

READING JONAH MULTIDimensionALLY¹: A multidimensional reading strategy for biblical interpretation

Louis Jonker
University of Stellenbosch

Abstract

In this article I will concentrate on the following: Firstly, I will explain what I mean by 'multidimensional exegesis'. Secondly, I will formulate a multidimensional 'map' that provides the possibility of 'plotting' various exegetical-hermeneutical strategies and their interrelationships. Thirdly, I will describe the twofold reading strategy necessitated by multidimensional exegesis. In particular, I will elaborate on 'competent reading'. Fourthly, as an example, I will venture a multidimensional reading of the Book of Jonah.

1. Introduction

Voices propagating a multidimensional approach towards the interpretation of Biblical texts are increasingly being raised. Although this development has its roots in the general shift towards postmodernism, the dissatisfaction among exegetes of various persuasions with the present state of the exegetical discipline has been a major factor. Numerous exegetical strategies exist side by side - sometimes in a conflicting relationship. Exegetes often claim (albeit sublimely) that their particular strategies are the most suitable for unlocking the truth of Biblical texts.

Various scholars now realize, however, that the exclusivistic claims of certain exegetical strategies do not do justice to the multidimensionality of Biblical texts and the communication processes in which they are involved. Exegetes are not only ethically obliged to recognize the role marginalized groups (such as women, and the oppressed) play in the interpretation of Biblical texts. They also realize that Biblical texts, and the contexts in which they are read, are too diverse to be interpreted from only one viewpoint.

Many scholars² distinguish three phases in exegetical-hermeneutical developments of the past century. Initially (from the middle of the previous century), in the spirit of positivism and historicism, exegetes focused on the historical background and the original circumstances of the Bible as important conditions for the understanding thereof. The historical processes involved in the establishment of the texts were also researched.

As a result of developments within the literary sciences, in the second phase of the exposition of the Bible the focus gradually shifted to the texts themselves. In stead of the historical background, the linguistic and literary structure became central in the understanding process of texts. Against this background various strategies were developed to highlight the literary character of the Biblical texts.

A third phase is constituted by the shift in focus towards the context in which the Bible is read and understood. The creative role of the reader and his/her possible ideological bias has been brought into play by this development.

1 A shortened version of this article was read as a paper on 20 July 1995 at the XVth Congress of the I.O.S.O.T. in Cambridge, United Kingdom.

2 Cf., for example, Eagleton (1983, 74), Tate (1991, 209ff.) and Lategan (1992).

Although every new phase did not supersede the previous phase(s) - some of these hermeneutical view points exist side by side - in practice scholars in every new phase tend to lose interest in other aspects of textual interpretation.

In the most recent shift, the fourth phase, scholars tend to have a greater consciousness and sensitivity for the total exegetical-hermeneutical picture. In this phase, in which I propose we find ourselves at present, scholars tend to have a greater consciousness of the complexity of textual interpretation, but also of the complexity of Biblical texts. This phase has seen the emergence of integrated or multidimensional approaches towards the interpretation of Biblical texts.

PROPOSITION 1:

A fourth phase has emerged in the exegetical-hermeneutical debate which proposes integrated or multidimensional interpretation.

2. What is a multidimensional approach?

In the South African scholarly context it is particularly in New Testament circles that the quest towards a multidimensional approach to Biblical interpretation originated³. One of the major advocates in this regard, Lategan, indicates that an integrated approach (as he calls it) '... is not an attempt to deny plurality, nor the choice of the 'best' or most suitable method for the interpretation of biblical material' (1993, 1). I fully agree with his statement. An integrated approach, or multidimensional approach (the term I prefer)⁴ does not mean that one 'super method' is created by amalgamating the 'strong' points of every available exegetical strategy. Such a methodological integration would be too subjective and would deny the plurality of existing approaches.

But how can a multidimensional approach then be described? Lategan (1993, 1) continues: 'Rather, it (an integrated approach -LCJ) is the recognition of the complex nature of texts and the complexity of their interpretation. It is also an attempt to understand and establish the relationship between the various facets of this complexity.' Texts, therefore also Biblical texts, are too complex to be read and understood from the viewpoint of only one or two exegetical strategies. The process of interpretation is also too complex that it could impossibly be observed from only one viewpoint⁵. Exegetes cannot deny this reality -

3 Cf. Rousseau (1986) and Lategan (1993).

4 Cf. my critical comments on integrated approaches (1993, 224-226). 'Integration' normally involves merging two or more entities into one. I prefer 'multidimensional', because this term provides for the uniqueness of entities (such as exegetical-hermeneutical approaches) without denying plurality.

5 Cilliers (1993, 7ff.) discusses the characteristics of complex systems and how they can be modelled. He provides the following description of a complex system: '(i) Complex systems consist of a huge number of elements. ... (ii) A large number of elements is not sufficient. ... The elements have to interact, and this interaction must be dynamic. ... (iii) ... any element in the system influences, and is influenced by quite a few other ones. ... (iv) ... the interactions are nonlinear. ... Nonlinearity is a precondition for complexity. (v) The interactions usually have a fairly short range, i.e. they receive information primarily from their immediate neighbours. ... (vi) ... The effect of any activity can feed back onto itself, ... The technical term for this aspect of a complex system is recurrency. (vii) Complex systems are usually open systems, i.e. they interact with their environment. ... (viii) Complex systems operate under conditions far from equilibrium. ... (ix) Complex systems have a history. Not only do they evolve through time, but their past is co-responsible for their present behaviour. Any analysis of a complex system that ignores the dimension of time is incomplete ... (x) Each element in the system is ignorant of the behaviour of the system as a whole, it responds only to information that is available to it locally. ...' From this description it is clear that the interpretation of ancient religious texts, such as the Bible, qualifies as a complex system.

they therefore are obliged to approach the interpretation of Biblical texts multidimensionally⁶.

PROPOSITION 2:

The complexity of Biblical texts, and that of the interpretation processes in which they are involved, necessitates a multidimensional approach.

Lategan (1993, 1ff.) distinguishes three levels on which integration could be of significance. The first would be the phenomenological level on which it is investigated whether there are universal features as far as the nature and function of texts are concerned. On a second level, the methodological, one asks whether it is possible to systematize or integrate the various methods used to interpret texts. The third level, the level of content, deals with the question whether the diversity of stories and topics can be integrated into a single or at least a set of dominant themes. This third level, to my mind, is the task of Old/New Testament en Systematic theologians.

The multidimensional approach I propose deals with the first level (i.e. the nature and function of texts), but particularly with the second, the methodological level. On this level it is important to realize that different exegetical methods deal with different aspects and functions of Biblical texts, and even with different aspects of the communication processes in which these texts are involved. To avoid comparing apples with pears, a multidimensional approach should therefore commence with the 'mapping' of the exegetical-hermeneutical landscape. This map could then be used to determine which questions (regarding the texts and the communication processes in which they are involved) each exegetical strategy tries to answer.

My proposal has a dual aim:

- (i) To design one possible multidimensional 'map' for the 'plotting' of various exegetical-hermeneutical strategies, and
- (ii) to formulate a twofold reading strategy that acts as operative factor in the proposed multidimensional approach. The following two sections will deal with these aspects.

3. A Multidimensional 'map' for the 'plotting' of various exegetical-hermeneutical strategies

In a previously published article⁷ an extensive description of the proposed multidimensional approach was provided. As a result a few short comments on this proposal, and a summary of the exegetical-hermeneutical map, will suffice for the purpose of this article.

- (i) The principle of a pluralism of exegetical methodologies is acknowledged.
- (ii) Various scholars who have previously proposed multidimensional approaches to Biblical interpretation have all emphasized that these texts function within communication processes⁸. Biblical interpretation can thus be seen as an act of communication. The point of departure of my proposal is, therefore, an adapted

6 Cf. Davis's remark: 'The rising post-Enlightenment criticism is, I believe, prepared to explore the multidimensionality of the critic and seeks to address the multiple dimensions of texts. It is time for a multidimensional criticism' (1980, 94-95).

7 Cf. *Scriptura* 58, (1996).

8 Cf. Buss *et al* (1979), Rousseau (1986), Patte (1990) and Lategan (1993). Cf. also Roussouw's comment that the reading of texts (therefore also Biblical texts - LCJ) has the character of a communication process (1980, 9).

communication model. The three basic elements of the communication process (namely sender, medium and receiver) constitute the exegetical-hermeneutical landscape.

- (iii) An important consideration is that the objects of investigation of Biblical interpretation are ancient texts. As a result, the proposal should make provision for diachrony, as well as synchrony⁹. Various studies have highlighted the importance of distinguishing between synchrony and diachrony, but it is equally important to realize that these are not mutually exclusive categories¹⁰. In my proposal every element of the communication model is, therefore, described synchronically, as well as diachronically.
- (iv) The different elements of the communication process are in constant interaction. Exegetes should, therefore, realize that Biblical interpretation is a dynamic process which cannot be confined to one singular description.
- (v) Biblical interpretation deals with religious texts¹¹. The result is that the religious dimension of Biblical texts cannot be ignored in the formulation of a hermeneutical framework within which exegetical methodologies of the Bible should operate. Not only does each element in the communication model have a historical and a religious dimension, but the interaction between these elements should also be understood in these terms.
- (vi) Within the hermeneutical framework of a communication model, specialization in one particular exegetical methodology does not become redundant. In fact, an *ecclesia* of exegetical research is a prerequisite for this model.
- (vii) One should be aware of the status of this map. It is only one attempt to describe the exegetical-hermeneutical landscape. Other maps can, of course, be drawn. The status of each map is, therefore, always provisional.

PROPOSITION 3:

The formulated framework provides the possibility of 'plotting' various exegetical-hermeneutical strategies and their interrelationships on a multidimensional 'map'.

9 Cf. again Cilliers's description of the characteristics of a complex system. His ninth characteristic refers: 'Complex systems have a history. Not only do they evolve through time, but their past is co-responsible for their present behaviour. Any analysis of a complex system that ignores the dimension of time is incomplete, or at most a snapshot of a changing process' (1993, 9).

10 Cf. Boorer (1989), Rendtorff (1992) and Noble (1993).

11 Cf. the following quotations: (i) Tracy (1984, 167): 'It is true, of course, that biblical texts can also be literature. As such, they remain fully open to literary critical analysis of the various new schools. Yet these same literary texts are also religious texts raising and responding to - often through provocative new uses of literary genres - explicitly religious questions.' (ii) Van Huyssteen (1987, 11): 'But at least equally important is the fact that these same literary texts are also *religious texts* responding to explicitly *religious questions*. And this fundamental *religious dimension* of the scriptural texts should not only form an integral part of the systematic theologian's view of the Bible and therefore also of his theory of the text; it can to my mind also never be ignored by literary critics' [his italics - LCJ]. (iii) Patrick and Scult (1990, 18) in their rhetorical criticism maintain that, 'as difficult as it might be to do so without losing scholarly objectivity, the interpreter must somehow engage the spiritual and theological truth claims of the Biblical text in order to understand it rightly.'

The following table provides a summary of the proposed multidimensional map. The numbers correspond to those used in the diagram which was provided in a previous publication¹²:

	SYNCHRONICAL	DIACHRONICAL
(i) Sender	<i>historical:</i> <i>sociological</i> <i>economical</i> <i>political</i> <i>cultural</i> <i>etc.</i> <i>religious:</i> <i>religious-cultic</i> <i>secular</i>	<i>oral transmission</i> <i>author(s)</i> <i>compositor(s)</i> <i>redactor(s)</i> <i>etc.</i>
(iii) Medium	<i>structure of text</i> <i>grammatical</i> <i>rhetorical</i> <i>literary</i> <i>intertextual</i> <i>etc.</i>	<i>textual growth and modification</i> <i>(from the earliest possible stages to the canonization processes and Masoretic activities.)</i>
(v) Receiver	<i>historical:</i> <i>sociological</i> <i>economical</i> <i>political</i> <i>cultural</i> <i>etc.</i> <i>religious:</i> <i>religious-cultic</i> <i>secular</i>	<i>original hearers/readers</i> <i>New Testament writers</i> <i>Early Christian church</i> <i>Rabbis</i> <i>Church fathers</i> <i>Reformers</i> <i>Ecclesiastical traditions</i> <i>Modern exegetes/readers</i> <i>etc.</i>
(vi) Communication process	<i>Unique contexts with in which interpretation takes place</i>	<i>continuous interpretation in new contexts</i>
(ii) Interaction: sender-medium	<i>The synchronical aspect of the sender (or various levels of senders) provides the basis for the description of the interaction which takes place between sender (author) and medium (text). Because the Bible is an ancient text, the context of interaction can only become known to the exegete through and by means of the text (medium).</i>	
(iv) Interaction: receiver-medium	<i>The synchronical aspect of the receiver provides the basis for the interaction between text and exegete/reader. On each level of reception the interaction with the text takes place within a specific context (with historical and religious components).</i>	

12 Cf. Jonker (*Scriptura* 58, (1996).

4. A multidimensional reading strategy¹³

The above exercise of 'mapping' the exegetical-hermeneutical landscape highlights the complex and multidimensional nature of Biblical texts and the communication processes in which they are involved. By means of this map the advocates of specialized exegetical strategies can find their 'identities' within the framework of the communication process, but it also makes them aware of the interaction which is possible among these strategies.

This map further illustrates that interpretation is more than the specialized description of a limited number of aspects of the communication process at the hand of one particular scientific approach. To facilitate adequate interpretation, the dynamics of the whole communication process must be grasped. This point is illustrated by the fact that not only exegetical specialists understand the Bible, but also ordinary readers thereof¹⁴. Every reader of the Bible interprets it. Interpretation happens anyway - not only when it is facilitated by specialized interpretation strategies. Of course this does not mean that every interpretation of the Bible is adequate. Various factors hamper the ordinary reader's understanding of the Bible¹⁵. Biblical interpretation should therefore always be looking for more adequate interpretations.

Adequate interpretation requires a twofold reading strategy. Specialized reading of Biblical texts is indispensable. Not every reader of the Bible is, however, an exegetical specialist. The gap between specialist investigations of Biblical texts, and the actual reading of the Bible should be bridged by another mode of reading, which I want to call competent reading.

PROPOSITION 4:

A multidimensional approach requires a twofold reading strategy, namely specialized reading and competent reading.

PROPOSITION 4a:

Specialized readers are those who associate themselves with one particular scientific approach which is based on particular hermeneutical presuppositions and makes use of sophisticated methods of interpretation.

13 This section is an elaboration of a theme that was discussed briefly in my dissertation (1993, 232-233). Cf. my remark there: 'Renewed attention should be devoted to a more adequate formulation of a reading strategy as operative factor in the communication situation. Competent reading, in particular, should be described more precisely' (1993, 238). I hereby acknowledge the valuable role discussions with Dr. E.M. Conradie (Dept. of Christian Studies, University of the Western Cape) played in the refinement of my ideas on this matter. In this section I rely heavily upon a joint publication which was the result of some of our discussions. Cf. Conradie, E.M. *et al.* 1995. *Fishing for Jonah. Various approaches to Biblical interpretation. Text and Context 6*. Bellville: University of the Western Cape.

14 Cf. West's investigation (1991).

15 To mention but a few: (i) *Distance*. Not only is there a historical distance between the reader and the time of origin of the Biblical texts, but there are also socio-cultural, linguistic-literary, geographical, and other differences that create a distance. (ii) *Plurality*. The plurality of existing interpretations of a particular text in itself does not necessarily create a problem. However, various interpretations of the same text are often in conflict. Plurality then becomes problematic. (iii) *Ambiguity*. This problem involves the ideological nature of Biblical texts and their interpretation. When it becomes clear that the interests of an individual or a group had influenced the creation of Biblical texts, and that the interests of individuals or groups still influence the interpretation of these texts, interpretation becomes problematic, indeed.

PROPOSITION 4b:

Competent readers are fairly experienced readers who have developed a sensitivity to the factors that can play a role in the interpretation of the Bible, who are able to ask relevant questions about their own interpretations, and who are sensitive to the questions that the text itself raises.

4.1 Specialized reading

Specialized reading involves the analysis of Biblical texts and the communication process (or parts thereof) in which those texts function at any given moment. This mode of reading takes place at the hand of a given set of methodological presuppositions and specialized methods. Every specialized reading broadens the diachronical basis of the communication process because it describes new/other aspects of the communication elements (and the interaction among them). In this way the multidimensionality of the Biblical texts, and the communication processes in which they function gradually and consistently unfold.

Specialized reading, however, does not amount to isolated reading. Within a multidimensional approach exegetical specialists should specify which aspect(s) of the communication process their methods describe. This implies that exegetical specialists should realize that every specialized method deals with only a part of the whole communication process. The ideal is that all of the various specialists remain aware of their own respective presuppositions and shortcomings so that their own (indispensable) contributions can be supplemented by those of other specialists.

4.2 Competent reading

What, then, distinguishes competent readers from specialized readers? Competent readers¹⁶ are fairly experienced readers who have developed a degree of skill at reading and interpreting the Bible. They have developed a sensitivity to the factors that *can* play a role in the interpretation of the Bible and are able to ask relevant questions about their own interpretations¹⁷. They would also be sensitive to the questions that the text itself raises.

16 Cf. Barton's (1984, 8ff.) description of 'competence'. He explains it with reference to the game of chess: 'A good chess player is one who plays well, has a good grasp of chess strategy, and so on, but a competent chess player, in this technical sense of the term, would be one who (irrespective of how well or badly he plays) knows what sorts of moves are permitted by the rules of the game, who does not try, for example, to move pawns backwards or to castle with the bishop' (1984, 12). Cf. also Deist's view that the competence which is desired in Biblical interpretation encompasses a thoroughly integrated knowledge of the historical and philological aspects of Biblical texts (1989, 61).

17 The metaphor of the general medical practitioner can be used as explanation. Normally the human body functions without any problems. Every now and then, however, the body gets sick. Then one has to visit a doctor. A general practitioner then examines one to determine where the problem *could* lie. A general practitioner therefore has to have a fairly good idea of the processes within the human body. However, he/she should not necessarily have specialized knowledge on each of these processes. When a general practitioner determines that your health problem is caused by a cardiac disfunction, he/she could then refer you to a cardiac specialist who will treat this particular disfunction.

In this metaphor general practitioners represent competent readers. Competent readers do not specialize in every possible approach to interpretation. They are not specialists but general practitioners, who have to know a little about everything, but who have to refer some cases to specialists. In contrast to untrained readers (cf. West, 1991), competent readers do have a good general overview of the factors that play a role in the interpretation of the Bible. In their quest for adequate interpretation they are able to pose relevant questions, even if they do not have the answers.

Ideally spoken, every exegetical specialist should also be a competent reader of the Bible. A competent reader, on the other hand, does not necessarily have expertise in any particular specialized reading strategy.

The exegetical-hermeneutical map that was discussed above, presupposes a constant interaction between the various elements of the communication process. In the final analysis Biblical interpretation boils down to a consistent interaction between text¹⁸ and context¹⁹. The result of this interaction is a continuing spiral of interpretation. During this constant interaction between text and context existing interpretations are continuously tested and refined. This process is never concluded, because one can always refine your own interpretation of a particular Biblical text through a process of critical testing, but also because the contemporary context in which a particular Biblical text functions, changes over time.

Competent reading therefore takes place in three phases (that can be distinguished logically but not chronologically)²⁰:

The *first phase* involves an attempt by readers/exegetes to articulate their pre-understanding of the text, i.e. the way they are engaged in interpreting the particular Biblical text. In this phase readers should reflect on the role that their own particular traditions of interpretation have played in their understanding of the particular text.

The *second phase* involves a process of continuing critical testing of the reader's existing interpretation(s). A precondition for the process of critical testing is that the readers must have a good overview of the communication process which is taking place. This competence enables the readers to ask relevant questions regarding their own interpretations. Knowledge (albeit not specialized knowledge) of the various exegetical strategies enables exegetes to determine whether their interpretations have taken into account all the relevant aspects of the communication process.

Knowledge of the aspects of the communication process being investigated by, for example, the historical-critical approach, would entail questions such as: Does my interpretation take into account that the text under discussion could have existed previously as smaller literary or even as oral units? What effect would knowledge of the process of textual growth and transmission have on my interpretation? Does my interpretation consider the world that lies behind the Biblical text?

Awareness of the accents of a narratological approach towards Biblical interpretation would result in the following questions being asked of a particular interpretation: Does my interpretation take into account that this Biblical text is a piece of literature which should be judged according to literary conventions? What influence would it have on my interpretation if I admit to the fact that this Biblical text is a story/parable/poem? Does my interpretation take into account the world that the text itself creates?

18 Because the diachronical aspect of the medium, as well as the synchronical and diachronical aspects of the sender [cf. Jonker, *Scriptura* 58, (1996)], are only accessible through the synchronical aspect of the medium (i.e. the Biblical texts in their final form), interaction takes place primarily with this last-mentioned aspect.

19 In terms of my proposal of an exegetical-hermeneutical map 'context' refers to the unique synchronical structure of the receiver. Cf. also Tate (1991, 210): 'Hermeneutics is not a monologue; i.e., the author does not simply address readers through the medium of the text, the text does not alone speak to the reader, and the reader does not address only a silent text. Hermeneutics is a dialogue between the text, and reader, and the text and reader enter into a conversational covenant informed by the world of the author.'

20 I rely here on a simple model for the interpretation of the Bible that was developed by Conradie (in Conradie *et al*, 1995, chapter 5). Although he has a wider context in mind with this model, it can be used just as effectively in a narrower sense to indicate how competent reading actually takes place.

From a reception theoretical viewpoint the following questions would, for example, be posed: Does my interpretation take into account the unique reader context in which the communication process takes place? What influence would it have on my interpretation if I admit that readers in fact create meaning in the text, and that meaning is not something inherent to texts? Does my interpretation take into account that my interpretation takes place within a world in front of the text?

These examples illustrate that during this second phase competent readers/exegetes engage their interpretations into conversation with various scholarly interpretations²¹. This does not mean that they have to be specialists in every single scholarly approach, but rather that they have a good knowledge of the factors that *can* influence their interpretations.

It should, however, be made clear that the second phase of critical testing does not mean 'the more conversation partners, the merrier interpretation.' In the interpretation of a particular text some conversation partners may be silent or even absent. This means that critical testing will deem certain questions irrelevant to be asked.

The question remains as to how competent readers/exegetes should choose the appropriate scholarly strategies as conversation partners. Lategan (1993, 3) correctly points out that within a multidimensional approach towards Biblical interpretation the question no longer is 'What methods do we choose?', but: 'What methods does the text choose - or rather, require?' This illustrates that the multidimensionality of Biblical texts is the main determining factor of the scholarly conversation partners in the critical-testing phase. However, the consistent interaction between text and context (see above) also gives rise to the question: 'What methods does the context choose - or rather, require?' Because Biblical interpretation never takes place in a vacuum, the reader context (or world in front of the text) is also a determining factor in the selection of conversation partners²². Text and context indicate what questions are relevant to ask. The more competent a reader/exegete is (i.e. the degree of comprehension of the communication process he/she has), the more relevant questions he/she will discover in the text and the context to put to his/her own preliminary interpretation.

The *third phase* consists of the renewal/refinement of the existing (tradition of) interpretation. This phase, which cannot really be distinguished from the previous phases, continues the spiral of interpretation. The element of renewal/refinement is facilitated by the exposure to diverging interpretations during the phase of critical testing.

Competent reading can thus be described in terms of this three-phased model. Of course, complete competence in the interpretation of the Bible is unattainable. Every interpretation of a Biblical text influences later interpretations of the same text and interpretations of other texts. Competence is therefore a constantly growing and, at the most, a provisional skill that readers increasingly acquire through experience. The purpose of theological and hermeneutic training is not to provide readers with a recipe or method according to which one *must* read and interpret the Bible; its purpose is rather to develop the reader's 'general competence' to read and interpret the Bible.

21 Cf. Tate (1991, 210): 'This approach rests upon a modified communication model in which the text and reader dialogue, and in which the world of the author offers preparatory, foundational information for the dialogue. If hermeneutics is willing to bring to bear upon interpretation the scholarship of the differing critical approaches, the dialogue will inevitably be more informed, constructive, and pertinent.'

22 Cf. Patte's (1990, 10) distinction between legitimate and valid interpretation.

5. Reading Jonah multidimensionally²³

The Book of Jonah was chosen as illustration²⁴ because it has a rich and interesting tradition of interpretation. Not only is the Book of Jonah one of the typical battlefields on which clashes take place between those exegetes who hold the historicist view that everything in the book actually happened, and those who are of the opinion that the events of the book are literary creations²⁵. But it is also a book on which various specialized exegetical strategies have already been applied. This little book therefore offers a challenge to the multidimensional reader's competence.

PROPOSITION 5:

A multidimensional reading strategy opens up the possibility of evaluating the adequacy of existing interpretations of the Book of Jonah.

This illustration will proceed in accordance with the three-phased model of competent reading²⁶.

Phase 1: The articulation of existing interpretations²⁷

Most interpretations of the Book of Jonah seek to emphasize its *missionary intent*:

- (i) One should not refuse God's command to proclaim His message - even in places where we do not want to go. One should be God's witness everywhere - to the ends of the earth (with reference to Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8).
- (ii) Do not deny heathens God's grace and mercy. One should not be dissatisfied when God extends His grace to all people, even when it is to your enemies.

Other interpretations seek to '*personalize*' the '*message*' of the Bible:

- (iii) Jonah, because of his disobedience to God, landed up in a storm. God did not forsake him in the storm, however. This then offers comfort to those who experience the storms of life.
- (iv) Only once Jonah landed up in the belly of a huge fish he started praying to God. One should not only pray to God in crises.

Still other interpretations have it that the Book of Jonah wants to convey *certain universal truths about God*:

- (v) God is almighty. He controls the elements of nature. The fish huge enough to swallow Jonah, as well as the fast-growing tree shading him against the sun, bears testimony to his miracle-working power.

23 Cf. Conradie *et al* (1995). This book is meant as an introduction to Biblical interpretation, with the Book of Jonah serving as an illustration to explain various approaches.

24 This discussion is nothing more than an illustration. It does not profess to be a fully-fledged analysis of the Book of Jonah.

25 Even on the colloquial level the issues in this book feature in discussions. Cf., for example, the extensive debate in the letter columns of an Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Burger*, during the months July to September 1995. This debate on Biblical interpretation was initiated by a letter by the Rev. M. Bignaut who reacted to certain interpretations of the Book of Jonah which have become common among some exegetes.

26 Again, it should be pointed out that this is done for logical reasons only. This discussion does not dictate a chronological order/process for reading the Book of Jonah. Nobody ever interprets Biblical texts in chronologically ordered phases.

27 Cf. Conradie *et al* (1995, chapter 6) for an elaborate discussion on interpretation strategies (and the resulting interpretations) of ordinary readers of the Book of Jonah.

- (vi) God is patient and gracious. He was willing to walk the road with Jonah - although the prophet was an unwilling servant.
- (vii) God's grace is intended for everybody. God bestows His grace upon people with whom neither Israel (nor Jonah) want to associate. God's grace cannot be nationalized.

Some of these interpretations seem to be adequate, others inadequate (or even ridiculous). How can we determine whether an existing interpretation is more adequate or less adequate? The process of critical testing now enters these interpretations into conversation with various scholarly approaches.

Phase 2: The process of continuing critical testing

As was shown above text and context determine which questions are relevant to put to these interpretations. The following questions arise from the *text* of the Book of Jonah²⁸:

- (i) Do the above interpretations take into account that the text of the Book of Jonah is probably the product of a process of growth and transmission? Literary critics (investigating from a historical-critical perspective) have pointed out that the Jonah Psalm (ch. 2:2-9) was probably not part of the original text, but was added at a later stage²⁹. Various arguments are advanced in this regard, *inter alia*, that the psalm is the only part of the book that consists of poetry and not narrative prose; the language used in the psalm differs from that of the rest of the book; the psalm destroys the chiasmic structure in 1:17 and 2:1.10; the psalm destroys the symmetrical structure of the book as a whole, and others. The fact that the psalm presents a far more positive image of Jonah than the rest of the book may have implications for some of the above interpretations.
- (ii) Do the above interpretations take into account that the Book of Jonah in its canonical form is the product of a long process of canonical development and decisions? Canonical critics³⁰ have indicated that the insertion of the Jonah Psalm in ch. 2 brought about a structural change. The newly-formed structural parallelism between chs. 2 and 4 refocuses the narrative from a story about true/false prophecy to a story about the limitless grace of God. Canonical critics also comment on the relation of the book to 2 Kings 14:25, the corpus of the minor prophets, and the book of Nahum.
- (iii) Do the above interpretations take into account the many theories about the date of origin of the Book of Jonah? Historical critics have indicated that the reference to Jonah-ben-Amittai in 2 Kings 14:25 who lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel (approximately 780 BC) is no conclusive clue to the time of origin of the book³¹. Many arguments point to a post-exilic date, approximately the 5th or 4th century BC. Why exactly was this story told at this particular time in Israel's history? What influence would it have on one's interpretation if one would know that this

28 Only a few examples are cited here. Cf. Conradie *et al* (1995), sections C3 and C4 in particular, for more elaborate examples of scholarly conversation partners. The following strategies are discussed there: historical-critical approaches (textual criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism), canonical criticism, and text-immanent approaches (structural analysis, narratological analysis). The point of departure in all these exegetical strategies is the *text* (and its prehistory).

29 Cf. Allen's (1976, 181ff.) discussion of scholarly arguments for and against this theory.

30 Cf. Childs (1958 and 1979).

31 Cf. Allen (1976, 185ff.).

period of origin was characterized by a nationalistic religious tendency among the Jews?

- (iv) Do the above interpretations take into account that the Book of Jonah probably belongs to the genre 'parable'? Literary scholars (in the Anglo-American sense) hold that the book is no historical account of events of the past, but rather a story with a particular message³².
- (v) Do the above interpretations take into account the various literary features in this book? Literary scholars have pointed out that compositional techniques, stylistic devices, rhetorical conventions, characterization, focalization, etc. are used in this narrative.
- (vi) Do the above interpretations take into account the structural features in this book? Various scholars have pointed out the concentrical structural compositions in the text, and how various themes serve as structural markers. These studies have emphasized that no text (or singular verses) should be interpreted in isolation. The textual network of relations should be taken into account.

All these approaches deal with the questions that the text of the Book of Jonah put to our interpretations. The following questions arise from the modern *context* in which the Book of Jonah is being interpreted³³:

- (i) Do the above interpretations take into account that there are certain gaps in the text that should be filled in by the reader³⁴? For example, it is noteworthy that the Book of Jonah ends with a question: 'Should I, then, not have pity on Nineveh, that great city?' The text does not provide an explicit answer to this question, but leaves it up to the reader.
- (ii) Do the above interpretations take into account that the Book of Jonah makes use of certain rhetorical devices to convince the reader of a certain point. For example: The purpose of the first three verses of the book is to get the reader to identify with Jonah. After these verses the original hearers/readers would immediately know that they, Jonah and Jahweh are on the one side, and that the Ninevites are on the other. However, the rest of the story 'upsets' this identification pattern by showing that the Ninevites are not necessarily on the opposite side of Jahweh, and that Jahweh is not necessarily on 'our' side. How would sensitivity to these rhetorical patterns affect the above interpretations?
- (iii) Do the above interpretations take into account that women would probably read the Book of Jonah with different eyes than most men? Women readers might, for example, feel an affinity to the universalistic perspective of the book. In an androcentric world the message of this book could then be understood as God sharing his limitless grace with the peripheral groups of the community, such as women.

32 Cf. Allen (1976, 175ff.). Cf. also the recent South African contributions in this regard: Van Heerden (1988) and Potgieter (1991).

33 Again, only a few examples are cited. Cf. Conradie *et al* (1995), sections C5, C6 and C7 in particular. In these sections various strategies that take their point of departure in the *context* of interpretation are discussed: rhetorical-critical approaches, approaches that focus on the role of the reader, post-structuralist approaches, cultural-anthropological approaches, psycho-analytical approaches, Marxist approaches, and feminist approaches.

34 Cf. Craig (1990).

These, and other, questions arise from the text of the Book of Jonah and the contexts in which the book is read. The process of critical testing determining the adequacy of interpretations leads to the next phase, the renewal/refinement of existing interpretations.

Phase 3: The renewal of the existing interpretations

It seems that the interpretations that seek to 'personalize' the 'message' of the Book of Jonah, in particular, are inadequate. Although these interpretations may be of great comfort in certain contexts (cf. 'God does not forsake us in the storm'), or may even be successful as admonition to a more pious lifestyle (cf. 'One should not only pray to God in crises'), they use the text selectively without taking into account other dimensions of the text.

The interpretations of the other two groups, i.e. the groups that emphasize the missionary intent and universal truths about God, all have a degree of adequacy. However, the argumentation of some of these interpretations should also be revised in the light of certain scholarly insights. For example, if it is acknowledged that the book belongs to the genre 'parable', it would be inadequate to refer to the fish or wonder-tree episodes to prove that God is almighty.

The critical-testing process shows that some interpretations are more adequate than others. Each interpretation can be refined in the light of new scholarly insights, and can serve as starting point for a next round in the spiral of interpretation. No interpretation has therefore a final status. Even adequate interpretations should continuously be tested critically, because the context in which the text is being interpreted, changes constantly.

6. Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a quotation from an article of Barton: 'There is a widespread perception of professional biblical scholarship as concerned only to talk to itself, taking the Bible away from the believing community and encapsulating it in a small world with its own rules. The Bible, people feel, needs to be given back to the church. And for this some way must be found of bridging the gap between the professionals, on the one hand, and pastors and ordinary Christians on the other' (1989, 443).

My proposal of a twofold reading strategy, consisting of specialized and competent reading, endeavours to do just that.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, LC 1976. *The books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Barton, J 1984. *Reading the Old Testament. Method in Biblical Study*. London: Darton Longman and Todd.
- Barton, J 1989. 'Should Old Testament Study be More Theological?', *Expository Times* 100/12, 443-448.
- Boorer, S 1989. 'The Importance of a Diachronic Approach: The Case of Genesis-Kings', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51/2, 195-208.
- Buss, MJ (ed.) 1979. *Encounter with the Text. Form and History in the Hebrew Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Childs, BS 1985. *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*. London: SCM Press.
- Childs, BS 1987. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. London: SCM Press.
- Cilliers, PJ 1993. *Modelling Complexity*. Stellenbosch: Unpublished dissertation.
- Conradie EM *et al* 1995. *Fishing for Jonah. Various approaches to Biblical interpretation*. Bellville: University of the Western Cape Press.
- Craig, KM 1990. 'Jonah and the reading process', *JSOT* 47, 103-114.
- Davis, CT 1980. 'A multidimensional criticism of the Gospels' in Spencer, RA (ed.) *Orientation by disorientation*. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press.
- Deist, FE 1989. 'Eksegese as 'leeskompetensie': Oor onderrig in Skrifuitleg', *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 30/1, 56-63.
- Eagleton, T 1983. *Literary theory: An introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Jonker, LC 1993. *Exclusivity and Variety: A Typological Study Towards the Integration of Exegetical Methodologies in Old Testament Studies*. Stellenbosch: Unpublished dissertation.
- Jonker, LC 'On plotting the exegetical-hermeneutical landscape', *Scriptura* 58, (1996).
- Lategan, BC 1992. 'Hermeneutics', *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3, 149-154.
- Lategan, BC 1993. 'An Integrated Approach to Biblical Interpretation', Unpublished Paper delivered at a workshop of the NTWSA.
- Noble, PR 1993. 'Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of Literature and Theology* 7/2, 130-148.
- Patrick, D and Scult, A 1990. *Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation*. Sheffield: The Almond Press.
- Patte, D 1990. *Discipleship according to Matthew*. (July 5, 1990 draft).
- Potgieter, JH 1991. 'n *Narratologiese ondersoek van die boek Jona*. HTS Suppl. 3.
- Rendtorff, R 1992. 'The Paradigm is Changing: Hopes - and Fears', *Biblical Interpretation. Sample Issue*, 1-20.
- Rossouw, HW 1980. 'Hoe moet 'n mens die Bybel lees? Die hermeneutiese probleem', *Scriptura* 1, 7-28.
- Rousseau, J 1986. *A Multidimensional Approach towards the Communication of an Ancient Canonized Text*. Pretoria: Unpublished dissertation.
- Tate, WR 1991. *Biblical Interpretation: An integrated approach*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers.

- Tracy, DW in Grant, RM & Tracy, DW 1984. *A Short history of the interpretation of the Bible. Second Edition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 151-187.
- Van Heerden, SW 1988. *Die interpretasie van die boek Jona in die NG Kerk: 'n Hermeneutiese studie*. UNISA: Ongepubliseerde proefskrif.
- Van Huyssteen, W 1987. 'Understanding Religious Texts. The Role of Models in Biblical Interpretation', *Old Testament Essays* 5, 9-23.
- West, GO 1991. *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation. Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.