rich is attempting to undermine my family's prestige and position, and must therefore be kept in their place. All people are not equal. Certain categories of people are more important than others.	Are a result of my own hard work, efficiency, ingenuity and resourcefulness. I have to make progress by myself in the tough competitiveness of the open market. If anyone is unfairly precluded from competing on an equal footing through discrimination, we regard it as immoral and unjust. Everyone must have equal opportunity.
8. *When I have financial problems, trauma, serious illness or disappointments …*	I do not want my personal affairs to be public knowledge. I share my problems and deepest pain with a few close friends. Others must respect my privacy.	I feel that everyone in the village should know about it. They should visit me in my home regularly and discuss the matter with me and with one another.
9. *Where friendship and social life are concerned …*	We have close personal relationships with the people in our local community. We tend to develop strong bonds of friendship with our next-door neighbours.	We choose our friends carefully. We tend to have social contact with personal friends living a few kilometers from us and not necessarily with our next-door neighbours.

10. Where religion is concerned, we believe that ...	Religion, family life and local politics go hand in hand. The head of the family (the father or the eldest brother) determines the religious allegiance of the whole family. One would not even consider joining another religious group. Religion is a public matter. It is regulated by important figures in the community in order to ensure the good order of the community.	Religion is a matter of personal commitment. Each person is free to choose the group he or she wishes to belong to. Religion is important to ensure the moral standing of each individual. Religion is a private matter. It cannot be regulated or prescribed by politicians or the state.

Exercise 8 (Approaches focusing on the production of texts – see Chapter 4)

In section 4.4.1(a) above a table was provided in which historical criticism was compared to social-scientific criticism. Add two columns to that table, and try to summarize "Canonical criticism" and "Socio-rhetorical criticism" accordingly.

Exercise 9 (Feminist approaches – see Chapter 7.4)

What images jump to your mind when you hear the word *feminist*? Study the following list of descriptions and mark those that you associate with the idea of feminism:

- Women taking part in a protest march to demand the legalization of abortion.
- Women working in the corporate sector, wearing masculine suits and clumsy shoes.
- Women who dislike men.
- Women who study specific gender characteristics of both males and females.
- Women who distrust men, and often have a history of abuse by men.
- Women who spend most of their time working for groups, such as *People against women and child abuse*.
- Women who understand and evaluate their own experience of oppression, and work to change the world in which women share such experiences.
- Superwomen who believe that they are entitled to top-notch careers, successful children, a perfect marriage and family life, and who strive towards these (un)realistic goals.

Ask yourself whether your associations between the above perceptions and the word *feminism* portray specific people whom you either like or dislike. This exercise is important in so far as it reminds us that our preconceived ideas play a major role in our interpretation of new ideas. Perhaps you have reacted emotionally to a subject or point of view of which the basic principles have not yet been discussed. Nevertheless, do not allow your emotions to prohibit you from studying the content of this approach with an open mind. At the end of this section, we hope to have a more informed moral opinion on the subject.

Exercise 10 (Feminist approaches – see Chapter 7.4)

Genesis 2:4–25 contains the creation epic which is supposed to justify the traditional argument that women were created subordinate to men. Woman was created last, whereas man was created first; furthermore, she was called his "helper." Do these two facts, if indeed they are facts, support the argument that women were created to be less than men?

Study this story carefully before examining the following questions:

In the first creation epic (Genesis 1) the order of God's creation of the animals and people differs from the account in Genesis 2. Does the fact that people were created last (Genesis 1) mean that they have the least value of all the creatures that God created?

Then, on the grounds that it seems as though woman was created second, can we determine the value or importance of women in relation to men? Or does the fact that the creation of humans is mentioned right at the beginning and again right at the end of creation in Genesis 2, indeed, imply the same as it is traditionally seen to imply in Genesis 1, namely that the creation of humans is the focus of God's creation, as well as its completion?

When someone helps you, does that necessarily imply that the person in question is subordinate to you?

The Psalms often refer to God as "our helper." Does this mean that God is subordinate to us? Then why should the same word imply subordination when used in respect of women?

The objective of this exercise is to indicate that a preconceived notion about the subordination of women leads to the traditional reading of Genesis 2, which confirms this subordination. The text itself does not imply that women are inferior to men. It is only a fixed idea that lives in the mind of its readers that causes this text to be read as such. After the creation of woman, man rejoices in the fact that she is similar to him, not that she is different from him. This then affirms the opposite of subordination, namely co-operative equality.

Exercise 11 (Feminist approaches – see Chapter 7.4)

In the same way, let us re-examine the creation story by reading the first creation epic and focusing on Genesis 1:27. On studying the word *ha-adam* a serious question arises: Does this word indicate man or humankind?

If humankind is accepted as the meaning, it is clear that the text intends to say that men and women were created in the image of God. Then this would be a valuable contra-text to any text applied for the subordination of women. Furthermore, a text that prohibits women from speaking the word of God in a congregation, such as 1 Timothy 2:11, can be read with Judges 4 and 5, in which Deborah acts as God's prophet. How would you handle this apparent contradiction? Which text would you choose to be the most authoritative, and why?

Also, read Joel 2:28-29 and Acts 2:17-18. Do you think it is important that, when the Spirit of God is poured out, that both "sons" and "daughters" will prophesy? What is the relation between the sons and the daughters in these passages?

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Because we offer this book as a textbook for undergraduate studies, we wished to avoid appending a massive bibliography. Our intention was to restrict ourselves to a few entries for each chapter, with a somewhat more extensive bibliography on the book of Jonah. But when the authors of individual sections cited certain works, we obviously had to include these as well. As a result, the bibliography is neither as brief nor as focused as we had expected. When many entries appear under a particular heading, it reflects the fact that the authors of these sections referred to many works in their contributions.

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Fishing for Jonah (anew) introduces students of theology to a wide range of approaches or "methods" in biblical interpretation, drawing on the book of Jonah for illustrations. This thoroughly revised version of *Fishing for Jonah* (Conradie, Jonker, Lawrie & Arendse 1992) represents both a contraction and an expansion compared to its predecessor. The elementary introduction to the theory of interpretation in Sections A and B of the previous book is now dealt with in *Angling for interpretation* (Conradie & Jonker 2001), and theological hermeneutics, briefly touched on in Section D of the previous book, will become the topic of *Hooked on hermeneutics* (Conradie & Smit, in preparation). On the other hand, *Fishing for Jonah (anew)* contains a number of new chapters and revised and expanded versions of the chapters that appeared in the previous book. The chapters are ordered so as to give readers a rough picture of the history of biblical interpretation and of the debates and problems that have shaped it. In the view of the editors, this history is not simply a story of dawning enlightenment or of decline from a pure origin. It is, instead, the story of an ongoing struggle to make sense of the Bible and of insights gained, used, abused and sometimes regained. To such a story there can be no absolute conclusion. We can neither accept one of the approaches we have inherited as a final answer, nor can we start with a clean slate. We have to read the Bible with our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers. This book introduces some of the voices to which we have to give a hearing when we seek to "read in community".

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