

RECURSION AND VARIATION IN THE “PROPHECY” OF JONAH: ON THE RHETORICAL IMPACT OF STYLISTIC TECHNIQUE IN HEBREW NARRATIVE DISCOURSE, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO IRONY AND ENIGMA

ERNST WENDLAND
Bible Society of Zambia
Lusaka, Zambia

[Part Three]¹

6. *On the Incisiveness and Inclusiveness of Irony in Jonah*

There is no doubt among most commentators that irony does occur in the book of Jonah. The debate rather concerns the extent to which this device is manifested: in a relatively few isolated instances or virtually throughout the text?² Of course the issue of occurrence and distribution cannot be decided without first determining a definition for the term “irony”; here one encounters additional difficulty because a number of proposals may be considered in relation to several posited subtypes.³ But in general, irony typically involves some critical conflict, contradiction, incongruity, contrast, or contraexpectation, whether overt or covert. Such a focal disjunction pertains to two (or more) distinct levels of knowledge, perception, speech, or behavior, and with respect to two (or more) individuals or groups.

Concerning its rhetorical operation, then, irony usually functions to convey—either explicitly, or more commonly, in an implicit manner—a

¹Parts One and Two of this article appeared respectively in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 35 (Spring 1997): 67-98 and 35 (Autumn 1997):189-209.

²As representatives of these two extremes, we have respectively Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 437-438; and Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Sheffield: Almond, 1981), 41.

³These cannot all be discussed and evaluated here (cf. Ernst R. Wendland, *Demarcating the Compositional Units of Hebrew Prophetic Discourse: A Rhetorical-Structural Approach, As Exemplified in the Oracles of Hosea and Joel*, Text and Studies Series [Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical Press, 1995], chap. 6). Useful definitions and biblical illustrations of related literary tropes (e.g., sarcasm and satire) are found in Good, 26-28.

certain measure of *criticism* that may or may not be perceptible or even accessible to the one(s) being criticized (or as it were, "ironized"). However, the "burden of recognition," as Edwin Good puts it, rests with the primary receptor(s) of this barbed form of plurisignification, that is, "the discovery of the [incongruous] relation between the ironist's 'is' [i.e., human self-perception] and his 'ought' [i.e., the human reality]."⁴ Thus the crucial implication for effective literary communication and analysis is that a partial or complete "failure of this recognition" will lead to a "misunderstanding of the ironist's criticism,"⁵ and the point he or she was trying to make, whether major or minor in relation to the intended message as a whole.

For the sake of classification, I will distinguish between two general types of irony, namely, "textual," which places special emphasis on some incongruous or contrastive use of language, and "contextual," which deals with the unexpected import of events in general or the inappropriate, incriminating, or self-destructive behavior of certain narrative participants in relation either to each other or to the larger plot (story-line). *Textual* irony, in turn, may be either "verbal" or "evocative" in nature: The *verbal* variety is grounded in the discourse itself (direct or indirect speech) and a double meaning (one sense being primary or foregrounded) that is conveyed by what one character says to another, whether deliberately or in ignorance. *Evocative* irony, on the other hand, is effected by a certain prominent opposition or antithesis that becomes apparent as a result of what is said (or narrated) at a given point in the account as distinct from a former (intratextual) citation or some familiar intertextual reference.

Similarly, *contextual* irony is twofold: it may be dramatic where a sharp contrast in attitude or behavior is drawn between two (or more) characters, or when there is a significant discrepancy between what a certain character supposes "reality" or the "truth" of a matter to be and what the enlightened audience knows it actually is by virtue of what the narrator (or "implied author") has revealed to them. Situational irony, on the other hand, occurs when there is presented a sequence of events, a combination of circumstances, or a final outcome that is the opposite of what might be expected or considered just and/or appropriate in relation to some conventional pattern or accepted standard (including a moral or religious norm). The four subcategories proposed above (i.e., verbal, evocative, dramatic, and situational) are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and there may well be a certain amount of merging or overlapping with respect to their concrete realization within a given story. Moreover,

⁴Good, 31.

⁵Ibid.

differences in the details of classification will inevitably arise depending on one's point of view and the particular nature of the analysis that was carried out. The purpose of these four distinctions is simply to sharpen one's perception of the great depth, diversity, and multifunctionality of the operation of irony in biblical narrative, with the book of Jonah being our particular focus of attention.

Textual Irony

a. Verbal. In verbal irony, one individual communicates an element of critical dissatisfaction, disapproval, rebuke, or censure to another person (or group) by means of some overstatement or understatement. This discrepancy between what is said (i.e., the ironic *vehicle*) and what is actually meant (i.e., the *tenor*) is invariably marked, that is, overtly "cued," within the textual surface (or the contextual setting) in some way—gesturally (e.g., by a distinctive facial expression), phonologically (e.g., through vocal modulation or intonation), lexically (e.g., by selective reiteration or punning), semantically (e.g., by use of an incongruous collocation of terms or hyperbole), and/or morphosyntactically (e.g., by means of a rhetorical question or a shift in word order). Verbal irony is most prominent in the pair of dialogic confrontations involving YHWH and Jonah recorded in Jonah 4. The ironic sequence begins with a reversal of the divine messenger formula: Now, as it were, it is "the word of Jonah [that comes] unto YHWH" (4:2; cf. 1:1; 3:1). Later, when the LORD responds to Jonah's request for death (4:3-4), he ironically foregrounds the impropriety of his prophet's attitude and value system by reiterating the root "good" (*tôb*) in an emphatic, compound verb construction:

Jonah: "My death is *good*" (i.e., because you spared Nineveh).

YHWH: "Is your burning [anger] *good*?" (i.e., since I spared Nineveh).

The obvious answer to the LORD's rhetorical question is emphatically "no!" This ironic interchange continues in chiasmic sequence in vv. 8-9:

YHWH: "Is your burning [anger] *good*?" (i.e., since the plant was destroyed).

Jonah: "My burning [anger] is *good*, (especially if it leads to) my death" (i.e., because of the plant).

The LORD's reiterated query might be more pointedly rendered: "What right do you have to be angry?"⁶ i.e., "You have absolutely *no* right at all!" since you are in effect presuming to sit in judgment over the Supreme Judge and "the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9), and who even saved you from the sea by causing the fish to vomit you out onto "dry land" (2:9-10). Thus the tragic irony of Jonah's inconsistent loyalty to "*his* God" (2:1; cf. 2:8) is made abundantly clear.

⁶Stuart, 435.

Jonah's unrepentant and hyperbolic response then leads up to the LORD's final word on the matter—a devastating, albeit generally-stated rebuke which, in addition to the *a fortiori* mode of argumentation, also features another prominent instance of “verbal” irony (4:10-11). This usage, in contrast to Jonah's approach, is based rather upon subtle iterative *understatement*: Jonah “pitied” (*hús*), i.e., was deeply grieved about, the plant; YHWH, on the other hand, “pitied,” i.e., relented and did not destroy, the entire city of Nineveh. It is possible, as Wolff suggests,⁷ that another level of irony is also present in the LORD's initial reference to Jonah's “pity”: in fact, the man was not really sorry about the fate of this puny plant at all; instead, he was extremely bitter because of his frustrated hope of seeing the great city destroyed and was perhaps also upset over his potentially ruined prophetic reputation. According to this viewpoint, Jonah's *self-pity* extended to a sense of shame and apprehension due to a likely loss of prestige when it would become known back home that he had been God's chosen instrument in bringing about a deliverance of his nation's worst enemies!

b. Evocative. Textual irony of the evocative kind, namely, that which is based on a prominent correspondence or a distinct contrast in relation to some other passage of Scripture, is generated on a number of occasions throughout the book. There are both intratextual and intertextual instances of this, many of which have already been commented on in Parts One and Two. Virtually all of the repeated sequences of lexical items involve two levels of meaning at some stage or another, depending on which words they happen to be collocated with. The irony that is inherent in the illogical reasoning concerning Jonah's “anger” (*h-r-h*), as contrasted with his “pity” (*hús*) in the preceding example, is of manifest thematic relevance.

Use of this device becomes apparent at the very beginning of the narrative as Jonah's continual physical “going down” (*y-r-d*) in flight from the command of YHWH—first to Joppa (1:3), then into a ship (1:3), and finally down “below deck” (1:5)—may be viewed as a parallel to his moral and spiritual “descent” away from positive fellowship with his God, as he himself suggests—but does not openly admit—in his psalm (2:6). Jonah's estrangement in this regard is intimated by his self-centered confession of 1:9, i.e., *ánāki . . . YHWH . . . ʾnī*. Even a common adjective like *gādól* (“large/great/important”) is skillfully incorporated by the author into his all-embracing ironic network. Everything characterized as “great” in the

⁷Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 173. This interpretation is disputed by Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 218.

account becomes so only by being directly or indirectly associated with the purpose and activity of YHWH, who does not himself require any such augmentative attribution.⁸ Even the "fish," once it has completed its divine mission, is no longer termed "great" (2:10). The only exception to this pattern is negative (and verbal) in nature, occurring with reference to what the rebellious and irreverent Jonah was *not* able to do—that is, he could not even "make great" an insignificant and helpless plant (4:10)!

Evocative irony of an *intertextual* type is also quite prevalent through-out the story, as we have seen. Several important instances involving the nature and role of the prophetic office were noted in Part One. For example, the expected response to the divine command, "Arise and go" (1:2), is immediately "And he arose and went" (e.g., Elijah, 1 Kgs 17:9-10; Jeremiah, Jer 13:4-5). To be sure, Jonah "arises" (1:3), but the audience may well have been shocked to hear (or "rehear") that he does so only "to flee . . . from the presence of YHWH!" The surprise and potential significance of that initial reaction are underscored later when on the second occasion Jonah dutifully (but also silently) obeys "according to the word of YHWH" (3:2). He preaches the divinely assigned message (at least the choicest part from his point of view): "Just forty days and Nineveh will be overturned." Here the key verb *h-p-k* evokes a strong intertextual reminiscence of the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:25, 29; Deut 29:23; Isa 13:19; Jer 49:18; Lam 4:6; Amos 4:11), yet it also semantically embraces within itself "the irony of reversal."⁹ Thus contrary to all (certainly Jonah's) expectation, "the men of Nineveh *believed in God*" (3:5)—and the verbal phrase found here (*'m-n b*) is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures only with reference to God's people Israel.¹⁰ The outcome for Jonah was a great personal tragedy and a psychological disaster, one that left him longing for immediate death at the hands of his LORD (4:3). The horrible experience was exactly like that of his illustrious predecessor Elijah (1 Kgs 19:4) but, ironically, for just the opposite reason: Jonah desired self-extermination on account of the tremendous *success* of his testimony—Elijah, on the other hand, due to the apparent lack of it (1 Kgs 19:10).

Contextual Irony

a. Dramatic. Turning now to contextual (eventive, stative, circum-

⁸Timothy L. Wilt, "Lexical Repetition in Jonah," *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics* 5 (1992): 259.

⁹Trible, 190; cf. the discussion of "enigma" below.

¹⁰Wolff, 150.

stantial) irony of the “dramatic” variety, we take note of several of the thematically pertinent character contrasts that develop as the story unfolds. These examples, all of which spotlight Jonah’s actions and attitudes in relation to that of the other narrative participants, are usually reinforced by “textual” irony as described above. But there does seem to be an added dimension present that serves to enhance the book’s overall message, particularly its ideological import. Jonah refuses to go and “call out” (*q-r-’*) to despicable foreigners God’s message of judgment (1:3), but a friendly pagan sailor has to encourage him to “call out” to his God for deliverance (1:6), along with all his heathen shipmates (1:5). As Jonathan Magonet puts it,

Thus the call words are repeated, but in an ironic fashion, meaning . . . different things to Jonah (and the reader), who hear in them God’s original command repeated, and to the captain, who intends only that Jonah pray to his God.¹¹

Similar instances of the language of traditional Israelite religious piety emanating from the lips of heathen speakers occur elsewhere in the book. The mariners, for example, later “call out” to the LORD to forgive them for putting into effect the judicial decision of the lot they believed to be divinely inspired, as attested by the guilty party himself (1:7, 12, 14). The sailors’ reverent demeanor and worshipful behavior (1:16), no matter how ignorantly motivated in relation to YHWH’s full covenantal requirements, certainly contrast with the words and deeds of the LORD’s chosen prophet, who knows the right answers (e.g., 1:9), but seems so oblivious to their pragmatic implication that he cannot seem to put them into meaningful practice in relation to his fellow human beings anywhere in the account. As Good observes:

Jonah “congratulates himself that it is no idol to whom he prays (v. 9), for idolatry would be the abandonment of covenantal loyalty (*hesed*, v. 8). Yet that loyalty is precisely what Jonah abandons.”¹²

In case anyone did not get the point, it is reiterated even more forcefully through Jonah’s subsequent interaction with the inhabitants of Nineveh. His utmost desire is to see God punish them with complete judgment and swift destruction (3:4), while they wish only the bare minimum of divine mercy (3:8-9). Accordingly, the king penitently humbles himself by “sitting down” (*y-š-b*) in the dust (3:6) and fervently pleads to God to “turn [from] his anger” (*šûb . . . ’appô*, 3:9), whereas

¹¹Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 17.

¹²Good, 54.

Jonah self-righteously "sits down" (4:5) for the sole purpose of watching God bring "evil" (*ra'ah*) upon the whole city (3:10). In his opinion, therefore, it was a great "evil" that the LORD did not act according to his prejudicial personal will (4:1-2). An ironically trenchant transformation has thereby taken place: The "evil" that is offensive to the LORD is no longer that of Nineveh (1:2), but rather that exhibited by his own petulant prophet! Accordingly, Jonah's subsequent "prayer" over the city bitterly laments the fact that YHWH actually did see fit to "take compassion" (*n-h-m*) upon its people. The king, on the other hand, like the captain before him (1:6), can only bring himself to appeal in humility very indirectly to God to "take compassion" so that "we (himself included) are not destroyed" (*lo' nō' bād*). The monarch fears an outpouring of the righteous "wrath" (*āp*) of God (3:9), but Jonah complains when the LORD's just "wrath" is withheld (4:2). Indeed, Jonah appears not to fear the punitive displeasure of God at all, but peevishly demonstrates his "anger" (*hārāh*) over the loss of a divinely provided plant and what he felt was some well-deserved physical comfort (4:8-9). One contrast thus resonates with the next to highlight the tragic irony of a man (in fact, a whole class of like-minded individuals) who had already graciously experienced the abundant mercy of God, but who would selfishly begrudge it to others who were not in his (their) favor.

Contextually based "dramatic" irony may also be generated by a selective lack of knowledge attributed to certain characters within the plot. According to Webster's basic definition, there is a fundamental contrast "between what a character thinks the truth is, as revealed in a speech or action, and what an audience or reader knows the truth to be."¹³ Through-out the first half of Jonah 1, for example, the audience—along with Jonah—knows the reason for the terrible storm, but the mariners do not. This irony (and partial "enigma," see below) is resolved in an emotionally pleasing manner (for those who do not have the same racial or religious bias as Jonah) as the crew gradually comes to a realization of the ultimate divine cause and then makes an appropriate, heartfelt cultic response. The case of Nineveh is somewhat different, but as suggested above, the positive direction in which events are headed is clearly indicated (to the scripturally "literate") by the elaborate, evocative penitential terminology used in the summary of 3:5. In both instances, Jonah's problem does not really involve any ignorance on his part; it is rather a basic misunderstanding of (or a deliberate refusal to understand) the central theological principle concerning the operation of divine *hesed*

¹³Webster's *New World Dictionary of American English*, 3d college edition 1988, s.v. "Dramatic Irony."

("steadfast love") (2:9). YHWH was desirous of demonstrating his gracious deliverance to *all* individuals and peoples (4:2); his mercy was not ethnically restricted to members of the initially chosen and long-favored nation of Israel.

The final example of dramatic irony is foregrounded by means of the text-temporal displacement found in Jonah 4.¹⁴ Thus Jonah leaves the city (4:5), after preaching his short sermon of judgment (3:4), in hopeful anticipation of a positive result—from his jaundiced perspective, i.e., "to see what would happen to the city." The audience already realizes that the eventual outcome is contrary to his wishes (3:10); ironically, even Jonah himself knows it, that is, if the literal surface sequence of the narrative is followed (4:1-4). This makes his subsequent behavior sound even more irrational (4:5ff) and serves to heighten the unrighteousness of his unacceptable moral and religious position in that he would drastically limit the LORD's expression of saving mercy on the basis of his own experience.

The temporal displacement manifested at 4:2 makes possible a reversal of the device of dramatic irony. In this case, the audience lacked a vital piece of information which was available to a narrative participant (cf. "enigma" below). They did not realize that Jonah had actually protested quite vigorously to the LORD about his mission to Nineveh at the very beginning, when he received his call (1:2). That explains his subsequent un-prophetlike behavior—at least partially, for Jonah never says outright that he hated the Ninevites (or their doings) so much that he did not want YHWH to give them even a chance to repent (knowing that if they did, they would receive forgiveness according to the divine nature). The withholding of this vital speech until the latter portion of the story gives listeners a more positive picture of Jonah throughout—and the impression that he was acting more by natural instinct than deliberate prejudice. This effectively keeps the Jonah-vs.-YHWH conflict more in the background until it can be highlighted later by way of contrast, once the Ninevite issue has been happily resolved. The "tragic" nature of Jonah's fundamental character "flaw" (*hamartia*; proud, ethnocentric prejudice) is also dramatically heightened and given such prominence that it becomes the basis for the book's central message. The didactic irony underlying much of what he has spoken previously in the narrative is emphasized through retrospection. For example, "his complaint about Yahweh's sparing the city suggests that his earlier confession was mere heartless orthodoxy, intended only to appease God."¹⁵ Furthermore, his enumeration of the

¹⁴Should this hypothesis be accepted, see the argument in Part One.

¹⁵Branson L. Woodard, Jr., "Jonah," *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 353.

(now) offensive attributes of YHWH in 4:2 only magnifies his own guilt, for he himself had already been a happy beneficiary of the LORD's lovingkindness (*hesed*), a fact which he lauded so poetically (yet superficially) in his psalm (2:9).

b. Situational. The situational variety of contextual irony is the most general perhaps, and hence also the potentially most inclusive (and elusive) category. It is "activated," so to speak, whenever a "character reacts in a way contrary to that which is appropriate or wise,"¹⁶ or when there is "a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what is or might be expected or considered appropriate."¹⁷ Jonah's playing the role of the prophetic antitype in such a blatant manner is an obvious case in point: after receiving the characteristic divine call, he promptly heads in the opposite direction—to Tarshish, the virtual end of the world—without so much as a word of protest, explanation, or argument (thus the account is constructed to sound, 1:2-3). While on his contrary way, then, he receives a lecture on personal piety from a pagan sea captain (1:6), a character who would not normally be known for religious reverence. Shortly thereafter, this poor excuse for a man of God sanctimoniously proclaims his "faith" in the LORD of creation, who "made the [very] sea" that he is presently utilizing in his vain bid to escape (1:9). Having transformed the ocean into an awesome instrument of punishment, YHWH turns around and "appoints" one of its mysterious creatures as a vehicle for effecting a divine rescue operation (1:17). There Jonah sits "for three days," the same amount of time that his Nineveh crusade would be expected to take (3:3). Yes, he does "pray," but his is a prayer that manages to avoid the real theological issue, his obstinate rebellion against the LORD. Instead, he blithely speaks about the public performance of ritualized religious service (2:9) in the "holy temple" (2:4), from which he had just recently been trying to get as far away as possible! Even Jonah's poetic technique fails him, for he intones his exultant song of thanksgiving in the [3+2] rhythm of a lament (which is also suggested by the *hithpa'el* form of the introductory verb *p-l-l* ("pray") (4:2).¹⁸

In like manner one can proceed throughout the entire narrative. Just about anything Jonah says or does has some subtle ironic and an associated thematic implication, one or more that are based on a crucial textual or intertextual contrast or incongruity. The same is true of a number of quotations which emanate from other members of the cast.

¹⁶Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 635.

¹⁷Neufeldt, 714.

¹⁸Cf. Tribble, 162.

For example, in their desperate prayer to the God whom they now know as YHWH, the mariners “reveal a theological good sense and a moral scrupulousness that provides a sardonic contrast to that of YHWH’s prophet.”¹⁹ They optimistically refer to Jonah as being a “man . . . [of] innocent blood,” when everyone hearing the story knows just the opposite (a certain measure of “dramatic” irony is also involved here). Similarly, the pagan king of Nineveh intercedingly and “prophetically” prays for compassion, using language (3:8-9) that God himself later seems to indirectly appropriate in appointing a complete reprieve for the city (3:10).

The result is an underlying accumulation of ironic signification that progressively builds to reach a peak of incisive intensity in the final chapter: God spares the “great city” of Nineveh, and this provokes Jonah to a “great anger” (3:10-4:1). His reactionary “prayer” is another incongruous antitype: although he uses all the right words, Jonah does not praise YHWH’s all-encompassing merciful attributes; on the contrary, he critic-ally laments them (4:2). He does not thank the LORD for saving so many lives (as he did when his own *nepeš* was at stake, 2:8); instead, he asks for immediate death to end his sense of shame, misery, frustration, and failure (4:3). According to the book’s arrangement, Jonah “later” sinks into a peevish funk over the scorching of an ephemeral plant (4:9-10), whereas he could not give the slightest care about the thousands of ignorant human beings “clinging to worthless idols” (2:8) whom the LORD himself was greatly “concerned about” and had given Jonah the privilege of ministering to in their tremendous spiritual need (4:11). The superfluity of irony in the book thus makes it virtually impossible for “concerned” receptors today to read it as a mere story, or more significantly, as a historical account alone. Rather, this prominent rhetorical device acts as a continuous cue that the narrative is meant to be understood on another, more deeply personal level, as a pointed prophetic preachment: what about that germ of “Jonah” in me or in my society? To what extent does his “tragedy” reflect a similar state of affairs in my/our own thinking and behavior?

Functions of Irony

Three special purposes of irony may be briefly noted in addition to the more context-specific instances noted above. They operate in rhetorical concert to enhance the author’s principal *didactic* and *paraenetic* purposes in bringing his “prophetic” message more forcefully home to the

¹⁹Herbert Chanan Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 71.

hearts and minds of all listeners (and readers). First of all, irony appears to lend a perceptible element of *humor* to the account. Though some commentators do not see this,²⁰ it seems apparent—at least to most modern critics—that the narrative does have its lighthearted moments. There is Jonah's ignominious exit from the "great fish" (2:10), for example, in immediate answer, or so it sounds, to his solemn declaration that "salvation belongs to the LORD!" (2:9). Jonah's all-too-typical "angry" reply to YHWH's ironic inquiry about his "anger" over the desiccated castor-bean plant adds a humorous touch to an otherwise emotively "heavy" concluding chapter (4:9). While one would perhaps hesitate to go far as to characterize Jonah as "a laughable figure . . . [who] is held up to scorn by being rendered ridiculous,"²¹ the poetically astute and literarily aware listener does sense a subdued, "gentle" sort of wit that contributes to this tragicomic account a perceptible element of human interest, appeal, and realism.²²

This carefully controlled humorous tone serves to render the character of Jonah in more natural—hence believable—terms. His soul-searching experience therefore becomes more universally and personally applicable, and cannot be simply dismissed as a figment of the fantastic, the parabolic, or the esoteric. This is a feature that concerns the second general purpose of irony in the story, namely, to encourage a fuller psychological *engagement* of the receptor as part of a total, rhetorically conditioned communication event. In other words, the restrained, alternating satiric and tragic tones that unobtrusively color this historical narrative tend to "criticize [Jonah's] failure to reach high but reachable ideals, involving the reader in a moving story that mixes scornful looks and smiles."²³ Jonah's self-induced failure and frustration thus become potentially (or actually) our own as the flashes of his down-to-earth, fallible human nature periodically shine forth throughout the account: his headstrong desire for independence, his deeply set but thinly disguised ethnic prejudices, his self-righteous questioning of the specific plan and purpose of God, his fickle and situationally determined religious moods, and above all, his predominantly self-centered perspective on life and death.

And finally, pervasive irony such as we have in Jonah is used for the purpose of *foregrounding* key aspects of the book's message as a whole.

²⁰See, for example, Stuart, 438.

²¹Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 337.

²²Brichto, 73.

²³Woodard, 357.

This becomes evident in the sequence of contrasts and incongruities that Jonah leaves in his wake as he is swept from one unhappy narrative experience to the next. His perverted attitude toward the LORD's ideal of *hesed*-love is thereby made prominent as part of the overall didactic intention. God is speaking to his people in and through the person of his chosen prophet. Even that portion of the text most disputed as to its originality and appropriateness may be vindicated with reference to this fundamental thematic principle. Stuart explains:

Far from being extraneous, therefore, the psalm is actually pivotal. The hypocrisy of Jonah's attitude in chap. 4 is muddled without the psalm. The psalm celebrates Yahweh's deliverance (cf. Exod 15; Judg 5), and thus fixes an ironic contrast: Jonah's obedience (3:3) is won by mercy; but Jonah cannot abide the thought that Nineveh's obedience could be won the same way!²⁴

Just as Jonah had greatly rejoiced to be himself a partaker of YHWH's wonderful act of merciful deliverance (2:9), he should have been overjoyed to see an entire city-state repent and receive new life (3:10)—even its lowly livestock (3:8, 4:11)! But his reaction was the polar opposite—manifested in brutish, racist, irrational (i.e., for any follower of the LORD) pique (4:9, 4). Irony thus heightens the impact of the double standard of judging that Jonah would impose upon the world at large, the magnanimous divine will being rendered subservient to his own introverted point of view.

7. Enigma and the Ever-unfolding "Mystery" of Jonah

Recursion and deviation in narrative discourse are utilized in the creation of irony, as we have seen, and also a closely related device designated here as "enigma." I am using this word in a somewhat wider sense than its popular (dictionary) reference to a certain phenomenon (speech, behavior, natural state, or set of circumstances) that is distinctly ambiguous, perplexing, surprising, and seemingly inexplicable—or at least so it appears, based upon one's initial and/or superficial sensory perception. I thus employ enigma as a cover term to refer to the various *questions* and conceptual *cracks* which a skillfully composed narrative text (as opposed to one that is mediocre or worse) deliberately creates in the listener's/reader's mind. Such points of interrogation or cognitive disjunction are stimulated by the selection and arrangement of content as well as by the diverse literary and linguistic forms chosen to convey the message. They are intended to be "answered" or "patched," at least tentatively, by inference and anticipation, based upon what the text has already

²⁴Stuart, 473.

said and where it seems to be heading with regard to plot and theme. The importance of the opening scene in setting the stage for what follows and in shaping the initial expectations of the audience cannot be overestimated, for it is "the first step in the intentional production of meaning."²⁵

It should be noted that these author-implemented breaks, queries, and conundrums are always related somehow to the point and purpose of the intended message *in its initial setting* (as closely as this may be determined). The goal of contextual specification and analysis, although quite impossible to fully achieve in practice, is necessary in order to limit the scope of possible textual inquiry to that which is most relevant in terms of so-called "speech-act" theory. This would encompass the primary illocutionary functions of a specific, rhetorically governed discourse, plus any desired perlocutionary effects that are made explicit, either in the text itself or in some related co-text.

It is clear that the *less* current receptors know about the original author, his envisaged or implied audience, the setting of communication, and of course the text itself, the *more* serious gaps in understanding they will undoubtedly experience. As a result, there will be certain important thematically related questions that they will not even realize are implicit in the biblical text. On the other hand, they may seek answers for a number of queries that are either irrelevant to or not derived from the source-intended message. The larger the number of these conceptual lacunae, therefore, the greater the likelihood (albeit unintentional) of faulty exegesis and misinterpretation, that is, the lack of an acceptable or appropriate hermeneutical "closure."²⁶ However, one must distinguish between those gaps or fissures which an author deliberately leaves in the text to create interest and to effect other rhetorical purposes (see below) and accidental "blanks" which are quite irrelevant to the telling of a story and the conveying of its intended message.²⁷

In this connection it is important to differentiate also between a text's author-intended "meaning" (including content, connotation, impact, and purpose) in the initial event and its possible "significance" today, that is, in terms of contemporary relevance and practical application. The former is never completely determinable, but that is quite different from being "open-ended," as Jonah is often claimed to be.²⁸ The criterion of

²⁵Edward Said, cited in Walter B. Crouch, "To Question an End, To End a Question: Opening the Closure of the Book of Jonah, *JSOT* 62 (1994): 104.

²⁶Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), 199.

²⁷Sternberg, 235-237.

²⁸One proponent of such "open-endedness" is Tribble, e.g., 227.

compositional intention, although to varying degrees hypothetical from a present-day perspective and therefore imperfect, is nevertheless the best basis or norm we have for controlling the level of intrusive and potentially distorting subjectivism during the process of analysis, interpretation, and qualitative assessment. Certainly, the analytical tools at our disposal are inexact and our knowledge of the initial biblical context is inadequate, but at least these can provide some general parameters within which the missing pieces of the complete communication puzzle can gradually be filled in as new discoveries are made and as current literary, linguistic, anthropological, and archaeological studies build upon earlier ones to modify, correct, reinforce, or augment our overall understanding.

Despite the fact that in biblical literature we are dealing with a divinely "inspired" author, we must also recognize that he never tells us the whole story, as it were. The information that he presents is always highly selective in terms of both form and content in the service of his higher communicative objectives. This situation is well described by Sternberg as follows:

From the viewpoint of what is directly given in the language, the literary work consists of bits and fragments to be linked and pieced together in the process of reading: it establishes a system of gaps that must be filled in. This gap-filling ranges from simple linkages of elements, which the reader performs automatically, to intricate networks that are figured out consciously . . . and with constant modifications in the light of additional information disclosed in later stages of the reading.²⁹

In the case of complex literary works and/or those that are contextually remote in terms of time, place, culture, and setting, this functionally important gap-filling process—or "multiple system" of processes³⁰—becomes much more tenuous in nature and dependent upon various text-analytical procedures for execution, evaluation, and validation. Such procedures would normally include a comprehensive discourse (generic, structural, lexical-semantic, propositional, and rhetorical) analysis of the larger macrotext,³¹ complemented by a detailed stylistic and semantic "close reading" of the microtext.³² These would naturally have to be coordinated with a careful study of the situational context that pertains

²⁹Sternberg, 186.

³⁰Ibid., 222.

³¹I have applied such a discourse-oriented methodology to Jonah in "Text Analysis and the Genre of Jonah: What Can the Discourse Structure Tell Us About a Unique Prophetic 'Word of the LORD?'" *JETS* 39 (1996): 191-206.

³²As capably demonstrated, for example, in Tribble.

both to the participants and events depicted within the narrative account and also to the (postulated) original author and his intended addressees in their distinct setting of intercommunication.

Before I discuss some of the prominent text-based queries that appear in Jonah, it may be helpful to draw attention to the following aspects of enigma. These are four partially overlapping distinctions that may be made with respect to its possible manifestation in narrative discourse: *Anticipation*, or "foreshadowing," is generated when a specific future outcome or turn in the plot's development is suspected, expected, or even more strongly looked forward to. It is set up or encouraged by something that is either said in the account (e.g., a veiled forward allusion) or done (e.g., a reiterated sequence or pattern of events). Jonah's calculated disobedience of the LORD's command (1:3) introduces an obvious complication into the story. It produces a clear expectation that the book is dealing not only with the problem of manifest corporate wickedness, i.e., that of Nineveh (1:2), but with two crises, including the silent individual rebellion of Jonah. Somewhat later, the communal conversion of all the heathen sailors on board the ill-fated Tarshish-bound ship (1:16) at least hints that the fate of similarly pagan Nineveh might somehow be not as severe as originally suggested in the LORD's first commission. This anticipation is reinforced by the minor but significant changes in wording found in the second sending (3:2).

Suspense involves a much vaguer sort of "anticipation." Some sort of resolution or outcome is awaited—accompanied by a greater or lesser level of interest, emotion, and/or excitement—but one does not know for certain what that will be, whether good or bad in relation to some major narrative participant or enterprise. When Jonah is cast into the sea, for example, there is absolutely no clue concerning his present and future fate (1:14). The sudden calm that follows (1:15) only increases the suspense or, in this case, the apprehension, for it definitely does not look good for Jonah! Not until "the LORD provides" (1:17) is this tension at least partially resolved, then held constant until Jonah finishes his song of thanksgiving and God decisively acts again (2:10). Later, when the prophet finally does preach his message of doom, one wonders what the effect is going to be on the Ninevites. However, his words certainly do not offer much reason for hope for the city (3:4).

Surprise occurs when there is an unexpected outcome or result, that is, when one's prior "anticipation" is either denied, contradicted, or altered (i.e., when a significant variation takes place instead). This usually stimulates varying degrees of worry, awe, or wonder in the listener or reader. The swallowing of Jonah by the mysterious "great fish" (1:17) is

an obvious case in point. That is, of course, preceded by the extraordinary, storm-tossed prayer meeting at sea, one which was organized by a foreign ship's crew but dedicated to the worship of Israel's God, YHWH (1:16). Similarly, though possibly anticipated by those who "know" the LORD, the complete conversion of the great pagan metropolis of Nineveh certainly comes as no small surprise to the audience (3:10). How could all this happen indeed, so fully and so fast? But the important fact is that each of the unexpected eventualities just referred to could have occurred only as a result of determinate divine intervention.

Finally, *curiosity* looks backward, whether near or far, instead of forward in time to something that does not quite make sense in the account due to insufficient evidence or information. It therefore arouses a certain amount of interest, attention, and the desire to know more because of the questions it raises in the listener's mind. Why, for example, do the sailors try their best to row back to shore even after they have learned by infallible lot that Jonah is the cause of the storm (1:13)? Surely this serves to highlight the contrast between their behavior and Jonah's, but their motive is not entirely clear until their subsequent prayer for forgiveness for committing the sacrilege of taking a human life at sea (1:14). Why does Jonah apparently proclaim his abbreviated message for merely a single day (3:4)? Is this yet another indication that he was performing his obnoxious mission only with the greatest reluctance and an ongoing attitude of willful rebellion? Most important perhaps, why does God deal so patiently with such an unfaithful and disagreeable servant as Jonah? Certainly he knew what the man "said" in his heart (4:2) at the very beginning, so why does the LORD wait so long to explicitly (verbally) teach him a lesson? That delay, of course, is just as much for our benefit as for Jonah's, since we too are expected to learn a lesson from this report of his chastening experience.

To summarize: "surprise" involves definite contraexpectation, while "curiosity" evokes a certain measure of ambiguity in relation to how things are turning out in a given story. "Anticipation" and "curiosity," on the other hand, are related by virtue of the fact that they both stimulate the process of active hypothesis formation in the listener's mind—the first in relation to what *will* happen; the second in relation to what *is* happening or *has* already taken place. Another possible difference between the two is that, whereas anticipation is mainly concerned with future *events*, "most of the curiosity gaps bear on [*character-related*] internals—motives, schemes, personality."³³ "Suspense" differs from the other three

³³Sternberg, 284.

in that it is derived from a relatively greater amount of uncertainty in the account, a lack of knowledge that is correspondingly of greater significance to the eventual outcome of the story. It is an innocent ignorance that often "escalates into a clash of hope and fear" which keeps the audience more physically attentive and emotionally involved.³⁴ Suspense, however, is always carefully held in check within Hebrew narrative, e.g., through a divine prophetic (hence certified and certain) prediction, in order to preserve the divine order of things, that is, "God's [sovereign, controlling] involvement in the world and the overriding need to publish his supremacy."³⁵ That is the fundamental presupposition which guides both the author's presentation of the story of Jonah and the expected response of any audience or readership.

I will not attempt to sort out the preceding four distinctions in the overview and exemplification below. They have been introduced simply to indicate the relative complexity and also the importance of enigma as a narrative concept and an analytical tool. Taken together, the enigmatic elements of anticipation, curiosity, suspense, and surprise function in three closely related ways: (a) *structurally*, to lend additional cohesion to an already tightly constructed account; (b) *semantically*, to enhance and to emphasize certain key features of the book's multifaceted theme; and (c) *rhetorically*, to add a greater measure of interest, impact, and appeal with respect to both the surface narrative and its underlying message. In the following discussion I organize the illustration of enigma in Jonah according to four principal (but not necessarily the only) areas of possible realization within a biblical story: in relation to plot, character, vocabulary, and message—or eventive, dramatic, lexical, and thematic enigma, respectively. The four are interconnected and mutually impacting, of course, but for the sake of this presentation they will be treated more or less separately.

Eventive Enigma

Plot-related or eventive enigma is the most general and therefore also inclusive in nature. It involves major uncertainties concerning the sequential, incident-based development of the narrative. The first and seemingly most important question pertaining to plot in Jonah is raised by what is reported in the book's opening verse: what will happen to Nineveh—or more specifically, how *bad* is its definitely implied punishment going to be (cf. Gen 18:21; Lam 1:22)? The suspense stimulated over this issue is renewed (after the shift in spotlight to Jonah

³⁴Ibid., 264.

³⁵Ibid., 267.

in chap. 2) and heightened in more personal terms as the king of Nineveh utters his indirect but poignant plea: "Who knows?" (i.e., whether God will relent and spare his city or not; 3:9; cf. the captain's corresponding pessimistic "hope" expressed in 1:6).

Notice that many issues relating to the cultural and historical background of the text are not directly included in this exegetical stage of analysis. For example: what did the people of Nineveh do wrong? Why pick on the city of Nineveh? Such questions may well occur to an audience today (and will thus have to be answered as the book is made contextually relevant and applied), but they would not have been necessary from the perspective of the original hearers/readers. Contemporaneous receptors would have known all too well about the wickedness which characterized Nineveh the great, and why it justly deserved God's punishment.

The narrative's second principal question is provoked by Jonah's unexpected behavior in 1:3: Why did he act in the way he did—to think that he could "run away from the LORD"? And to leave without even a proper word of protest or complaint—what kind of behavior is that? Now what is going to happen to him as a result—how will he be divinely disciplined (which is surely a strong anticipation at this stage)? Here is where the device of textual "displacement" operates, i.e., the forward movement of Jonah's reply, which should have occurred at the end of v. 2 but is relocated for rhetorical effect to 4:2. This quote clarifies the query concerning Jonah's character, but its removal from 1:2-3 also renders subsequent events in a somewhat more enigmatic light than they would otherwise have been. This reordering, along with the palliative psalm of Jonah 2, also serves to keep the YHWH-Jonah conflict in the background and subservient to the Ninevite issue until it suddenly resurfaces in the final chapter. That the LORD's repeated call to Jonah to go to Nineveh features so much lexical recursion suggests that the relationship between the two crises is still of major concern to the narrator—but how so, and what is the significance of Jonah's obedience on this second occurrence?

Several other important eventive enigmas function to develop the primary pair just mentioned. The first chapter is especially suspenseful in this regard as the dramatic tension elicited by a relentless succession of plot-initiated interrogatives sweeps listeners along from start to finish. For example, What will happen to the ship in the storm (v. 4)? How long can Jonah keep silent about his guilt (v. 6)? Will the lot operate effectively to expose his deception (v. 7)? Will Jonah finally come clean when confronted with his crime (v. 8)? Would the sailors by force of might and sheer willpower be able to save their own lives and Jonah's too (v. 13)?

Will the casting of Jonah into the sea mark the end of his role in the narrative about Nineveh (v. 15)? What effect will the solemn "fear of the LORD" have upon the lives of the crew (v. 16)? This last question remains an enigma to the end, but its positive outcome as far as the sailors were concerned hints at a similar conclusion for the parallel episode in chap. 3. Finally, what will happen to Jonah after he is swallowed by the great fish (v. 17)?

The suspense which has peaked by the close of the second scene is greatly relieved by the revelation that Jonah is only going to spend "three days and three nights" in submarine transit. But how was he going to escape this divinely appointed vessel of deliverance? And what would happen to him then? It is now clear that the respective fates of Jonah and the inhabitants of Nineveh were closely intertwined—but how, and to what end? The psalm of chap. 2 lessens the prevailing tension considerably, but this is only a lull in the storm of the story's persistent forward progression. It serves to intensify the presence of an increasingly important enigma concerning Jonah's character: what kind of messenger of "the word of the LORD" is he? How should he be assessed in personal, moral, or spiritual terms?

Before dealing specifically with this apparent prophet's character, it is necessary to mention what is undoubtedly the central *utterance*-related enigma in the book. This crucial speech act by Jonah is preceded and prepared for by two others which also have a certain enigmatic quality about them, namely, YHWH's command to "call out *against*" (1:2)/"call out *unto*" (3:2) the city of Nineveh. As argued in Part One of this article, the shift in preposition from *ál* to *él*, coupled with the altered narrative/plot setting, i.e., before and after the storm with Jonah, would suggest a change in both connotative tone (from negative to positive) and communicative intent, that is, from complete condemnation (1:2) to the possibility of a reprieve (3:2), if true and total repentance would be forthcoming. In any case, the critical question is: what message did Jonah actually preach to the Ninevites? Did it faithfully represent what YHWH told him to say? Was it limited to the concise, rather cryptic, clause (four words) recorded in 3:4, or was there more? His proclamation does not indicate either *how* or *why* Nineveh was going to be "overturned," *who* was going to inflict this punishment, and *what* the people could do in order to avoid the threatened catastrophe (the focal verb is itself suggestively enigmatic in this regard). At any rate, circumstantial evidence derived from what is reported about Jonah in the rest of the story would indicate that he preached only the bare minimum of the message he was entrusted with and hoped for the worst. Nevertheless, ironically—and

providentially—his words, whatever they were, had the effect of instigating a mass public display of penitence and a consequent divine pardon of the entire city.

Dramatic Enigma

Character-based or dramatic, enigma is naturally very closely related to the eventive variety, since biblical personages are always strongly characterized by their actions and reactions to what is done or happens to them. But their respective natures are also made manifest by what they are reported as saying and, less commonly, by what the narrator reveals about their thinking and feeling as well. In some cases there is an apparent dual level of enigma. This occurs when some vital information is disclosed to the audience, but not to the participants concerned. Thus, while the protagonists may experience certain doubts and queries about their present situation and/or the future course of events, the audience already knows what is going on, at least in part. This is, of course, the basis for “dramatic irony” as earlier described. It also provides the foundation for the dramatic nature of narrative itself. In summary, where there is no ignorance, there can be no conflict; and if no conflict occurs, there cannot be a plot—at least not in the normal narrative sense.³⁶

Certain well-known characters or character types may be endowed with a specific reputation—good, bad, or indifferent—as the story begins. It is based upon the historical and literary tradition which the audience or readers have come to know through enculturation, including religious indoctrination, and which they consequently bring with them conceptually to the narrative event in the form of underlying presuppositions, attitudes, judgments, and opinions. The nature of such character assessment, of course, varies according to the audience, but our concern must always be directed initially toward that of the assumed original receptor group, as difficult and hypothetical as such a contextually related designation may be.

This matter is of considerable importance as far as the content and significance of the book of Jonah is concerned, for on it depends the magnitude of impact in relation to the “great reversal” in thinking which this seemingly unsophisticated narrative ultimately effects. If, as it is reasonable to suppose, the didactic-hortatory purpose of the story is aimed primarily at those whose theological orientation would be similar to that exhibited by Jonah, there would be the greatest possible disparity manifested in relation to their initial estimation of character: Jonah, first introduced as a genuine messenger of the LORD (1:1), would probably be

³⁶Ibid., 173.

viewed in highly positive terms. The foreign (Gentile) mariners, on the other hand, and particularly the pagan, politically, and militarily hostile people of Nineveh would evoke an intensely antithetical connotative reaction. The first major enigma for this audience would likely have been, *why* does the narrator proceed to depict these characters in such an unexpected, unconventional, and culturally contradictory light?

The second, even more important question follows. It is one that, considering the sacred nature of this text, borders upon a critical dilemma, for upon it the book's central message depends: Would the intended recipients (and ultimately you or I) finally have accepted the tremendous, antitraditionalist shift that occurs in the book and commit themselves to its new moral vision and religious perspective—or would the psychological leap be too great? This point is dramatically summed up in the divine rhetorical question that serves to conclude the narrative proper, which has been fully anticipated by the pair of chiding queries of 4:4 and 9. This trio of seemingly Jonah-specific utterances at the same time ironically initiates a demand that each and every receptor personally resolve the enigma involved, not only conceptually, but more concretely, also in their associated behavior towards ethnic outsiders as well: who really is my spiritual "neighbor" (cf. Luke 10:29, 36)? Does this category of interpersonal relationships actually include such characters as the "king of Nineveh"? The final question does not appear to be a free invitation to the audience simply to "Choose sides, [and pick] who is right in this conflict, YHWH or Jonah?"³⁷ Being rhetorical in nature, the interrogative embodies its own intended (or "ideal") answer, i.e., surely the LORD—and his perspective or decision alone—is completely correct. Being ideologically biased, the Scriptures also presuppose the essential justice of YHWH (1:2), as well as his "steadfast mercy" (2:8, 4:2), in all his dealings with humanity. Thus the only question for the current audience concerns the nature and degree of their responsibility and commitment to what they know to be right: In that sense, then, "Will *you* choose to side with the LORD or not?"

Meir Sternberg considers Jonah to be "the only biblical instance where a surprise gap controls the reader's progress over a whole book," a gap that is based on a "false impression produced at the start." He begins with the assumption noted above that the LORD's called prophet would be viewed initially in a very positive light. However, he follows this up with the claim that Jonah's subsequent contrary response would be interpreted in like manner, not as an act of rebellion against a mission that just might allow the mercy of YHWH to be manifested towards Nineveh,

³⁷Crouch, 106.

but "because Jonah is too tender-hearted to carry a message of doom to a great city." The prophet thus acts in protest "against a wrathful God" whose "image grows more and more forbidding as he pursues Jonah with relentless violence." In other words, YHWH initially appears to be the true "villain" of the story, and "it is fear alone that he inspires in the *dramatis personae*." It is not until the general repentance of Nineveh is matched by "the surprise of God's repentance" that this erroneous "model of the narrative world and world view" is shattered, and the reader "discovers that his reading of the past [has been] turned upside down." This realization is reinforced by the revelation of 4:2, and when "this master gap [is] disclosed in closure, God and Jonah prove opposites indeed," and it is shown that "of the two Jonah has been the ruthless one all along and God the merciful."³⁸

While I cannot deny that such a reading of the account is possible, I do not think that it is very probable in terms of the book's original religious setting and initial audience. For them the very mention of Nineveh at the beginning would amount to a raising of the proverbial "red flag," connotatively that is, and it is not likely that anyone would be very upset at all to hear of the city's forthcoming judgment. Jonah is "ruthless" all right, but the narrative's elaborate recursions, subtle variations, and sharp contrasts in relation to the heathen with whom he comes into contact all serve to highlight his impious and implacable behavior from the very start. The story's principal enigma rather concerns *why* Jonah behaves the way he does, and this question is not fully clarified until the fourth chapter, where it is foregrounded throughout—but not its inevitable sequel: what does Jonah (or you/I) finally decide to do? This example illustrates the potentially equivocal quality of literary enigma and also points up the need for grounding any hypothesis concerning its supposed operation in biblical narrative as firmly as possible upon the original text, context, and scriptural co-text.

Lexical Enigma

Lexical enigma is closely related to the presence of irony in Jonah because it also involves a potential plurality or superfluity of meaning. It is occasioned by a use of the same word or root either with essentially the same semantic significance or with a somewhat different meaning in disparate narrative settings. This feature is generated by the text's generous amount of verbal recursion, a process that forces the reader/hearer to question whether a given term is being used as before, or whether some new sense, connotation, or implication is intended. As was pointed out in

³⁸All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Sternberg, 318-320.

Part One of this article, the associative resonance of a particular term automatically increases as a narrative develops by virtue of the fact that it is inevitably either collocated with different words, or it is contextualized in new dramatic settings. In what sense was Nineveh "great" (*gādól*), for example? There is a gradual shift in both denotation (from size to importance) and connotation (from negative to positive) as the account proceeds, and finally "great" ends up being connected with the gracious "concern" (*hūs*) of the LORD (4:11).

In such instances, we are not dealing with an obscurity, or unclarity, of lexical usage, nor is it vagueness (imprecision) either. The author is too skilled a narrator to allow that to happen (at least in relation to his initial receptors). Rather, he occasionally introduces a deliberate ambiguity into the account, where *either* of two or more different, but definite, senses are possible—but probably not both at once. The word *ēlōhīm* in 1:5-6 is an example: either "god" or "gods" would fit (though the latter may be preferable to accent the heathen nature of the mariners). Stuart feels that the noun *rā'āh* in 1:2 is another instance of such ambiguity, meaning either "wickedness" or "misfortune" (but with an emphasis on the latter).³⁹ However, such equivocality again does not seem to be likely if evaluated with respect to the book's *original* setting, where "evil/wickedness" would seem to be the sense most perceptible (and desirable) to the intended audience.

Lexical enigma is also involved more commonly (and importantly) in cases of what I have elsewhere termed "semantic density," that is, where two or more senses are not only possible, but *both* are probably intended in a particular textual context.⁴⁰ In other words, several meanings are appropriate and also mutually reinforcing or complementary at that specific point in the discourse. The vital conjunction *kî* in 1:2, for example, which "performs a major role in Hebrew rhetoric,"⁴¹ is a likely candidate: It may be rendered causally ("since/because"), objectively ("that"), or asseveratively ("surely/indeed"); and all of the options happen to fit here, though most commentators and versions prefer the first, "because their wickedness has come up before me." But an intensive construal (e.g., "obvious") is also attractive,⁴² for this would stress the LORD's indignation over the issue at hand. Not often considered is the possibility of an object clause, because, according to Wolff, "this is not the

³⁹Stuart, 437, 449.

⁴⁰Ernst R. Wendland, "What Is Truth? Semantic Density and the Language of the Johannine Epistles (with special reference to 2 John)," *Neotestamentica* 24 (1990), 2: 304.

⁴¹Tribble, 126.

⁴²Sasson, 3, 75.

message which Jonah is supposed to convey according to 3:4.⁴³ But what if it were, the utterance of 3:4 being a deliberate truncation? Certainly the two segments harmonize well together: "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed [because] YHWH/God is 'faced' with its wickedness!" True to his character, then, Jonah would prefer to accent the negative (3:4) and leave a (potentially merciful) Lord out of the message as much as possible.

Jonah 3 appears to illustrate a number of other instances of semantic density. Here Nineveh is described as a "city great to God" (v. 3), that is, not only large in size, but also of considerable concern to him in his abundant grace. Accordingly, Jonah is commissioned to "cry out" (*q-r-*), both in denunciation of its evil (cf. 1:2) and as a proclamation that saving repentance was still possible. Hence Jonah's short message was twofold in implication: if no genuine penitence occurred, the city would surely be physically "overturned" (*b-p-k*); on the other hand, God just might perform a mighty saving work there, in which case the city would be spiritually "turned over" in a mass conversion event. As it transpired, the latter option was realized, and the LORD relented concerning the "destruction" (*rā'āh*) he had determined to carry out upon the city, which, of course, would have been a tragic calamity (or evil), from their unfortunate perspective. The frequency with which such plurisignification and punning occur in the text contributes to the overall lexical resonance, the emotive richness, and the ideological scope of this brief but profound narrative.

Thematic Enigma

By virtue of the preceding three categories, pervasive enigma is also essentially thematic in nature; that is, it has a definite bearing on the total message that is conveyed, not only in the original situation, but also with respect to captivated listeners (and readers) ever since. This applies in a specific way to the many plot-related, character-based, and lexically significant questions that the text of Jonah generates, as noted above. All of these engage the audience in a search for clues and ultimately answers to the strange and wonderful things that are taking place within the narrative. As Magonet observes:

This anticipating of events is one of the thematic and structural keys of the book itself. Jonah himself states that he fled from God's mission because he "anticipated" (4:2) (*qiddamti*) God's compassionate response.⁴⁴ The irony here is that even at this late stage in the action, Jonah did not realize or even suspect that he himself was the first—and most personally

⁴³Wolff, 95.

⁴⁴Magonet, 88.

touched—recipient of the LORD's manifold mercies. It was all still a tragic puzzle as far as he was concerned. A further thematically relevant irony associated with an enigma involves Jonah's incongruous pitying of a dried-up plant when a great thriving metropolis was in grave danger of being struck down dead before his very eyes (4:5b)! The revelation of this paradoxical attitude is effectively delayed (from its logical location in 4:7) until a point where it can be contrastively juxtaposed with the ideal and ultimate pity of God (4:10a/11a).⁴⁵

In a more general sense, the text of Jonah is "enigmatic"—or we might say, evocative or even provocative—in relation to its manifestation of theme. The question here is: what *constitutes* its "principal" theme? Is it A, B, or C? The answer simply is yes; it is all of these and more. Thus Jonah is a book that appeals to a wide range of receptors, certainly because it presents an interesting, action-packed account of divine intervention in the affairs of human beings, but also because of the potential diversity of its thematic expression and the consequent depth of its overall communicative significance. Not all of the possible themes may be recognized by or realized within every reader or hearer, but they do appear to be conceptually accessible to all who possess the competence and put forth the effort to perceive them.

In this process of thematic extraction and critical assessment it is again important to distinguish between the two so-called *horizons* of interpretation,⁴⁶ that of the *original* text (where the analyst is concerned with intended meaning) and that of the *current* exegete (who is concerned with contemporary significance).⁴⁷ In short, not all interpretations, hence also themes and associated functions, are valid or credible in relation to the initial biblical setting of message transmission. Relative validity and credibility must therefore be determined by a joint consideration of text, co-text, and context as these interrelated perspectives pertain to the assumed rhetorical purpose of the inspired author. Our consideration of theme within this general framework will have to be brief and limited to the bare essentials, namely, a viewpoint governed by the interaction of the major plot participants and key terms. These perspectives are summarized in the two figures shown below:

⁴⁵Cf. Tribble, 223.

⁴⁶Anthony C. Thistleton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with special reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), 16.

⁴⁷E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967), 255.

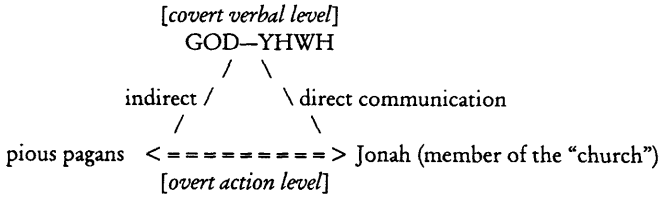


Figure 1. Triangle of Participant Interaction in Jonah

This “triangle” is articulated synchronically with what we might posit as a “circle” of focal semantic significance. In other words, as the various participants interact, sooner or later they confront the issue of the LORD’s steadfast love (*hesed*) in one dimension or another. We thus have a sequence of associated key terms that cluster around this central notion as the events move from the beginning to the end of the account, as schematized (in part) below:

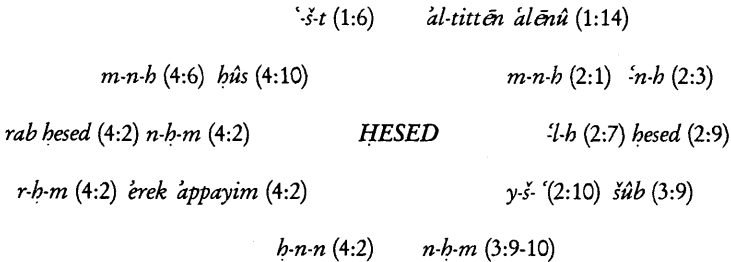


Figure 2. Circle of Semantic-Thematic Significance in Jonah

The concentration of YHWH’s covenantal qualities in 4:2 clearly represents the point of greatest emphasis in relation to the book’s overarching theme, and it is highly ironic that Jonah himself is forced to make this revelation even as he reluctantly (and angrily) fills the principal narrative gap or plot-related enigma.

Jonah interacts with several sets of pagans on the overt level of the narrative surface. He also communicates directly with YHWH via verbal messages, formal as well as informal, which flow in both directions—though in isolation from the story’s other participants. The pagans, on the other hand, discourse only formally with “God” (one of many) and receive verbal messages from him solely through his prophet, Jonah. The personage of YHWH-God is manifestly the central participant throughout—occasionally in the foreground, but always in the background. He actively impinges upon the entire story, controlling its action

(but not necessarily its final outcome), to an extent that is reminiscent of the momentous Genesis and Exodus accounts.

Thus one way of generating a set of the various relevant themes of this narrative is to list the principal oppositions or contrasts that are possible between any pair of participants (or participant types) as they relate to God and/or interact with each other. One side of the antithesis is emphasized and/or encouraged as a principal part of the message[+], while the other is downplayed and/or discouraged [-]. Jonah himself may be taken as representative of an outwardly religious but inwardly self-righteous class of Israelites living at the time of the book's writing. The application to similar hypocritical individuals who regard themselves as being charter members of the select "church" of God is not difficult to make; it is, in fact, encouraged. The following listing provides a sample of five of the comparative possibilities in this regard; it is intended to be merely suggestive of what would need to be done in a full-scale, integrative thematic analysis.⁴⁸

1. Certain individuals [J] have considerable religious knowledge [+], but they fail to put it into practice (*hesed*) in their everyday lives [-], or they do so in a strictly tradition-bound, stereotyped, or limited way [-]. Others [P] with little or no knowledge of the LORD of Scriptures [-] can sometimes teach the enlightened ones [J] a lesson or two in relation to spontaneous personal piety and public obedience to their professed religious principles [+].

2. Ethnic or any other type of prejudice [J] has no place among the people of God [-], for it is the very antithesis of the *hesed* principle [+]. YHWH is the only universal God and the divine embodiment of *hesed* [+]. He wants all peoples [P] to come to know and worship him aright [+]. Many pagans [P] put self-professed believers to shame by their fear of God [+] and their consequent behavioral acknowledgment of his ever-present immanence and his immediate relevance to their everyday lives [+].

3. Repentance before God and man is an obligation that applies to all people [+], especially the self-righteous [J], who do not think that they need it [-]. Moreover, it must be total, involving one's whole being [P], with a manifestation of genuine sorrow over sin, confession of one's iniquity, and an appeal to and trust in God for forgiveness [+]. A repentant heart is further confirmed by a willingness to publicly demonstrate one's conversion in a new life of worship and complete

⁴⁸Signs used are as follows:

[+] = a positive, foregrounded, and/or promoted attribute, attitude, or action

[-] = the negative, backgrounded, and/or condemned counterpart

[J] = self-righteous "Jonah" type [P] = pious "pagan" type.

obedience (*hesed*) in keeping with the revealed will of YHWH [+], be that extensive [J] or limited [P].

4. God is holy and righteous [+], and is therefore bound by his essential nature to punish all sinners [+], whether they wrong him [—] willfully [J], hypocritically [J], or in blind ignorance [P] and pagan idolatry [P]. However, YHWH in his wondrous grace and mercy [+] is ever desirous of finding ways to manifest his forgiveness [+] to those who respond positively to his initiatives [+], at whatever imperfect level of recognition this may be [P]. Similarly, he continues to seek [+] sinners [J/P], trying to get them to see [+] the error of their rebellious ways [—]. God's patient and steadfast love (*hesed*) for the lost [+] should in turn be a model [+] for all those who claim to be his people [J], and a motive for change to all those who do not [P].

5. YHWH is the sovereign Creator and almighty Ruler over the entire universe [+]. Human beings cannot resist the punitive judgment of God [P], nor can they escape his enjoined will [J], no matter how hard they may try [—]. However, they may indeed reject [—] his unchanging love (*hesed*) and his gracious purpose [+] for their lives [J], especially as this relates to their obligation to witness for him [+] and reveal to others [P] the fact that "salvation belongs to the LORD" alone [+].

Of course, these are not the only themes possible for Jonah, nor are they necessarily formulated in the most relevant or appropriate way. But they do serve to illustrate the point that even with reference to its original biblical setting, this book generates a variety of potential messages, each statable with varying degrees of generality or specificity in relation to the nuclear core of *hesed* thought and behavior. The complex construction of the narrative, involving recursion and variation on all possible strata of form and meaning, structure and style, creates manifold possibilities of semantic significance and pragmatic relevance along many different planes of implicature. Magonet comes to a similar conclusion after his own useful thematic survey:

Different emphasis on any single element or group of elements can result in quite different readings. That such ambiguity exists and that no single reading is the "true" one, is no more, and no less, a problem than the attempt to recognize and understand the word of God itself at any given time.⁴⁹

However, instead of "ambiguity," a better term might be "polyvalency" or even "thematic density."⁵⁰ That is because these themes are not vague,

⁴⁹Magonet, 112; cf. also Tribble, 108.

⁵⁰The latter by analogy with "semantic density," as in Wendland, "What Is Truth?" 1990.

contradictory, or mutually exclusive, nor do they result in any confusion or uncertainty of meaning, with regard to either the nature of God himself or his enscripturated Word. Rather, they are all (the correctly contextualized ones, that is) quite definite and serve to complement one another in relation to the unifying conceptual force of *hesed* to convey a message that is not only very rich in theological and moral significance, but which also has many different levels of practical implication and possible application.

Perhaps this enigmatic, unresolvable aspect of the book's thematic potential is an implicit lesson to all listening "Jonahs": do not assume that you "know" God and his *hesed* (cf. 4:2) simply because you are able to quote a few creedal and confessional statements about him (e.g., 1:9; chap. 2, 4:2) and can carry out the requisite public acts of ritual worship (2:9). To be sure, YHWH is fundamentally unfathomable with respect to his being (essence), nature (attributes), behavior (actions), and purposes (or decisions). However, he condescends to meet people where they are in their individual religious understanding, general morality, inner spirituality, personal devotion, and degree of personal commitment to his cause. He thereby expects and encourages them to continually probe more deeply so that they might derive ever greater blessings as a result of their fellowship with him—and with all fellow seekers along the way, no matter what race, culture, language, political persuasion, or socioeconomic status they may represent. In short, the LORD is concerned about, or pities, us all (4:11), and he wants us to feel the same way about each other!

A final question that somehow seems pertinent: why is Jonah also included "among the prophets?" (cf. 1 Sam 10:11-12). The answer—still debatable, perhaps due to the book's largely narrative format—should hopefully be more apparent now. Like the other prophetic texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, the function of Jonah is not primarily informative (in this case, a dramatic Bible history lesson), though it does also include this particular communicative function. It is rather preeminently *hortatory*, commending the right, condemning the wrong in relation to God, and also *didactic*, an instructional and faith-building, literary composition. Similarly, its message is stylistically complex, strongly critical, morally challenging, and contextually related to the lives of its intended receptor constituency. It is also firmly founded upon the principal covenantal attributes of YHWH: his omnipotence, omniscience, immanence, holiness, justice, mercy, fidelity, and (especially in relation to Jonah) his patience. By means of the poetic techniques of recursion, variation, irony, and enigma the text is rhetorically crafted to convey its pluralistic, multipurpose theme in a manner most likely to *persuade* its audience to

move mentally and physically in a positive direction. That is to say, through the impelling force of "the Spirit (*rûah*) of YHWH" (cf. 1:4) we are all encouraged to recognize the error of Jonah's perspective (4:4, 9), the rightness of God's position (4:11), and the need for actively applying this highly relevant, prophetic Word of the LORD to and in our own lives.