The book *Jonah* – a paradigm of the 'hermeneutics of strangeness'

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Summary

The Old Testament book *Jonah* provides for a unique hermeneutical study of strangeness. The context and questions pertaining to it are considered, focussing on the strangeness of events and characters as they present themselves to a modern day secular reader. In both early Christianity and folktales the miraculous was readily accepted, while the distinction between fiction and reality is a relatively recent development. The book *Jonah* with its moral lesson, also called a *Midrash*, is significant for studying this tradition. This intricate text, having technical similarities with the contemporary novel, emanates from an extraordinary and competent narrator and can be seen as the prototype of the modern novel. The questions to which the text offers some answers are posed and some differences between the book *Jonah* and the secular novel are discussed.

Opsomming

Die Ou-Testamentiese boek *Jona* dien as 'n voorbeeld vir 'n ondersoek na die hermeneutiek van vreemdheid/eienaardigheid. Daar word aangetoon hoe die teks die hedendaagse leser met verskillende vreemde aspekte konfronteer. Die konteks en vrae daaromheen word ondersoek. Hierdeur word aandag gefokus op die vreemdheid wat 'n geestelike teks verkry wanneer dit deur 'n ongelowige van ons tyd gelees word. In sowel die vroeë Christendom as in volksverhale is die wonderbaarlike geredelik aanvaar, terwyl die onderskeid tussen fiksie en werklikheid 'n relatief onlangse ontwikkeling is. Die boek *Jona* kan beskryf word as 'n vertelling met 'n sedeles, ook 'n *Midrash* genoem, en is betekenisvol vir die bestudering van hierdie tradisie. Die teks van die boek *Jona,* waarvan die verwikkelde struktuur ooreenkomste toon met die vertelstruktuur van die hedendaagse roman, gee blyke van 'n buitengewoon begaafde verteller. Die vrae waarop die teks antwoorde verskaf, word aangedui en daar word ingegaan op die verskille tussen die boek *Jona* en die latere romantradisie.

1. Formulating the question

The book *Jonah* of the Old Testament seems to offer an excellent paradigm for a general inquiry – by virtue of a hermeneutics of both temporal (historic) remoteness and synchronic (cultural) foreignness – into the conditions and implications concerned in the apprehension of strangeness. Its suitability for this purpose lies in the fact that it confronts the modern informed reader as well as the contemporary, active adherent of the Christian faith and even the religious specialist, that is, the theologian, with numerous aspects of strangeness in a text that is at once archaic and highly advanced with regard to its formal literary characteristics. First, it has three actors whose actions are completely out of character: the recalcitrant, disobedient prophet, the repentant heathens, and the long-suffering God who relents and withholds his pronounced judgement. The best method to follow in explicating this compounded strangeness would be that of Odo Marquard (1981:53), which con-

sists in initially dividing the process into two consecutive stages comprising reconstructive and applicative hermeneutics respectively, although in fact these two facets of hermeneutics are entirely interdependent for the whole narrative. According to this procedure, then, the first step would be to establish the primary context; in other words, the whole body of implicit questions to which the text provided answers. Next, the temporal remoteness of the text as exposed in the first stage of explication should be reconciled with the presence of the reader, that is, with a secondary context, which can also be described as all the questions that are not explicit in the text and to which answers are not yet forthcoming from the text. The fact that these questions did not exist when the text was originated does not in itself render them historically invalid; they are not mere projections into the past of present-day preoccupations (by a process known as naive actualisation). They are rendered hermeneutically valid if the reconstructed context of the past remains the chief criterion in terms of which an investigation originating in the present-day context must be validated (genuine actualisation), that is, if the inquiry concerns only those questions to which the text provided an answer that was not recognised to date, and ignores those to which it cannot provide answers at all.

From the viewpoint of literary hermeneutics the significant qualification should be added, in this regard, that some texts and text types naturally preclude the extraction of answers (lyric poetry, for example, is usually not centrally concerned with making some pronouncement that is primarily understandable as an answer to implied questions). It is advisable, therefore, in the interest of literary hermeneutics, to defer the hermeneutics of question and answer, and therefore the decoding of the possible meaning, so that the otherness of the world and the receivers for whom the text was created can first be brought into full view. If this otherness is to be understood not only to establish common ground, that is, not only to confirm that features of the present are identifiable in the foreign context, but also to extend and enrich the present context, then the resistance of the foreign context to apprehension must as far as possible first be thrown into stark relief before it can be broken down by subjecting the text to minute examination from all angles in the processes of reconstructive and applicative hermeneutics. This second stage of the explication must be calculated to determine whether the otherness of the text merely leaves us with an impression that the text is unfamiliar and archaic to us, or whether it can provide a new answer to a legitimate question pertaining to the meaning of the text. A method that has been successfully applied to this end is that of devoting the first phase of the explication to meticulously exposing the alien aspect of the text to view and not clarifying obscurities at once but letting them stand for the time being as open questions (questions that are left unanswered by the text itself, thus excluding questions that can only be formulated in the reconstruction of the primary context or in the applicative interpretation of the secondary context). This procedure can still be performed without recourse to theological research because it relies exclusively on the reflection incidental to literary aesthetic appreciation and is not concerned with the fact that, although the

text is a literary construct, it also was and still is intended to be a document of both the Judaic and the Christian faith. My main concern in this paper is to focus attention on the strangeness that a scriptural text acquires in being read through the eyes of a modern 'heathen' who at the same time maintains the biased belief that the book *Jonah* still offers a highly pertinent answer even to the modern reader in his profane context, an answer that, curiously, is not required by the tenets of Christian faith, as I hope to demonstrate in the second phase of the reading. If this reading does not satisfy the demands of theology, the profane perception of faith as a strange experience fortunately remains as a hermeneutic bridge that is certainly not the least important form in which otherness can be apprehended.

2. The strangeness of the text (from the viewpoint of literary hermeneutics)

The book *Jonah* is among the best-known texts in the Bible. Its currency has spread so far beyond its source that the story of the 'man in the whale' is even known to people who may never have read it in the Bible and are already far removed from the faith of their fathers. The hermeneutic result of this wide currency is that the primary resistance of strangeness has been completely dissolved in a secondary intimacy – in an illusion that the meaning is immediately apparent and that all the archaic elements of the narrative, dating from times immemorial, are perfectly clear and straight-forward. Indeed they are taken so much for granted that ultimately it is no longer the story as such which seems strange, but rather the sheer credulity, emanating from a 'naive' or dogmatic orientation, of those who believed it. Even the marvellous natural phenomena, foremost among them the sea monster that swallows the hero at Yahweh's behest, keeps him in its maw for three days and three nights, and then spews him forth, came to be taken for granted. At first, informed intellects took exception to this incredible prodigy while Christian dogmatism defended its supernatural realism, but even this controversy has now been resolved: everybody knows – and the theologian exploits this knowledge – that both during the early history of the Christian faith and later, in folktales, the marvellous was accepted as the rule rather than the exception.

Those who believe the story are saved while those who no longer believe it can enjoy it from a purely aesthetic point of view, justifying their position by invoking the famous formula of 'the willing suspension of disblief'. This formula is used in narrative theory to explain the penchant for the miraculous and the unusual, and the tendency to attribute reality to the unreal as a result of this predisposition, which seems to be characteristic of the naive orientation to fiction. The first step in the process required to strip the text of its secondary familiarity in order to use the resultant barrier of temporal remoteness to reconstruct the primary immediacy (foreign to us) presupposed by the text in the world of its intended original audience, is to apply the criterion of 'the willing suspension of disbelief' exclusively in terms of an aesthetic perspective, which is certainly implied by this formula. The aesthetic distance

required to deliberately thrust mundane reality into the background, that is, to experience the pleasure of makebelieve, is only possible when aesthetic appreciation is no longer encumbered by the direct participation of religious belief. When a miraculous event is perceived from this purely aesthetic vantage point, disbelief neither has to nor can be deliberately excluded because the consciousness of the reader is pervaded by the 'wonder of belief', in which state of mind any distinction between willing and unwilling, or between fiction and reality, is automatically eliminated.

The distinction between fiction and reality, which we have come to accept as entirely self-evident, is a quite recent development in all cultures (Henrich & Iser, 1983:423–432). A hermeneutics of temporal and cultural unfamiliarity, applied with a view to exposing what is alien and strange and presents a challenge to our understanding, is required if we are to revert to an archaic orientation that patently hinged on the absence of any distinction between fiction and reality. Equal weight has to be assigned to both actual and implied utterance in the performance of this interpretative exercise.

Chapter 1: All we learn about Jonah, the protagonist, when the narrative opens, is that he was the son of Amittai (v.1). Nothing at all is revealed about his earlier life, or even about the situation in which the word of the Lord came to him – may we assume, unexpectedly? We are not told why Jonah, rather than another, is called upon to proclaim the judgment to be visited on the city of Nineveh for its evil ways. Could this mean that chance alone determines who receives the call to prophecy, or is the reason why Jonah is chosen merely to be revealed at a later stage? The imperious command of the Lord seems to suggest that he prefers not to address the erring citizens of Nineveh directly, but to use a messenger from whom no demur is expected. This is implied by the word 'But' with which the third verse commences, a word used repeatedly for emphasis[1] and that, in each of verses 1.4, 2.1, 4.4 and 4.7 also initiates an unexpected turn of events, thus providing a clue to the analysis of the narrative structure. 'But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa' (1.4). The perplexing incongruity of this unexpected reaction is heightened in that the man of God seems to carry out his rebellious flight 'from the presence of the Lord' quite noncommittally, without further ado. His motive – is it fear, incapacity, doubt about his commission, or disobedience? – is again withheld.

The second 'but' initiates the Lord's answer, which takes the form of a wordless gesture made by a God 'which hath made the sea and the dry land' (v.9) and who, moreover, now sends a mighty tempest to stir up the sea, thereby utilizing an agency of overwhelming immensity to chastise his mean-spirited prophet.[2]

The 'omnipotence of God in nature is still conceivable to us – if only in the form of poetic reminiscence; but on considering the reaction of the ship's company (vv. 5–15) it immediately becomes clear to us why this aesthetic sense of the exalted – a legacy of German idealism and romanticism – is set worlds apart from the experience of the God of the Old Testament, who is capable of summoning first a violent storm and then a sea monster to act as instruments of his inscrutable will. The mood on the ship is that of people

facing the dire threat of catastrophe: mortal fear in which each one calls on his particular god; then the ship's cargo is thrown overboard; then there is the magical act of casting lots to determine who has been guilty of invoking the wrath of his god; and finally – equally outrageous to the informed modern mind – the scapegoat ritual is performed of throwing Jonah into the sea to appease the wrath of his God: 'and the sea ceased from her raging' (v.15). Is Yahweh within or beyond the pale of magical belief? Does he use these stratagems as a vehicle for a show of strength, to prove his superiority to the gods of the heathens? It does seem so, because the ship's crew eventually 'feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the Lord, and made vows' (v.16). Their magnanimity towards Jonah contrasts from the outset with the timidity and unregeneracy of the man of God in a way that cannot fail to scandalise the orthodox-minded. At first the crew merely arouse the sleeping Jonah and beseech him to call on his God too; when the lot falls on him they do not summarily cast him into the sea, but first ascertain where he has come from and leave the decision to him: 'What shall we do unto thee that the sea may be calm unto us?' (v.11). In any case, Jonah's complex character is not satisfactorily summed up by describing him as timid. How is it that he can go down into the ship's hold and lie there 'fast asleep' (v.5)? Since he was certainly not vouchsafed 'the sleep of the just', could his sleep have been a gesture – albeit paradoxical – of protest? Or does it signify that he has lost the will to live, and therefore subsequently chooses to be thrown into the sea rather than carry out Yahweh's commission? And yet, why should God have chosen this man, of all people, who is so patently unsuited to acting the part of prophet?

Chapter 2: 'Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights' (translator's note: quotation taken from end of *first chapter* in Authorised Version). The incongruity of the providential intervention of the great fish can to some extent be resolved philologically and is to that extent irrelevant to our inquiry. Before we proceed any further it should be noted that Jonah is demonstrably not saved from drowning because he has had a change of heart and has once more turned to the Lord in prayer in his extremity. His song in the belly of the whale, which is a retrospective psalm of thanksgiving, is superimposed on the chain of events in the narrative and as such was clearly inserted after the initial creation of the text with a view to interpreting the whale prodigy typologically as the 'sign of the prophet Jonah' who, for 'those with eyes to see', prefigures one greater than himself, as stated explicitly in Christ's own words when, as the first exegete (Matt. 12.35–42), he interprets the Old Testament text in his answer to the ignorant scribes and Pharisees: 'the Son of Man (shall) be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth'.

Here the primary resistance of the unfamiliar is overcome in the typological exegesis; the 'sign of Jonah' already forms part of what we perceive as the secondary foreignness of the primitive Christian conception of history, according to which the earlier event is symbolically linked to the resurrection of Christ on the third day after his crucifixion. Moreover, the primary resistance of the even greater unfamiliarity, to us, of ancient belief, also breaks

down when subjected to modern archetypical or depth-psychological interpretation.

In fact, discovering that the theme of a hero who is swallowed by a sea monster is among the commonest of all myths and that it recurs in the mythologies of many cultures (the prototype being the sun that sets in the western sea, only to rise again in the east); or that ultimately a basic motivational agent in the narrative is the primal urge to return to the womb in order to be reborn, cleansed and whole, into a new life (Weinrich, 1971 and Wolff, 1965: 20), certainly provides entirely respectable hermeneutic bridges that may lead either to the mythical world of alien cultures or to the traumatic subjective world of a patient. However, these bridges are merely provisional, makeshift aids that do not provide direct access to the obscure meaning of the text, but also have to be demolished before the text can be revealed in its pristine state – specifically as a book of the Old Testament, untrammeled by mythological or archetypical residue.

The specific hermeneutic difference that will set the text apart from any modern interpretation from an archetypical or mythological perspective must be sought in the changes made by the author (or editor) of our text in the mytho-archetypical model in order to fit it into the scriptural context of the Old Testament. Although his basic material may have been a seaman's yarn, retold and embellished as a Münchhausen type of tall story by sailors plying the Mediterranean, the narrator has ennobled the story by making Yahweh the great and Jonah the small subject of the story, and by lending casuistic depth to the relationship between them. Jonah's salvation does not commence with a cry of anguish (which is not clearly identifiable as such from the subsequent psalm of thanksgiving anyway) directed at the God from whose countenance he had initially fled; it is initiated much earlier, in the special providence of the great fish, which, against all expectation, proves to be the instrument of his salvation. The strangeness of the ancient faith is manifested in this sudden, unexpected turn of events – that is, in the undeserved, benevolent intervention of God – rather than in the return of the prophet to his God out of penitence, which is not too surprising since it results from his extremity. Another reason why the archaic faith seems not only strange, but almost modern, is that the relationship between God and his prophet, between master and servant, is cast in an antagonistic, unheroic mould, not only here, but from beginning to end. Unlike Heracles and Perseus, who overcame the monster, 'Jonah is the very opposite of a heroic warrior and conqueror... (he is) the guilty messenger who is brought to heel by the God who sends him on his errand (Wolff, 1965:25; own translation). He may be forced to obey, but essentially he has not been brought to any new insight. This becomes evident when the symbolic period of three days and three nights, which in myth signifies the completion of a return to the good, here initiates a salvation that does not signal an approaching resolution, but – to our astonishment – marks a continuation of the unequal struggle between master and servant. Jonah, who at Yahweh's command has been spewed out onto dry land, has only had an apparent change of heart.

Chapter 3: At each new juncture the characters of both Jonah and God

become increasingly problematic in response to each other; we cannot help wondering why God chose the insubordinate prophet and remains on confidential terms with him despite all his disobedience. It is consistent with Yahweh's role as the creator of heaven and earth that he should hold sway over nature and her elements and creatures as their sovereign Lord, and thus can command and recall them at will. But is is pleasantly surprising that this omnipotent being designs to repeat his command, without a hint of rebuke, as if Jonah had not erred at all; this treatment of the prophet bespeaks a virtue that can hardly be expected from a God of antiquity, namely long-suffering patience that even amounts to a gentle didactic strategy. The fact that God then 'repented of the evil' with which he had threatened Nineveh (v.10) accords with the ordinary weakness typifying the behaviour of human beings. The theologian may construe this behaviour without any hesitation as a sovereign act prompted by the divine free will of God, but the profane layman would nevertheless be justified in seeing an unmistakable, truly human characteristic of the Almighty in the fact that Yahweh relents (surely we are justified in making this observation here?). With regard to Nineveh the eruptive God of nature now reveals himself as a God of history who takes an active part in the fulfilment of his design: Yahweh's plan works to its conclusion, both for the seamen on a small scale, and on a large scale for the inhabitants of the metropolis. The heathens repent and turn to God, and thereby are taken up in the all-embracing, universalised history that is beginning to emerge from the hitherto particularised history of Israel.

A number of details that exemplify the foreignness of an ancient culture are apparent from the actual process of conversion. Imagine an ancient metropolis, so large that traversing it entails three days' journey, and yet, in which the inhabitants 'cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand' (4.11), and to top it all are predominantly engaged in animal husbandry. By mentioning the livestock Yahweh not only improves on the impression of magnitude made by the vast number of 120 000 inhabitants, but the livestock is included without comment in the prescribed acts of atonement. Not only are the people of Nineveh, 'from the greatest of them even unto the least of them' enjoined to fast and put on sack cloth (the king is by no means required to take the initiative in this, as one would expect) but the decree also applies to animals: 'Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: but let man and beast be covered with sack cloth, and cry mightily to God . . .' (v.7,8). The modern reader is struck by the peculiarity, not only of lumping all creatures together without distinction in one concerted act of prostration before a strange god, but of the patently archaic conception of prophecy that becomes apparent here: The response of Jonah's audience to his prophecy is an immediate, unquestioning reversal of their career on the path to perdition, which in turn induces the avenging Lord to relent and revoke his decision, with the unfortunate result that in so doing he nullifies the pronouncement of his prophet and in fact brings him into disrepute. No wonder that this turn of events 'displeased Jonah exceedingly' (4.1).

Does their sudden change of heart mean that the heathens – including those

on the ship – were nobler or more naive than Jonah, or were they simply shrewd enough to avoid the threatened catastrophe by immediate submission to the stronger God? Or could we be dealing with a moral tale devised with a special allusive purpose ad usum Delphini, directed in this instance at the Israelites who were notoriously rebellious and often either disregarded the prophecies of their prophets or decided to believe them when it was too late? Since present-day prognoses about catastrophes that can still be averted fail to elicit a timely corrective change in the course on which political action is set, even if the prognoses concerned are scientifically substantiated beyond any doubt (prognoses of this kind being the modern equivalent of prophecy), the modern reader finds it particularly difficult to understand the implicit belief, in early times, in the truth of prophecies that (to the modern mind) have no basis in fact but could nevertheless also be avoided by a reversal of action. Could it be that, whereas the degree of ineluctability of prophecy assigned by Greek myth to Cassandra (with the known consequences) only developed in the course of history, the faith of the Old Testament did not undergo this development although, paradoxically, it was the breeding ground of the modern philosophy of history (consider, in this regard, Hegel's dictum that everything that can be learned from history can be extracted from the relationship between the Israelites and their God)?

Chapter 4: The next part of the story again conforms to a pattern that has by now become identifiable as a consistent structural principle throughout the narrative: the basic theme recurs continually, albeit in different configurations of large and small, and in this process the skein of the story becomes increasingly knotted.

These increasingly knotty situations are resolved in each instance by an unexpected turn of events – divine intervention – but the prophet persistently refuses to acknowledge the validity of the relevant solution. The central theme consists partly in the element of flight followed by Jonah's withdrawal. First the fleeing prophet draws aside from the ship's crew and repairs to the ship's hold to sleep while the conversion of the heathens begins to take its course. Later, after proclaiming the imminent visitation of divine justice, the prophet, who is now performing the offices of his calling, again withdraws, this time by turning his back on Nineveh in order to wrangle with his God while, after the earlier, small-scale conversion, the large-scale conversion of heathendom is set in train. And as if turning his back is not enough, he makes his withdrawal provocatively obvious by leaving the city and erecting a booth so that, sitting in the shade, he can observe from a distance what will become of the city (like spectators watching a shipwreck, an analogy that could be fittingly incorporated in H. Blumenberg's collection). The second aspect of the central theme is the consistently suprising, unforeseeable response made by God to his prophet's behaviour, each time in a form that must be found strikingly unusual by the receiver. Jonah himself found the prophetic mission assigned to him unprecedented and inexplicable. His flight is not followed by a confrontation but by an uncanny, wordless response made by God as master to servant, first by promptly unleashing the elements and thereby placing human lives in mortal danger, and then by revoking his judgement and

calming the tempest. This process is repeated in the case of Nineveh, but the orders of magnitude are reversed: whereas Yahweh initially uses an agent of elemental proportions, the storm as a cataclysmic event, he then uses the prodigiously proportioned, fearsome whale, which unexpectedly proves to be an instrument of salvation, then the modestly proportioned gourd which grows overnight to a tree that casts a goodly shade, and ultimately and inexplicably this is followed by the minuscule, insignificant worm that causes the gourd to wither the next morning. Surely a better example of what Hans Blumenberg termed 'mythical arbitrariness' (Blumenberg, 1979:159; own translation) than this action on the part of Yahweh can hardly be imagined. But no, the extraordinary, puzzling behaviour of Yahweh cannot be satisfactorily explained by simply attaching this label to it. In regard to Greek myth, arbitrariness is one of various categorisations used to designate the irresistible force of divine caprice, the utter indifference of the gods to man's happiness. And by the same token delays in the execution of divine decrees are simply regarded as the result of impersonal forces acting at variance with each other. 'Even the most wrathful god is subject to circumstance: Zeus cannot destroy the thieves who stole the honey of the holy bees from the cave where he was born by striking them with lightning because he is thwarted by Themis and the Fates (Moirai), the purported reason for this intervention being that it would be unbecoming for the holy one (hósion) to cause anyone's death in this place' (1979:160; own translation). By contrast, this is the very constraint from which Yahweh is conspicuously free where Jonah is concerned; he even presses it into service to bring his stubborn prophet to new insight. His behaviour is essentially informed by a demonstrable interest in the world of mankind whose well-being means so much to him that he is prepared to take endless pains, after effecting the conversion of the vast heathen population of the great city, to school the insignificant, stubborn, orthodox man of God to his divine purpose. The use to this end of the gentlest possible persuasive technique – involving the gourd and the worm – in contrast with the dire harshness and terrifying drama of the storm and the sea-monster employed earlier, results in a discrepancy of tone from which it can only be concluded that the spirit of Yahweh possesses that rarest of all divine attributes – namely humour.[3] Even his last word on the subject does not have the uncompromising finality of a divine dictate, but poses an open question.

On the other hand the attributes of a wrathful and jealous God have been transferred to Yahweh's idiosyncratic prophet in the final dialogue: 'But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry' (v.1). His prayer, in which he seeks to vindicate himself before his Lord, elevates him to a virtually heroic stature of unimpeachable integrity: he had fled from God: 'for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil' (v.2). If he did not merely gain this insight in retrospect but had possessed it all along, his words are ironical in that they remind the Lord that this mercy is an article of faith, and indirectly reproach the Lord for having taken unfair advantage of this quality. Beseeching the Lord to take his life from him at this juncture constitutes a demonstration by the servant of uncompromising consistency as a moral standard in

order to instruct the Lord who has relaxed the rigour of his own consistency somewhat. The Lord disarms this reproach by replying with a gently chiding question: 'Doest thou well to be angry?' (v.4), and follows this answering question up with the gently instructive therapy involving the gourd and the worm. Patience and tact instead of an autocratic assertion of authority mark out the good teacher, and Yahweh is at least partially successful in adopting this strategy: Jonah is deeply gratified by the cool shelter afforded by the gourd. But, he again longs for death when the Lord causes the gourd to wither and in addition sends a strong, parching wind that, in concert with the fierce heat of the sun, drains Jonah of all vitality. The expression of his renewed death wish is again countered with the question: 'Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?' (v.9). Here we have another instance in which the insignificant has unobtrusively become the representative of the cosmic, in that the humble gourd is used to bring home the issue of the divine right to extend forgiveness, which is beyond the grasp of the human intellect. The smaller the cause the more absurd the pusillanimity of the objection. God adroitly clinches the argument in a display of undeniable shrewdness: 'Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: and should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?' (v.10). The wise pedagogue prefers to leave questions open so that his pupil may find the answers for himself and in so doing disabuse himself of fallacious knowledge and beliefs which he had considered beyond dispute; in other words, the purpose of this didactic technique is to lead the disciple to new insight which he gains in the process of grappling with the question confronting him. The technique of using a question as a conclusion, which occurs only once in the Bible and rarely in the literature of antiquity, strikes the contemporary reader as curiously modern and he would not hesitate to bestow on Yahweh the distinction of being the first Socratic teacher were it not for the storm of denunciation that this would assuredly provoke from both the theological and the philosophical fraternity.

3. From theological reconstruction to literary application

In the full knowledge that scientific legitimacy can only be claimed for questions that can be answered,[4] I freely admit that I neither can nor wish to apply this admissibility test to the many questions about the text that are raised in my mind by incongruities encountered at the first reading. Here I leave it to theological criticism to unsettle my profane reading. In fact, I draw on theology[5] to establish the primary real-life context, the modus dicendi or 'colloquiality' of the genre and the hypothetical questions to which the text provided answers when it was created. Even this exposition can only be done selectively here to the extent that it is required as preparation for a literary application, the object of this exercise being to determine whether the book *Jonah* could supply the secular reader with an answer to a topical question that affects him directly and can only be formulated today – a question that, in

relation to the central theme, would only be valid if the exposed strangeness of the text may be understood in the light of such a question as a manifestation of both an actual and a potential different mode of existence (in this I am correcting the demand that harmonisation should be effected by concentrating mainly on the identification of elements of the familiar, present context in the foreign context).

I shall begin with an excellent practice that is common in the study of literary history, namely that of identifying the genre to which the text belongs: it is, then, a moral narrative in the wisdom tradition, formally classifiable as *Midrash*, to which the binomial 'ways and words' is applicable. More specifically it is a story that is intended as an aid to the study of a tradition. The contents of the story of Jonah belong to the class of prophetic narratives which typically include events such as the assignment of a divine mission, statement of the prophetic message (couched in a distinctive poetic style), delivery of the prophetic message (this may take the form of a judgmental or conversion sermon), and the suffering and enmity endured by the prophet (in consequence of either obedience or disobedience on his part). Although the prophet's individuality may be so heavily emphasised by the narrative events concerning the fulfilment of his calling that he may be portrayed as an exclusive 'I', 'he himself is never the "hero" of the story; rather it is Yahweh who uses the prophet to magnify his own name' (Von Rad, 1968:302). The absence of Jonah's biographical details is explained by their unimportance, which is evident from the fact that the narrative is not told for the sake of Jonah himself. The specific narrative structure – embroilment in a conflict of current norms, which resolves itself in an unexpected turn of events, only to be followed by further developments leading to renewed embroilment that reaches a high point of intensity in a final aporia – seems to be uniquely characteristic of the book *Jonah*, and in fact, as will be shown, closely resembles the form of the modern novel.

The inquiry aimed at establishing the primary context is complicated by the fact that the origin of the book of *Jonah* is dated to the fourth century B.C. but that it is concerned with a man of God from a more remote period. The historical Jonah, who is placed in the reign of Jeroboam in the eighth century, was 'one of those prophets of salvation in whom the national religious pride of Israel found a bastion of strength, but who, at the same time, was most severely castigated for his religious stance by Amos' (own translation).[13] The revival of interest in him certainly cannot be assigned to the traditionalistic concern for the epic eulogising of ancestral times (laudatio temporis acti); instead it has the didactic purpose of resolving a then current controversy arising from two conflicting interpretations of the Torah by re-examining (and reinterpreting?) a tradition. The subject of the controversy is the question: Can God's mercy be extended to nonbelievers, or must it of necessity exclude them? Although conjectures about motivation arising out of contemporary history should not be allowed to harden into conviction (Wolff, 1965:14), I nevertheless propose to reconstruct the questions to which the narrator gave his answer in this text as follows: 'What is God's purpose with the people of the earth? What is the task assigned to Israel in this regard?' (Wolff,

1959:col.855; own translation). Since the universalist approach has become natural to the informed reader as the particularistic belief in an 'ancestral God' has become foreign to his orientation, these questions hardly seem amenable at this stage to an applicative exposition that could convince a secular reader of our own time and satisfy more than his historical curiosity.

On the other hand even the function of the prophet has been thoroughly discredited as a result of political exploitation. If the book Jonah were no more than a typical prophetic narrative the barrier to its reception by the secular reader would be insurmountable in my opinion, because then certainly the true strangeness of the text would no longer reside in the fact that at present it can only be understood from a historical point of view, but in the naive intellectual orientation of our own forebears, who held the text to be the literal truth! Far from being a typical prophetic narrative, however, the book *Jonah* is in fact, according to Gerhard von Rad, 'the last and rarest bloom of an old and nearly dead literary tree' (own translation). It is the last and rarest bloom because, in the final analysis, this narrative, 'which breathes a charm and lightness in the telling that is without parallel in the whole corpus of prophetic literature' (Von Rad, 1968:302; own translation), questions its own validity!

It should also be noted in this regard that 'Jonah', the name of the reluctant prophet – who is never referred to as a prophet in the text – means 'dove' and as such may be an ironic reference to Israel herself: 'The hidden parenthesis of the moral tale is an almost satirical comment on Jewish particularism. But the book Jonah only warns indirectly. Its tenor is that Yahweh achieves his goal even with a rebellious Israel' (Wolff, H.W., 1959:col. 855; own translation).

As Von Rad has it: 'The oddness of the fact that one of the last prophetic utterances of Israel should express such devastating self-criticism remains unresolved, however (Von Rad, 1968:303; own translation). At the same time, however, it should be born in mind that, through his long-suffering and his ingenious exercise of patience, the God 'who does not glorify himself in his messenger, but in the complete inadequacy of his messenger' (own translation), has for once divested himself of his authority in order to win over his messenger who maintains his unbending partisanship to the point where he finally becomes disobedient. Von Rad's paradoxical statement plainly implies that the attribute of 'humour' can be assigned to God, thus supporting the evidence already adduced to this effect. And although humour and self-glorification are mutually exclusive, a god may surely be allowed to glorify himself, as a rare exception, by means of humorous indulgence, particularly when this God who, in contrast with Jupiter, for example, can allow himself a joke and possess himself in patience, is successful in his pedagogic exercise. For who among us would not wholeheartedly agree with the implied answer to his last answering question? If the biblical Jonah, of whom nothing further is related by the text (Von Rad, 1968:302), had yet again spurned this answer because he considered himself to be more like Yahweh than Yahweh himself, then he did not deserve his God.... .

In the light of the foregoing I now proprose to formulate the questions to

which the text did not provide answers in its own time but could certainly provide noteworthy answers in our time, as follows: How should God be conceptualised – theoretically – if he wishes to demonstrate a facet of authority to the present age that differs entirely from the currently held conception of authority? How could the dogmatism of an overzealous party supporter be overcome and consensus be achieved – in practical terms – in spite of unresponsiveness owing to wilfulness and lack of understanding?

A new interpretation of the text in the light of these questions is not needed here because such an interpretation was hammered out some time ago in a seminar discussion with students, and it implicitly informed the text analysis – particularly with respect to the explication of the growing complexity of the characters of Jonah and Yahweh as manifested in the dialectics of 'master and servant'. The naive approach to an archaic text – here I agree with H.-G. Gadamer – inevitably falls prey to the illusion of immediacy. In the act of apprehending the text the later horizon of the reader invariably overlaps the earlier horizon of the text, which must be deliberately viewed in the light of contemporary experience in order to throw its strangeness and remoteness into prominence so that – here I am presumably still at variance with Gadamer – a gradual, spontaneous merging of horizons can be effected by a process of horizon contrasting. However, I do not wish to merely ask my readers to reread Part II in order that they may establish to what extent the tracing of strangeness in the book *Jonah* by means of the hermeneutic bridge of question and answer has already resulted in a recognition of its otherness that incorporates recognition of its strangeness and thus provides explicatory access to the text[8]; in addition I should like them to consider whether and when the questions formulated above have failed to overcome the resistance of the strangeness in our own environment. I still have to show why the distinctive, complex form and open structure of this last prophetic narrative has in many respects anticipated a particular modern narrative genre to such an extent that the book *Jonah* can at a pinch be classified as the first novel in world literature, a fact that certainly contributed to the pre-eminent popularity that this form has acquired as regards Bible reception.

According to the analysis by André Jolles[9] entitled *Einfache Formen* (simple forms), which is still relevant, the novel in its definitive form as created by Boccaccio is a complex, highly sophisticated literary construct that constitutes a radical departure both from the idealism of heroic literature and from the direct moralising of didactic genres, and that often revives older simple forms (such as the legend, the miracle, the vita and the comical tale) by the introduction of a time setting and a problematic element. The narrator in the book *Jonah* reintroduces simple forms in exactly the same way (themes from sailor's yarns or myths, examples of the prophetic narrative conforming to the Jeremiah and Elijah tradition, the prayer) and, while adapting them to a new, didactic purpose, reshapes them in the sophisticated form of a story characterised by unresolved tension ('whether-at-all' vs. 'how') and an unpredictable course of events calculated to take the auditor or reader by surprise at every turn and thus raise thought-provoking questions in his mind, and ending in an open question that challenges him to draw his own conclusion

about the moral of the story. Although the world portrayed by the story is epically remote from that of the reader, it is not idealised because it is concretised in terms of time and place. The conventional idealisation of people is also eliminated in that the order in which roles representing the dichotomy of good and evil are assigned to characters categorised as friend or foe is reversed: the pagan mariners and the inhabitants of Nineveh 'are simple and transparent before God; Jonah is problematical and psychologically complex' (1968:301; own translation). Whereas the later novel opposes fallible, changeable and ambiguous characters to the perfect saint, or the blameless knight, or the woman whose beauty is only matched by her nobility, the narrator in the book *Jonah* likewise opposes the heathen, who attains to nobility by his penitence, to an unregenerate, mean-spirited servant of the Lord whose mood alternates between anger and world-weariness and who seeks to evade the omnipresent, omnipotent authority of his Master by resorting to actions and equivocations that are frequently reminiscent of the subversive behaviour of the inimitable 'good soldier Svejk' (consider, for example, the propitiatory prayer in ch. 4.2 that is so adroitly turned against Yahweh) with the result that the remote forerunner of the modern antihero can be discerned in the figure of Jonah, who is portrayed as a 'prophet in spite of himself'.

The feature of the book *Jonah* that bears the closest resemblance to the novel as a modern genre, however, is its distinctive casuistic form: unlike the legend or the exemplum, which consists in imitation or direct moral teaching, this narrative imposes 'the obligation of arriving at an independent conclusion on the reader, but does not contain the conclusion – it presents the process of deliberation, not the result of deliberation' (Jolles, 1956:158; own translation). A comparison of the biblical Jonah with his counterpart in the Jewish legends collected by Louis Ginzberg will show to best advantage that the innovative achievement embodied in the form in which the book *Jonah* is cast required exceptional ability in the narrator (Ginzberg, 1968:246–253). In the legend the fallible and impenitent man of God is still (or again?) presented as an exemplary saint who achieves perfection in that – according to Jolles' reading of the legend – 'he is the personification of virtue (...), an ideal figure who is a paragon to both his immediate and wider context' (Jolles, 1956:29). Here the same unprecedented events that suspend a question mark over the motives and actions of the biblical Jonah are recast, amplified and embellished to confirm Jonah's faith, establish his righteousness before God and finally even bring about his escape from death in that he is transported in an instant into paradise.

In the legend the process of elevating Jonah to sainthood is initiated from the outset in that he is selected, as Elijah's best pupil, first to anoint king Jehu and later to apprise the inhabitants of Jerusalem of the imminent downfall of their city. Then, however, when the prophesied doom is not fulfilled because the people repent their evil ways and Yahweh pardons them, Jonah is stigmatised by the Jews as the false prophet. This historic preamble is given to indicate that Jonah is perfectly justified – on the ground of his implicit faith in

God's mercy and his unwillingness to risk being branded as a false prophet again – in rejecting the mission to carry God's message to Nineveh. Moreover, Jonah concluded that in providing the ship in Joppa for his specific convenience, Yahweh must surely be signalling his approbation of this decision. The ensuing storm is a miraculous event in that it threatens to destroy Jonah's ship alone while leaving all others quite secure. In this way Jonah is taught 'that God is the Lord of heaven and earth and that no man can hide from his countenance'. This object lesson is followed without more ado by the scapegoat ritual (an anomaly in the motivational apparatus). Again, in this version the ship's company is augmented to represent not less than seventy nations and a corresponding number of deities that have to be invoked. In addition the magnanimity of the heathens is enhanced here. First the passengers refuse to countenance Jonah's atrocious proposal that he be thrown into the sea, and even when they have prayed to the unknown God, beseeching him not to hold them accountable for innocent blood, they still cannot bring themselves to carry out the sacrificial act and try to pacify the sea by first lowering Jonah only knee-deep, then up to his navel, and at last up to his neck in the water. Each time the storm abates momentarily, only to break out with renewed fury, and it only ceases entirely when the sea has claimed its victim.

Whereas in this instance the miraculous element is characterised by the strangeness of magic, it assumes unmistakable features of a totally different strangeness in the whale prodigy, namely the fairy-tale extravagance of a Lucianic type of tall story. It is only the new beginning of the narrative that still presupposes a naive orientation to religious faith in that it relates that God made a wonderful fish just for Jonah when he created the world (incontrovertible proof that he was the chosen of God). I may be wrong, but to my mind the description of the fish and the vagaries of its career overstep the bounds of the willing suspension of disbelief, that is, the limits beyond which the purely aesthetic enjoyment of the 'truth' of Lucian's *True Stories* becomes impossible under the sheer weight of this improbability. The fish was so large that Jonah felt as comfortable in it as in a goodsized synagogue; its eyes served Jonah for windows; a diamond radiating a light that was as bright as the noonday sun enabled Jonah to see right down to the darkest depths of the sea. This fairy-tail fantasy seems to overcome the strangeness for us; one can marvel at how different it is from ordinary reality but one cannot question it without destroying its pleasant plausibility. May we conclude from this circumstance that belief in a presented reality (or the reality of the unreal) is a prerequisite for apprehension of the resistance of strangeness, and that this resistance may therefore be basically incompatible with the enjoyment of fiction as fiction, whether it be pleasant or horrifying? I shall now consider this question with brief reference to alternative versions (which clearly derive from heterogeneous sources) of the following episodes.

Leviathan threatens to swallow the marvellous fish, but Jonah manages to prevent this; Leviathan flees when he sees the sign of the covenant on Jonah's body. The fish demonstrates its gratitude by taking Jonah on a tour of all the most remarkable sights of the world: To the river that is the source of the ocean, to the spot where the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, and many others.

Then the author seems to remember the biblical narrative again. When Jonah has spent three most diverting days in the fish's belly and it still does not occur to him to plead with God to release him, God sends an even larger, female fish with 365 (year symbol) young that – not without the renewed intervention of Leviathan – make life unberable for Jonah, who now finds himself housed in less comfortable quarters. He now beseeches God's deliverance with the utmost sincerity and promises to carry out his task. He is then not simply spewed up but is expelled with such prodigious force that his giant trajectory carries him 965 'parasangs' inland – a last wonder thrown in solely to provide the final, decisive impetus that will ensure the conversion of the ship's inmates, who reputedly then go to Jerusalem and live there as devout proselytes.

In its early stages the Nineveh episode corresponds with that in the bibilical text, except that all the proportions are exaggerated as usual. Nineveh is a vast city with no less than one and a half million inhabitants, but to Jonah this is a mere trifle because he has a voice of such stentorian power that it carries to the remotest corners and immediately moves the entire populace, the king being foremost among them, to change their wicked ways. This radical conversion is related with many details drawn from life to impart the verisimilitude of local colour: the livestock give voice with the rest because the young are separated from their mothers; the Ninevites call out to God: 'If you do not show mercy to us, we shall show no mercy to these animals'; not only are fasting and prayer the order of the day, but all litigation is brought to an end by amicable settlement. The fact that God then forgives Nineveh emboldens Jonah (there is not the slightest hint of anger) to vindicate himself before God and to ask God's forgiveness for seeking to flee from the task assigned to him: 'God spoke to him: "Thou wast mindful of Mine honour" – the prophet had not wanted to appear a liar, so that men's trust in God might not be shaken – "and for this reason thou didst take the sea: Therefore did I deal merciful with thee, and rescue thee from the bowels of Sheol." ' A new motivation must now be sought for the next episode, which is that of the gourd: the great heat in the fish's belly has consumed Jonah's clothing and made his hair fall out. God protects him by means of the tree that grows up overnight and possesses 275 leaves, all exceeding a span in size, and after letting it wither he delivers the known admonition. At this stage Jonah draws the conclusion that has by now become inevitable: 'O God, guide the world with thy kindly hand' (free translation). But as if this is not enough, the Ninevites forsake Yahweh again after forty days, are more sinful than before and perish in an earthquake sent as a judgment upon them while Jonah, as already mentioned, is compensated for his suffering in the unplumbed depths of the sea (another motivational inconsistency!) by being transported into paradise.

There is a world of difference between the legend, which justifies Jonah's disobedience in order to preserve the particularistic faith, and the biblical book *Jonah*, which makes Jonah a problematical figure to prepare the way for the introduction of a universalised faith. In the book *Jonah* the translation from the dogmatism of the old faith in a God who excluded heathens as strangers from his covenant with Israel to a faith in a God who intends

henceforth to encompass heathens in his mercy, is completed before our eyes in a way that does not merely postulate the conflict between the two principles 'theoretically' but demonstrates it dramatically in a new narrative form that has clearly been created for the purpose by the narrator himself. God's universalised plan and the opposing particularistic disposition of his prophet reach a deadlock that is broken by an 'unprecedented occurrence', and would be resolved in this manner were it not that Jonah, who refuses to be shaken from his prejudice, revives the issue a second and a third time in a new situation demanding yet another miraculous intervention – in a regressus ad infinitum which his adversary finally ends but leaves unresolved by asking his great clinching question: thus placing the burden of the final decision squarely on the reader's shoulders! As we know, Goethe defined the novel (to Eckermann, 25.1.1827) as 'an account of an unusual event' (own translation). The full meaning of this definition only becomes apparent when it is applied to the simple form of the problem dominating the book *Jonah*. It also becomes apparent that the 'unusual event' can be more precisely described as an occurrence incorporating an unexpected turn of events that solves a problem arising from a conflict between two principles, a conflict in which the characters in the narrative enmesh themselves. Jolles traced the emergence of the novel to the method of narrative presentation typifying the courtly-love tradition of the Middle Ages. The introduction into that genre of problematic situations involving warring principles of equal weight is a development approaching the form of the novel, in which the basic problem is resolved by an event that, in Boccaccio's work, is included as a decisive turning point in the development of the central theme and takes the form of either a stroke of unforeseen good luck or an unprovoked, tragic blow of fate. In the *Decameron* this narrative pattern is a recurrent structural element and, 'true to the familiar phenomenon occurring in real-life situations wherever principles are concerned, one problem has hardly been disposed of when another takes its place; in fact the disappearance of one causes the appearance of the other' (158; own translation).

In my view there is a striking resemblance between the narrative structure of the novel as outlined above and the complex structure of the book *Jonah*: the multiple reversals in the lines of action typifying the actors (Jonah fleeing from his mission; the repentance of the seamen and the Ninevites; and Yahweh thinking better of his pronounced judgement) are not simply brought about by a series of completely different, unprecedented events. The summoning of the storm and the whale, the rescission of the divine judgement, the summoning of the gourd, the worm and the desert wind are not just wonders attesting Yahweh's omnipotence and mercy, but are also events that unexpectedly and unforeseeably resolve the conflict between the particularistic and the universalised approach to faith and yet, at the same time, repeatedly reopen the whole issue in a succession of inextricably linked developments. Thus, if the last prophetic narrative of the Old Testament is seen in the light of the foregoing observations it can certainly be regarded as the first novel in world literature. It differs from the later (secular) tradition of the genre in that it ties the relevant casuistic knot three times and anticipates the

modern dialectics of master and servant in the archaic struggle between the immeasurably great God and the insignificant prophet.

My proposition was that the book *Jonah* contains answers to contemporary questions which I shall now reiterate to refresh the reader's memory: How should God be conceptualised in theoretical terms if he wishes to demonstrate to men living in our own times how different authority can be? And – in practical terms – how could the dogmatism of an overzealous party man be dismantled and his willing support be gained if he is unresponsive owing to his wilfulness and lack of understanding? To this one could retort that modern authorities do not have the use of the judiciously administered wonder at their disposal and can only envy the ancient authority on that score. In this regard the attempted applicative exposition is confronted by a last barrier of strangeness which cannot be penetrated by literary hermeneutics but must wait the attention of another superlative narrator.

(Translation from the German: CENSAL.)

Notes

1. Since the Hebrew *and* may have either an additive or an adversative function that can only be ascertained from the context, *and* and *but* appear alternatively in different Bible translations. The German text quoted here is taken from the Zurich Bible, 17th edition, 1980.
2. In his essay 'Das Zeichendes Jona – über das sehr Grosse und das sehr Kleine in der Literatur' (The sign of Jona – on the very great and the very small in literature; now incorporated in Weinrich, 1971:35–44). Weinrich has pioneered an approach to interpretation which I gratefully apply and amplify here.
3. The humorous element in the book of Jonah has been accorded recognition in theological interpretation (cf. Wolff, 1959:73).
4. Consider, for example, the following observations made in this regard by L. Wittgenstein in *Tractatus Logicophilosophicus* (6,5): 'If an answer cannot be expressed, then the relevant question also cannot be expressed. Riddles do not exist. If a question can be formulated at all, then it *can* also be answered' (own translation).
5. Apart from Wolff (1965 and 1959) I am particularly indebted to Von Rad (1968:300 et seq.).
6. 'We know nothing of a denunciatory universalistic oppositon to the "particularistic" orientation propagated in Ezra and Nehemiah, and strictly speaking this little book contains no hard evidence to that effect' (Von Rad, 1968:302; own translation).
7. Uwe Johnson derives the conclusion of his version of the Jonah narrative from this fact: 'And Jonah remained seated within sight of the sinful city of Nineveh and waited more than forty times forty days for its destruction? And Jonah departed from this life into death, which he preferred? And Jonah arose and lived out his life in Nineveh? Who knows' (1966:59).
8. Here I am adopting H. Weinrich's distinction between strangeness and otherness (according to his publication: 'Fremdsprachen als fremde Sprachen').
9. Wolff (1965) discerned novelistic features in the book *Jonah*, but based his observations exclusively on the work of W. Kayser, with the result that the relevance of the distinction between the casuistic structure of the (Tuscan) novel as analysed by

Jolles (1956) and the earlier 'simple forms' was not taken into account. For criticism and elaboration of the work by Jolles see the publication: *Alterität und Modernität der mittelalterlichen Literatur*, Munich, 1977, p. 40 et seq.

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