

JONAH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF JONAH: EMBODIED THEOLOGY ILLUSTRATED

Johan H Coetzee
University of Johannesburg

Abstract

The body occupies a central position in the argumentation of the book of Jonah. Not only is the prophet Jonah depicted as being involved in different life-situations, but his bodily and personal conduct also illustrate an unwillingness to change his theological thinking. Religious, political, social and cultural aspects of larger bodies are enacted through Jonah's bodily performance. Jonah could not have acted differently.

Keywords: Jonah, Containment, Whole Body

Introduction

The way in which the author of the book of Jonah depicts Jonah as a person responding to God's commission, reveals interesting issues, especially with regard to Israel's cultural and theological thinking, when approached from a bodily angle. In this paper I want to propose that the characterization of Jonah by the narrator guides us to interpret the theological thinking of Israel as a theology of containment related to the notion of the cultural ideal body, the whole body. I am in agreement with Berquist (2002, 19) who is of the opinion that Israel's notion of the ideal body was the "whole body." However, I would like to add an additional perspective, namely that Israel constructed their theological thinking on the notion of the whole body in relationship with the notion of the body as a container. One could refer to Israel's theology as a theology of containment, based on whole-body symbolization.

Israel's Ideal Body as the Whole Body

The Hebrews viewed the human person primarily in relation to totalities within the cosmic order. The family and tribe as the *ethnic totality* presented the immediate relationship of the individual to the community in which he or she lived. The relationship with the antecedents by means of their generations represented the *historical totality*. Finally, the human person was seen in relation to God, the Creator. This related the human person to the *cosmic totality*. Within this totality, the human person belonged to God (Warne 1995, 58–59). Although the various body parts represented the body as the human phenomenon, the human person was nevertheless seen as a totality, as a psycho-physical unity. By means of synecdoche, particular aspects were used to represent that which was characteristic of the whole. Blood was associated with life, health with bones, etc. In Jonah 4, Jonah's head represents his whole body.

For Israel the "whole" body was the ultimate symbol of the society. Different societies develop their own notions about each part of the body, and eventually the ideal body is shaped from the different body parts combined. During the course of their history Israel

developed the concept of a pure and holy people based on the principles of bodily purity and bodily wholeness. This involved strong social delineations (Berquist 2002, 16) on religious and political levels. Through holiness Israel stays genetically separate and whole.

In this regard Vorster (1997, 445–446) speaks of the “context” as “the context of situation,” referring to the discursive practices in a society that are encountered as factual and objective. These are contexts that have been created linguistically and have gradually become “facts and truths” that have been agreed upon within the society. These ideas that have developed into fixed “truths and facts,” form the basic cause for Israel’s stagnation in her theological thinking. The personification of the prophet Jonah in the book of Jonah is a clear illustration of this. The kind of prophetic “person” linguistically constructed within the dominant culture as reflected in this book, can be defined as androcentric (only men are mentioned), ethnocentric, non-universalistic, Yahweh-centric, and non-futuristic or fixed (Vorster 1997, 458).

Whole bodies have firm boundaries. In order to prevent unwholeness and impurity the boundaries of the body should be kept unbroken and clean. But the boundaries of bodies are also a cultural issue (Berquist 2002, 40). It is important to protect social boundaries. Israel’s care for integrity, unity, and purity of their physical bodies reflects their protective attitude towards the threatened boundaries of their body politic. The body and society were alike in that, for either, crushing a part would destroy the whole (Berquist 2002, 44). On a macro level this also applied to the dividing lines between nations. When Jonah was asked by the sailors of what descent he was, he proudly proclaimed “I am a Hebrew” (Jonah 1:9). This is a demarcation of both personal, social and cultural boundaries.

The bodily practices of wholeness as protected by boundaries are the basis for rhetoric of ethnicity within Ancient Israel (Berquist 2002, 141). This also applies to their theological rhetoric. The appointed Judaic leaders of the Persian era (Ezra/Nehemiah) were strongly concerned with ethnicity as an important category for the inhabitants of Jerusalem and their social and religious solidarity. It is most probably in this situation when the policies of Nehemiah and Ezra were fostering a narrow nationalism, that the unknown prophetic writer of the book of Jonah proclaimed that Israel’s call was not a guarantee of privilege and prestige. They were not supposed to be a contained entity but they had a responsibility, namely to bear witness to the God whose salvation reaches to the ends of the earth (Anderson 1982, 566). The fixed boundaries based on the notion of bodily wholeness should be crossed.

Containment as a Body Schema

According to Johnson (1987, 21) “[o]ur encounter with containment and boundedness is one of the most pervasive features of our bodily experience. We are intimately aware of our bodies as three-dimensional containers into which we put certain things (food, water, air) and out of which other things emerge (food and water wastes, air, blood, etc.)” From our birth we experience constant physical containment in our surroundings (those things that envelop us). We move in and out of buildings, our clothes, cities, and numerous kinds of bounded spaces. We put objects in containers (like cups, boxes, bags). Three-dimensional enclosure seems to be the most noticeable experiential sense. These recurring spatial and temporal organizations result in a typical bodily image schema for physical containment. In this regard the experiential basis for *in-out* orientation is that of spatial boundedness. Similarly the verticality schema is generated in our bodies, emerging from our tendency to continually employ an up-down orientation. An image schema is, therefore, a recurring,

dynamic pattern of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that gives coherence and structure to our experience (Johnson 1987, xiv).

Consequences of these recurring experiential image schematic structures for *in-out* orientation include the feeling of protection from or resistance to external forces (Jonah is protected from the chaotic waters in both the cases of the ship and the fish as containers); the feeling of a relative fixity of location or restriction (Jonah cannot move around in the ship and in the fish as he would like to); the accessibility or inaccessibility to the view of observers (in the case of the ship Jonah can be seen by the sailors only when they enter the enclosed space he finds himself in). The omniscient narrator, however, perceives him from outside the ship and the fish, knowing what he is doing. Jonah's experience was that he had been banished from God's sight while in the fish (Jonah 2:5), and that his prayer rose to God in his holy temple (Jonah 2:8).

Related to this is the fact that body-centeredness is the most basic experience a person has (Turner 1984, 7–8). This emanates from the fact that since the moment we are born, and even before, our sense organs detect the environment around us as outside the body affecting or impressing onto the body in some way or another (Coetzee 2003, 38). In this sense the body itself can metaphorically be described as a container, while the normal surroundings we live in form the containers our bodies occupy. Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 274) speak of "the locational Self" residing in the body. When we leave the contained space in which we feel safe, we expose the Self to losing control. When Jonah leaves the bounded space of his home and his country to board the ship, his life starts spiralling out of control. This can clearly be seen in his descent into the body of the ship, into a deep sleep, into the deep waters, his sharp anger, his desire for his own death. A certain insecurity seems to have overwhelmed him, erupting in unusual forms of behaviour of fear and anger (Van Heerden 2003, 19). When he moves out of his country, out of the ship, and out of the fish, he breaks through the boundaries of contained space of safety.

These few theoretical insights may help us understand why the creator of the Jonah character succeeds in characterizing this character in such a skilful way that his embodied language guides us in observing that Jonah is caught up in a web of limitations from which he is unable to escape. The bodily image schema of containment is illustrated by Jonah's experiences of containment, and this schema has become a fixed part of his cultural and theological thinking and conduct. In combination with his notion of the whole body, Jonah's bodily containment prevents him from performing differently to the way he does. He is unable to make the required theological and cultural break-through himself.

To further my argument, I shall now briefly indicate how the author of the book of Jonah even implemented stylistic devices to emphasize the notion of containment.

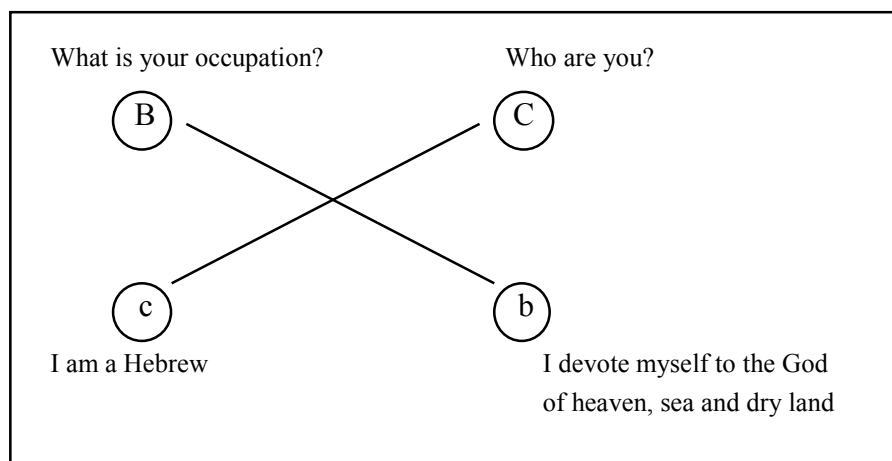
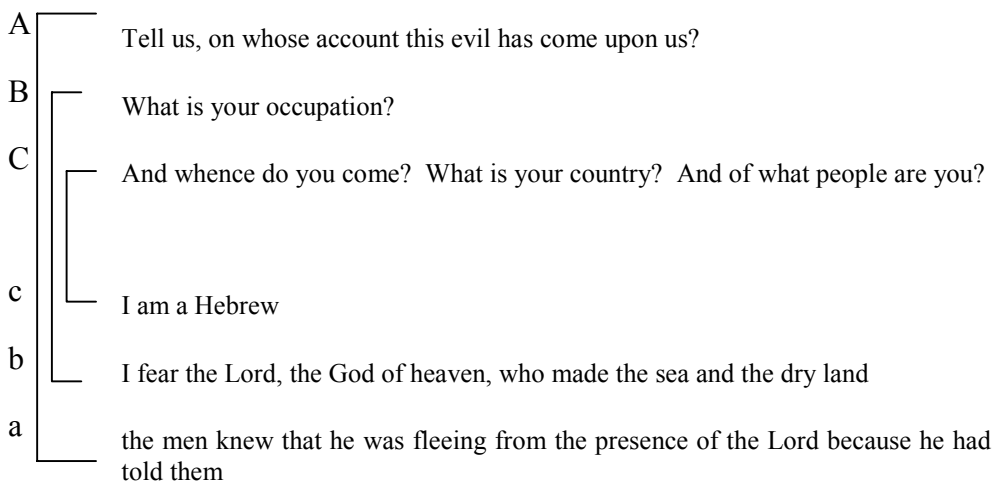
Stylistic Devices of Containment in the Book of Jonah

As far as I am aware no study of the origin of chiasmic or concentric structures in the Semitic languages has linked this stylistic feature to symbolization of the body. I want to pose that the notion of containment played a primary role in this regard. A few examples from the book of Jonah will prove my point that the author of the book implemented stylistic devices of containment, like the chiasm, to illustrate and emphasize Israel's closed mental attitude.

In Jonah chapter 1 we find a clear enclosure expressing contrast when, in vv. 1–3, on the one hand, God commissions Jonah, and the latter decides to flee away from God. In vv. 14–16, on the other hand, the chapter closes with the frightened sailors turning to God for

rescue. The character and conduct of Jonah are contrasted with that of the sailors to illustrate and emphasize Jonah's disobedience. In between these verses no direct contact between God and the characters is mentioned. These verses enclose the storm event.

In vv. 8–9, which form the centre of the pericope, a clear chiasmic structure is again implemented to illustrate Jonah's bounded mental attitude. The dialogue between the sailors and Jonah can be illustrated as follows:



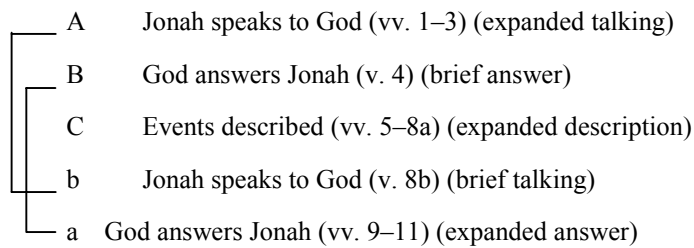
Jonah's nationality and his relationship with God, his ethnicity and his theology, form the pivot point of this pericope in an embracing structure. The sequence of the questions put to Jonah by the sailors is reversed in his answers and not paralleled. One could argue that his ethnicity is given preference to his theology by means of the concentric style of dialogue. But my main argument is that the author presents the relationship between

ethnicity and theology to the reader in a concentric, enclosed style, which can be called *containment*.

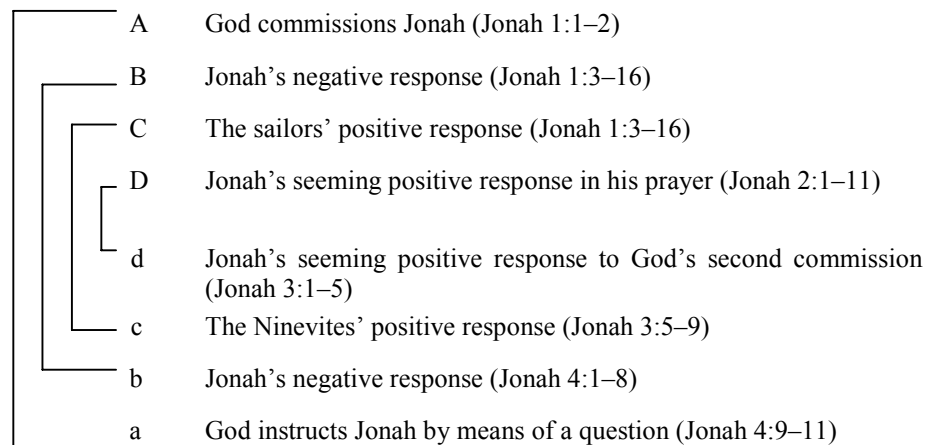
The same argument is valid when we look at Jonah chapter 2 and the fact that the prayer of Jonah (vv. 3–10) is contained in the prose about the fish (vv. 1–2, 11). Not only does the fish itself act as a container in which Jonah is protected from the chaotic forces of the sea, but Jonah’s prayer, his deepest religious feelings, are bound stylistically in the narrative. Twice the temple is mentioned in the prayer (Jonah 2:5, 8), the temple being the locality of Yahweh, the dwelling, the container where He resides among his people.

The conduct of people (Jonah and the Ninevites) in chapter 3 is bound by the actions of Yahweh. Initially Yahweh sends Jonah out for the second time (Jonah 3:1–2) and in v. 10 He withdraws his wrath against the Ninevites. In between no direct actions of God are described. This *inclusio* again illustrates the idea of containment. This time God’s actions form the membrane within which people act and respond.

The dialogue and prose in chapter 4 is structured in a parallel but also concentric style:



If we look at the book as a whole, God’s verbal actions embrace the entire book. The book starts off with God’s commission of Jonah, and concludes with God’s “sermon” to Jonah. In between the various responses of people are portrayed. First the negative response of Jonah and the contrasting positive response of the sailors are mentioned in chapter 1. Then follows Jonah’s seemingly positive response in his prayer in chapter 2, after which the real positive response of the Ninevites is portrayed in chapter 3. Before the final conclusion in the form of an open-ended question in chapter 4, Jonah’s persistent negative and bounded attitude is emphasized. We can depict it as follows:



It is, therefore, clear that the author made extensive use of concentric thinking and in doing so, portrayed the normal style of writing and thinking of the day. This style of containment can, in my view, be directly linked to Israel's bodily perception of a whole body and a body of containment. And this languaging of the body reciprocally influenced their entire thinking, including their theological thinking.

In addition to the stylistic features, we also encounter metaphors of containment in the book of Jonah, which strengthen our main argument.

Metaphors of Containment in the Book of Jonah

The Land of Israel

The land in itself was seen as a complete whole with its borders forming the skin or membrane of the whole body. The exile to Babylonia was experienced as a ripping apart of the body by external forces. The book of Lamentations and Ps 137 not only reflect deep emotional pain but also physical disorders (Ps 137:5–6) of the human in relation to their longing for Jerusalem. When Jonah escapes from God's commission, he so to speak breaks through the border of the safe country body and plunges into the chaotic world of the sea, never to return to the country body again, according to the narrative. Similar to the open-ended question of God with which the book concludes, Jonah finds himself in the open-ended world. Both the limiting borders of the land and the limiting borders of Jonah's theology are being forced open to universalism by the author.

The Ship, the Fish, Sheol, the Temple, the Shelter

It is of importance to notice that all five these entities, the ship, the fish, the belly of sheol, the temple, and the shelter built by Jonah serve as enclosures, as bounded spaces. The belly of the ship is a space of safety in which Jonah could fall into a deep sleep while the storm was raging outside. But it also shields him off from God and his commission. The fish, like the ship, protects him from the chaotic waters but also serves as a rescue vehicle to put Jonah on stage again in order to rid him of his containment attitude. Although the imagery of the belly of sheol (Jonah 2:3) may recall the belly of the fish and the inside of the ship, the innermost part of sheol is the most remote sphere from which he cries out to the Lord and the Lord listens and answers him. The narrator is pushing the idea that God is capable of transcending even the tightest boundary.

The temple with its concentric structure of the outside border, the temple walls, and the innermost and holiest section where the ark of the covenant is kept, is according to Israel's theology the enclosed space where God abides amongst his people (Jonah 2:5, 8). That is why Jonah prays from the innermost of sheol towards the temple.

The restricting shelter which Jonah has built, is replaced by an open shelter by God. Up to the last moment Jonah is unable to escape from his self-made enclosures.

Jonah's space of escapes (the ship), the belly of sheol, God's space of rescue (the fish), God's dwelling place (the temple), as well as Jonah's self-made shelter are all metaphors depicting the bounded mental attitude of the Israelites resulting from their symbolization of the human body. Jonah could just as well have fled by foot and God could just as well have brought him back on the back of an ass. But the author chose these specific metaphors of containment in order to emphasize Israel's limited thinking.

The Main Argument of the Narrator

It is not my intention to discuss the argumentation in the book of Jonah in detail. That has been done by scholars like Potgieter (1991), Magonet (1983), Tribble (1994) and others. Here I am only interested in the macro-argumentation of the narrative. Let us start right at the end of the Jonah narrative. Why does the narrator conclude his story with interrogation (see Kautzsch and Cowley 1966, 473)? I think that one answer may be that questioning as a speech-act is a tool fundamental to problem-solving (Goody 1978, 20). And what is the problem, the exigency of the argumentation of the book? It is captured in the final words of God to Jonah (4:10–11):

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

These last words from Yahweh to Jonah can be interpreted as follows: “You, Jonah, attempted to build your own shelter, your own container, your own bounded space to protect you from harmful influences from outside. I replaced your enclosing shelter with another shelter, an open protection, a miraculous plant from underneath which you could see the world around you. But when I put you to the test by removing the shade, by exposing the skin of your body to external forces, you were angry and pitied the shelter in your self-centeredness and complacency. May I then not pity the lost world around you?” The prophet Jonah’s person and conduct become a metaphor representing Israel. His characterisation by the author is an embodiment of Israel’s ethnic, cultural, political and religious thinking.

The rhetorical question from Yahweh’s mouth is introduced to break through the cyclic type of argumentation into an open, universalistic mode of thinking. The inclusive style of argumentation that the author implements exemplifying Israel’s bounded bodily experience which influences their entire worldview, is stylistically being forced open by means of the final, open-ended question, forcing the narrative into an irresolute ending.

Conclusion

Since societies exist as the collective actions and beliefs of individual members, and since individual persons as social actors interact with the environments only through their bodies, the centrality of the body is obvious (Berquist 2002, 10). This is clearly illustrated in the narrative of Jonah, in which, as a parable or a parody of just a metaphor, the person and conduct of Jonah is intended to serve as a corrective argument against the bounded mental and physical attitudes of Israel based on their bodily experiences and interpretations. Symbolization of the body in Jonah serves as persuasive strategy (Vorster 1997, 446) in an ironic way. Israel’s theology is embodied theology and in the person of Jonah the story caused the audience to see who they really were, and the image was not pleasing (Van Heerden 2003, 728).

From the perspective of Jonah as a character in the story, it was impossible to act differently, seeing that the whole and inclusive Israelite body was at stake. Jonah and Israel were practising a theology of containment inseparable from and emanating from their bounded bodily experience and symbolization as a whole body. From the perspective of God as the other main character in the story, the wall must be demolished similar to the one mentioned in the song about the vineyard in Isa 5 (see 5:5). But here in Jonah not to the detriment of Israel but to the benefit of the repeated, universal commission of Yahweh. The

only way in which the egg-bound chicken can fully come to life, is by breaking through the shell. Israel's self-centred, complacent and contained embodiment of her worldview and theology is to be demolished in order to really fulfil her assignment.

It is clear that the author of the book of Jonah had a different understanding of the body and bodily activities, which could lead to the construction of a counter-culture (Vorster 1997, 445). From a counter-culture point of view the author of the book of Jonah wants to introduce and establish an "alternative person," an alternative prophet, an alternative theology. The book of Jonah can be seen as a subversive writing, undermining the value-system of the dominant culture, intending to modify its social and religious values by parodying the prophetic person. By parodying the prophetic person, the possibility of an emerging alternative culture appeared (Vorster 1997, 464).

The notions of an ethnocentric religion and an universalistic religion are incompatible. The adjustment that should be made by the people of Israel, as embodied in Jonah, is to find a compromise solution, "which calls for the greatest effort and is most difficult to justify because it requires a new structuration of reality" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 415). Instead of outright rejection, the notion of prophetic person as defined by the dominant culture, is to be modified in the mind of the audience (Vorster 1997, 467). In the reconstruction of the person the necessity of ethnocentric religion is undermined.

This process of restructuring is to take place via the unanswered question of God to Jonah in chapter 4, modelled on dissociation with the person of the prophet. But, and I have refrained from introducing this argument, seeing that it is impossible for Israel to break through her own barriers, a miracle element from God is needed. Jonah and Israel are to rely completely on God, in obedience to Him, to step out of their boundaries. The open-ended question and the open-ended miraculous acts of God open new possibilities of restructuring and obedience for Israel.

In conclusion, Trible's (1994, 225) final remarks on her exposition of the book of Jonah fit in well here: "As the closing question opens the narrative beyond its confines, the long journey through external design and internal structure stops though it does not end. The riches of the text signal other possibilities." In this paper only but one of these "other possibilities" is presented to you for evaluation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, BW 1982. *The Living World of the Old Testament*. Harlow Essex: Longman.
- Berquist, JL 2002. *Controlling Corporeality: The Body and the Household in Ancient Israel*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Coetzee, JH 2003. Body Symbolisation in Psalm 139. *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 85(1&2):36–46.
- Goody, EN, (ed.) 1978. *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1978. Towards a Theory of Questions. Pages 17–43 in *Questions and Politeness. Strategies in Social Interaction*. Edited by EN Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, M 1987. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Kautzsch, E and Cowley, AE 1966. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lakoff, G., and Johnson, M 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Magonet, J 1983. *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Technique in the Book of Jonah*. Sheffield: Almond Press.
- Perelman, C and Olbrechts-Tyteca, L 1969. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame.
- Potgieter, JH 1991. 'n Narratologiese Ondersoek van die Boek Jona. Hervormde Teologiese Studies. Supplementum 3. Pretoria: Tydskrifafdeling van die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika.
- Trible, P 1994. *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*. Guides to Biblical Scholarship: Old Testament Series. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Turner, BS 1984. *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Van Heerden, W 2003. Psychological Interpretations of the Book of Jonah. *Old Testament Essays* 16(3):718–730.
- Vorster, JN 1997. Construction of Culture through the Construction of Person: The *Acts of Thecla* as an Example. Pages 445–473 in *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture. Essays from the 1995 London Conference*. Edited by SE Porter and TH Olbricht. Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 146. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Warne, GJ 1995. *Hebrew Perspectives on the Human Person in the Hellenistic Era: Philo and Paul*. Mellen Biblical Press Series 35. Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press.