

Reading the Old Testament in the 21st century using the Book of Jonah as reference

Author:

 Izak J.J. Spangenberg¹
Affiliation:
¹Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa

Correspondence to:

Izak Spangenberg

Email:

spangijj@unisa.ac.za

Postal address:

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Some Old Testament scholars identify three main types of approaches to the Bible, namely, (1) theological (2) historical and (3) literary. Others would rather refer to different methods of studying the Bible, which can be linked to different worlds. Some methods focus more on the world behind the text, others on the world of the text itself, whilst yet a third group focuses more on the world in front of the text. One reads the text according to which of the three worlds one regards as the most important. Although there is truth in all of these classifications of approaches to studying the Bible and methods of doing so, the audience for whom the reading is done plays an even more important role. The different audiences often cherish different views of Scripture which can be linked to a specific paradigm and which dominates the outcome of the reading process. The fact is illustrated by investigating how the book of Jonah has been read and studied in recent years.

Introduction

The introduction to the Gospel of Luke gives an excellent account of how the Gospels originated and is helpful in arguing a case in which the biblical books were not written in a day or a week, but over a longer period. Moreover, the introduction could even demonstrate that what we today call plagiarism was fairly common in ancient times, when authors used their predecessors' written material and incorporated it into their own writings. The introduction reads as follows:

To Theophilus:

Many writers have undertaken to draw up an account of the events that have taken place among us, following the traditions handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the gospel. So I in my turn, as one who has investigated the whole course of these events in detail, have decided to write an orderly narrative to you, your excellency, so as to give you authentic knowledge about the matters of which you have been informed. (Lk 1:1–4)

It can be concluded that the author of the Gospel of Luke was not an eyewitness to the Jesus events. He emphatically states that he is basing his narrative on the traditions handed down to him by the original eyewitnesses. Moreover, he is not alone in deciding to write a narrative of the events. There were other writers who also depended on eyewitness accounts. But Luke claims to have carried out intensive research before committing himself to the narrative. What is revealed in the introduction can be presented as layers of interpretation (Figure 1).

The Gospels do not present the original events that occurred in Palestine at the start of our Western calendar. They do not even present the original words spoken by Jesus. The Gospels are, in fact, already interpretations of the events that had taken place and the words Jesus had uttered. First are the interpretations by an eyewitness and then the interpretations by the Gospel writers, on which Robert Carroll (1991) comments as follows:

The different and often conflicting representations of Jesus in the canonical Gospels have to be taken into account when making statements about what Jesus might or might not have said or done. A wise reader of the Gospels will cautiously talk about 'the Jesus of Mark' or 'the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel', without making the mistake of thinking or implying that the *historical* Jesus actually did or said such things. (p. 28)

However, the interpretive process did not end when the Gospel writers completed their respective Gospels, but has continued ever since, with each reading involving interpretation. No reader can claim that he or she reads without interpreting the material being read. Furthermore, no reader does so from a neutral standpoint. We are all influenced by the environment in which we grew up, our relationships, our church tradition and our level of education (cf. Ben Zvi 2003:15). Even the century in which we are living affects our readings.

Many biblical scholars in the 21st century are influenced by two relatively recent changes. The first of these occurred towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the second 70 years later, that is, around the year 1970.

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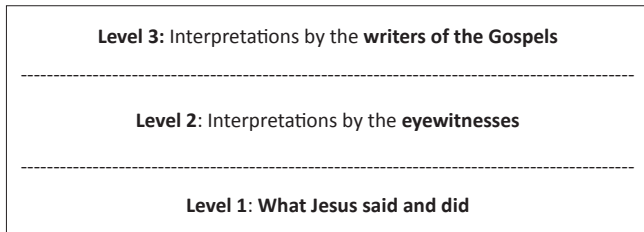


FIGURE 1: The process of gospel writing.

Paradigms and paradigm changes

The historical-critical paradigm

If we are to understand the change that occurred towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, we have to go back in history to the Protestant Reformation and reflect on the dominant paradigm that influenced people's reading of the Bible. This paradigm can be encapsulated as follows: '... the Bible is the Word of God to be interpreted by the conventions of common sense' (Noll 1991:45). Both Catholic and Protestant theologians worked according to this paradigm. The conviction that the reformers restored the Bible to its legitimate position in the Church is something of a misrepresentation of what really transpired during the Reformation. The Catholic Church and its theologians were also convinced of the authority of the Bible and used it extensively in their theological reasoning. The only difference between the two groups was the issue of who may be regarded as *legitimate interpreters* of the Bible. Protestant reformers regarded *ordinary believers* as legitimate interpreters, whilst Catholic theologians held the view that *only the Church* (as represented by the Pope and the Councils) could legitimately interpret the Bible.

The Copernican revolution, the philosophy of René Descartes and the dawn of a historical consciousness in the Western World caused major crises for the existing paradigm and prepared the way for the introduction of a new one. Both Catholic and Protestant theologians were convinced that the biblical cosmology was correct: the earth was the centre of the universe and the sun rotated around it. Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) dealt this conviction a major blow when he claimed that he could prove the hypothesis by Nicolas Copernicus (1473–1543) correct (Scholder 1990:46–64). Copernicus claimed that the sun did not rotate around the earth, but said that the earth rotated around the sun. Galilei argued that Copernicus' hypothesis should no longer be regarded as a mere hypothesis but as an established fact. The Catholic Church could not but condemn the Catholic astronomer, as, according to their convictions, he had rendered the Holy Spirit a liar. Many biblical passages indicate clearly the conviction that the earth does not rotate (Jos 10:12–14; Ec 1:4–5). Johann Kepler (1571–1630), a Lutheran astronomer, supported Galilei, but held the view that Joshua 10:12–14 did not give a scientific description of what had happened during the battle near Gibeon. Rather, it described events as ordinary people had perceived them. To Joshua and his men, it appeared as though the sun had stood still. Galilei did not adhere to this interpretation, arguing instead that when

science contradicts the exposition of Scripture then the latter should be revised in the light of what science has discovered. Observation and reasoning can therefore trump tradition and exegesis (Scholder 1990:62).

The philosophy of René Descartes (1596–1650) created a second crisis for the existing paradigm. He introduced a new, extremely influential method of reasoning, central to which was the principle of universal doubt. He said, '[S]ure knowledge can be gained only through doubt' (Scholder 1990:112). One could doubt anything except that it was oneself who did the doubting. The statement *cogito ergo sum* ('I think therefore I am') summarised his philosophy succinctly. The reflecting 'I' was suddenly placed at the centre of the universe. Descartes formulated four criteria for gaining the truth about a subject. The first and most important of these was that one should accept nothing as true if one was not convinced of it. The individual's reason (or mind) should convince him of the truth of a matter, and there was nothing to rely on when it came to claims of truth except one's mental capabilities. Tradition and authority were no longer of use in deciding on the truth of anything. Descartes' philosophy introduced not only a new way of knowing but also a new concept of what is true: 'What is true is primarily no longer what is guaranteed but what is evident; no longer what is handed down but what is demonstrated and proven' (Scholder 1990:112). The truth of ecclesiastical traditions and viewpoints was severely affected by this philosophy, as it could now be questioned.

The birth of a historical consciousness created a third crisis for the existing paradigm. During the last decades of the 18th century and the early decades of the nineteenth, scholars working in the field of historical research started to ask critical questions about history and historiography (Richardson 1964:47–49; Krentz 1975:22–30). The following scholars may be mentioned: George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831), Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) and Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884). According to Richardson (1964:41), people living during the 17th and 18th centuries lived in two worlds: on the one hand there was the modern world of natural sciences, and on the other was the medieval world, with its particular understanding of history. During these centuries scholars and ordinary people still believed that Adam was the first human being and that the world was created in the year 4004 BCE. However, it soon became apparent that the biblical data could not be used to give a reliable account of geology and human history. The world had not been created in the year 4004 BCE but much earlier. Moreover, the same criteria that applied when studying and writing history were now applied to biblical stories. This had grave consequences for theology and biblical studies. Edgar Krentz (1975:30) summarises this as follows: 'The Bible was no longer the criterion for the writing of history; rather history became the criterion for understanding the Bible.'

These crises led to a paradigm shift towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries and introduced

a new method of studying the Bible. Philip Kennedy (2006) gives an excellent summary of what this method entails:

A historically critical method of interpreting the Bible (a) regards biblical texts as human products; (b) analyses the texts in the languages in which they were originally penned; (c) examines them within their historical contexts; (d) accepts the new scientific world-view that emerged in the seventeenth century; (e) refuses to be constrained by ecclesiastical authorities; and (f) is informed by the findings of modern philology, phonology, lexicology, and syntax. (p. 118)

Protestant biblical scholars soon started to use historical-critical methods in their research, producing results that were at variance with traditional ecclesiastical doctrines and convictions. A considerable number of Old Testament scholars were accused of heresy (Shriver 1997; Spangenberg 2002:40–42), but churches could not prevent the birth of the new paradigm, which can be summarised as follows: ‘The Bible, however sublime, is a human book to be investigated with the standard assumptions that one brings to the discussion of all products of human culture’ (Noll 1991:45). Catholic biblical scholars were allowed to work with historical-critical methods only after Pope Pius XII indicated his approval in the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), but they soon caught up with their Protestant fellow scholars and are now endeavouring to readjust their views on Scripture (Brown 1981).

The modern literary paradigm

During the 1970s, some biblical scholars turned to modern literary critics and learned how they read and interpreted literature. In modern literary criticism, the focus has shifted from *the author* to *the text* and eventually to *the reader* of the text (Powell 1992:6; Marguerat & Bourquin 1999:5). The historical-critical methods focused primarily on *the author and the text*, whilst modern literary studies focus primarily on *the text and the reader*. New methods of reading and studying the Bible emerged. Some scholars tried to make sense of the change and introduced two rubrics: (1) diachronic studies, and (2) synchronic studies of biblical texts. Historical-critical methods were classified under the rubric ‘diachronic studies’, whilst literary-critical methods were classified under ‘synchronic studies’. Other scholars argued that the different methods of studying the Bible are anchored to where scholars deem the locus of meaning is to be found.

According to Kennedy (2006):

Some methods are anchored to the idea that meaning rests with the author; others proceed from the presupposition of a text-centred understanding of meaning; while a third category is tied to the belief that meaning lies with the reader. (p. 128)

Given this, almost 20 major interpretative approaches to the Bible can be identified (Gillingham 1998:115–186; Shillington 2002:219–275; Kennedy 2006:129, see Table 1).

It could be argued that literary studies did not introduce a new paradigm into biblical studies because the previous

paradigm already contained the seeds of the new approach. Even when the historical-critical study of the Bible was in its prime, scholars were already arguing that biblical books should be read in the same way as other literature. Benjamin Jowett (1817–1893) could serve as an example. He was professor of Greek at the University of Oxford and published an essay with the title ‘On the interpretation of Holy Scripture’ in the book *Essays and Reviews* (Wilson 1860). The essay caused a heated reaction, as Jowett argued that the Bible should be studied in the same way as any other piece of literature (Barr 1982–1983).

This was not well received in church circles, as to read the Bible with literary eyes seemed ‘to complete a long process of secularising Scripture, and hence of undercutting any claim it might have to authority’ (Alter 1992:202). However, even those scholars currently working within the old paradigm use the research results of those who study the biblical books as literature.

Modern literary critics indeed do not deviate from the previous paradigm. The Bible is treated as a human book but, whereas the older methods are more concerned with historical issues, recent approaches are more concerned with literary issues and the role played by readers. One may thus conclude that two paradigms currently dominate theological and biblical research: (1) the Word-of-God paradigm, and (2) the Bible-as-cultural-product paradigm. Ordinary Bible readers who are not acquainted with Western philosophy, modern literary studies and the research history of biblical interpretation often feel affronted by statements by scholars working under the second paradigm. Bernard McGinn (1989) is to the point with his assessment of the current predicament:

The conflict of interpretations between academic readings carried on in schools of divinity and religion and in departments of English on the one hand and the mass of general readers on the other is probably greater now than ever before. (p. 539)

Contrary to the paradigm changes in the natural sciences, old paradigms in theology are not always set aside when new ones emerge. Theology students are usually taught according to a specific paradigm, which is reflected in their research. When they mature as theologians, they often cling

TABLE 1: Major interpretative approaches to the Bible.

Meaning rests with ...	Approaches
the author	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source criticism • Form criticism • Redaction criticism • Tradition criticism • Historical criticism • Canonical criticism • Rhetorical criticism
the text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New criticism • Literary criticism • Textual criticism • Formal criticism • Structural criticism • Social scientific criticism
the reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reader-response criticism • Reception history • Narrative criticism (<i>can also be linked to the text</i>) • Poetic criticism (<i>can also be linked to the text</i>) • Deconstructive criticism • Advocacy criticism • Feminist criticism

to the old paradigm, continuing to practise their theological research accordingly, despite the emergence or existence of new hypotheses. Some may even try to incorporate a new paradigm into an existing one (Küng 1989:27). This phenomenon and its practice are also common amongst biblical scholars. The next section will illustrate the paradigms by studying the Book of Jonah and how biblical scholars living in the 20th and 21st centuries read and interpret the book and what we may learn from their endeavours.

An example: The book of Jonah

The Bible is the Word of God

Traditional approach

The scholars who work according to this paradigm usually emphasise that any biblical book or section of a book should be read and studied as a part of the Scriptural canon. One is thereby obliged to take note of what is written in other biblical books and engage with those books as well. Scripture should interpret scripture. Further, that interpretation should be guided by the grand narrative of Christianity. One author who can act as an example is Rosemary Nixon (2003), who commences her discussion of the literary genre of the Book of Jonah with the following:

The traditional Christian doctrine has always been that Jesus Christ is the Word of God. Holy Scripture bears witness to Christ as the Word of God. The Scriptures, inspired by the Spirit of God, testify to God's revelation to humanity, a revelation which finds its highest pinnacle in the Lord Jesus Christ who is *the* Word of God incarnate. (p. 42)

This confessional statement is followed by a discussion of certain clues concerning the genre. History is given a prominent position in Nixon's discussion. She tries to steer as close as possible to the idea that Jonah narrates history and she argues that the book is either 'history with a moral' or a 'parable grounded in experience' (Nixon 2003:46). Since readers cannot ignore the fact that the prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, it allows her to conclude that 'there is no doubt that historical events gave rise to this particular expression of truth' (Nixon 2003:54). Although she is reluctant to state that the Book of Jonah is pure fiction, her commentary shows that she has taken note of historical and literary research conducted on it.

The somewhat older commentary by Gerhard Maier in the series *Wuppertaler Studienbibel* (1976) reflects similar trends. The introduction clearly identifies the paradigm from which the series is written:

Die 'Wuppertaler Studienbibel' [...] geht im Unterschied zu manchen anderen heute vertretenen Auffassungen von der Voraussetzung aus, dass die Bibel Gottes Wort ist, das von Menschen niedergeschrieben und überliefert worden ist. Das heisst: Die Auslegung muss dem Doppelcharakter der Heiligen Schrift gerecht werden. (Maier 1976:11)

Prior to this commentary Maier (1974) published a book in which he claimed that the days of the historical-critical method are numbered. The commentary reflects this conviction and Maier criticises the research results of historical-critical

studies, arguing a case for dating the book to the 8th-century BCE (1976:25) and for accepting the 'miracles' narrated in the book as historical events (1976:16).

The 'three worlds' approach

Barbara Green's book is written from the perspective of the Bible as God's Word, and she does not conceal that she is writing as a 'Roman Catholic Dominican Sister' (Green 2005:xv). However, her view of Scripture is nuanced. She is aware of the changes that influenced the outlook of educated interpreters of the Bible and knows that, 'at least for educated people', it has become 'an almost exclusively human product' (Green 2005:4). According to Green, a 'three worlds' approach is helpful in gaining perspective on how previous readers read the Jonah story, and what historical-critical and literary readings revealed. This approach allows her to ask the appropriate questions to get to the core of the story, which, for her, is 'the relationship between the characters Jonah and God' (Green 2005:135). She acknowledges that other readers may differ on this point, but through her reading she has gained insight and self-knowledge on her journey of transformation (Green 2005:143).

Green's book has much to recommend it. Ultimately one even wonders whether her approach should be classified under the first paradigm. However, her confession that she is writing as a Christian and that her reading is done for and with those who accept the grand narrative of Christianity leaves no other option. In fact, her book illustrates how easy it is for biblical scholars to incorporate the research results of a new paradigm into an already-existing one.

The Bible as a cultural product

Historical-critical studies

The Book of Jonah could not escape *rational criticism*, which emanated from the Copernican and Cartesian revolutions. Nor could it escape critical questions concerning the *history* that the book supposedly narrates. Scholars were especially intrigued by the story of the fish (Jnh 1:17), the dimensions of the city of Nineveh (Jnh 3:3–4), and the mysterious plant and worm (Jnh 4:6–7). The question arising was: Is the book *fact* or is it *fiction*? Scholars were soon convinced that, although 2 Kings 14:23–25 mentioned a prophet Jonah, and although Jesus referred to Jonah and the citizens of Nineveh (Mt 12:38–42; Lk 11:29–32), the style and content of the book made it clear that it should not be classified as history. It hardly deals with real events in the life of the prophet Jonah during the 8th-century BCE. Moreover, the main character is 'a satirical imitation of a prophet rather than the historical prophet of the same name' (McKenzie 2005:13).

Scholars were also intrigued by the psalm in Jonah 2. Acquainted as they were with the identification of sources in the Pentateuch, they asked: 'Was the psalm added at a later stage?' The psalm is evidently a compilation of verses from other psalms and does not really fit into the context. Where readers might expect to encounter a penitential psalm or a prayer for forgiveness, they instead find thanksgiving (McKenzie 2005:7–8).

Lastly, scholars were occupied with the question of who the addressees might have been. If the book cannot be classified as history, and if it does not concern the eighth-century prophet who was a contemporary of Jeroboam II (786–746), then when was it written, and for whom? The type of Hebrew used and the message itself suggested to scholars that the book might have been written after the Babylonian exile during the Persian period (Ben Zvi 2003:99–115).

The commentary by Hans Walter Wolff (1977) in the series *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament* reflects that he has no scruples in treating the book as a cultural product. He is well acquainted with the historical-critical and even literary issues relating to the book. In the introduction he therefore discusses the book's relevance to the Twelve Minor Prophets; its dating; how it developed and which sections might have been added; who the addressees were and the aim of the narrator. There is also an extended section on the book's genre, in which Wolff argues for its being a didactic novel with an ironic slant (Wolff 1977:64). He is convinced that it does not present historical facts, nor was it written in the 8th-century BCE, and thus concludes: *'Die geschichtliche Distanz des Jonabuchs zur vorexilischen Zeit entspricht ungefähr der der Erzählungen des Danielbuchs zur Exilszeit'* (Wolff 1977:55). The prophet himself is presented as a certain type of Jew living in the Persian period: *'Im Unterschied zu den geschichtlichen Notizen in 2 Kön 14:23ff. wird er nur sehr generell als der Typ eines "Hebräer", der an Jahwe als den "Himmelsgott" glaubt, charakterisiert (1:9)'* (Wolff 1977:59). Jonah acts as a mirror for those Jews who not only look down on other people but also behave like the proverbial dog in the manger.

However, the impression should not be created that Wolff does not regard the book as part of the Bible and that it has no message for Christians. On the contrary, the commentary closes with a paragraph in which he reflects on the message of Jesus of Nazareth, specifically the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1–16), and concludes that the parable conveys the same message. The landowner challenges those labourers who complain that they should have been paid more considering the hours they worked. The closing scene of the Book of Jonah should have opened the eyes of the disciples even wider to the fact that at times believers are capable of behaving in a less humane way than non-believers (Wolff 1977:151).

A number of other commentaries could also be used to illustrate the point that treating the Bible as a cultural product does not necessarily force biblical scholars to abandon the conviction that the Old Testament is able to function in a Christian community. However, if it is to function viably in a modern Christian community, the document must be read for what 'it itself is and what it itself says', and one should 'avoid reading into it "the evangelical doctrine of scripture"' (Barr 1980:88). We need a new understanding of what the Bible is rather than merely confessing that it is the Word of God.

Literary-critical studies

As evidenced by the commentary by Hans Walter Wolff (1977), historical-critical studies of the Book of Jonah paved the way for reflection on how to understand this piece of literature even better. If the book is a novel, then we are dealing with a narrative (Nel 1988; Potgieter 1991). One should thus do narrative analysis and pay attention to (1) the narrator and his characters, (2) the plot, (3) the setting, (4) the narrator's point of view, (5) narrative time, (6) repetitions and hyperbole, (7) contrast and contradictions, (8) humour, irony and satire (Powell 1990; Marguerat & Bourquin 1999; Fokkelman 1999).

The narrator is the most important person in the narrative: 'He structures times, sketches space, brings characters on and takes them off again, misleads the readers at times, and enforces his point of view through thick and thin' (Fokkelman 1999:55). The narrator of the book is not the prophet Jonah, as the story is about him. We have a third-person omniscient narrator who knows what happens inside the fish (Jnh 2:1–9) as well as what transpires in the palace of the king of Nineveh (Jnh 3:5–9). The king decreed that:

neither man nor beast is to touch any food; neither herd nor flock may eat or drink. Every person and every animal is to be covered with sackcloth. Let all pray with fervour to God, and let them abandon their wicked ways and the injustice they practise. (Jnh 3:7–8)

Steve McKenzie (2005) quite correctly states:

Imagine sheep, cattle, and other animals dressed in sackcloth refusing to eat or drink, preferring instead to lament their evil deeds and pray for mercy! The idea is ludicrous. No other scene in the book quite so clearly illustrates the satirical nature of the story with its ridiculous images and hyperbole. (p. 10)

The narrator is evidently a satirist, as he ridicules the prophet. The ridicule becomes evident in the contrasts and contradictions that abound in the narrative. It should not be forgotten that satire is a vehicle for social criticism and is aimed at ultimate societal improvement (Spangenberg 2002:72–75).

The two main characters in the story are Jonah and Yahweh. The other characters serve merely to highlight the thoughts and actions of these two characters. The narrator uses contrast and contradiction to add flesh to the Jonah character. For instance, there is a contrast between the prophet and the sailors. The latter pray during the storm and cast the cargo overboard, whilst the prophet goes below deck and falls asleep (Jnh 1:4–5). When the sailors confront him, seeking answers, he confesses that he is a 'Hebrew who worships the LORD, the God of heaven, who made both sea and dry land' (Jnh 1:7–9). However, his actions contradict his confession. He acts as though he could escape from this god's presence. Jonah's prayer inside the fish (Jnh 2:1–9) presents another contradiction. Instead of praying to be saved from his predicament, he utters a thanksgiving psalm! But it can also be argued that, seeing that the fish had saved him from the chaotic waters, he uttered a thanksgiving prayer. The rhetorical questions with which the book ends (Jnh

4:11) then reflect that Jonah, despite being saved, cannot see the resemblance between his fate and that of the citizens of Nineveh. Furthermore, they repent whilst he remains stubborn!

Another important contrast is the one between the prophet and the citizens of Nineveh, who immediately take Jonah's words to heart and repent (Jnh 3:5–9). The closing scene makes it evident that the prophet remains intractable (Jnh 4:5–11), which explains why the book ends with a rhetorical question. Jonah serves as a mirror for readers in that they have to answer the question themselves. However, the intended readers did not live in the 21st century but were Jews living in the 5th-century BCE. Jonah's confession in the last chapter is based on a confession in Exodus 34:6, Joel 2:13 and Psalm 103:8 – in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. The confession claims that 'Yahweh is compassionate and gracious, long-suffering and ever faithful'. Jonah is out of step with this confession and it is evident that he does not want Yahweh to be compassionate and gracious, long-suffering and ever faithful towards those outside his circle of compatriots.

The contrasts and contradictions also serve an important aim of the book. The narrator evidently wanted to effect a change in Jewish attitudes towards non-Jews, which is why he painted a caricature of a Jewish prophet. However, this little book may be of help to readers, both believers and non-believers, living in the 21st century if they are willing to apply the requisite skills in their reading.

Readers and their communities

Ig Gous recently read a paper with the title 'Caught in the act ... Exegesis as an act of reading' (2012) at the Joint Conference of Academic Societies in the Fields of Religion and Theology held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg. This is one of the arresting titles for which he is renowned, but I would have changed it slightly to read 'Caught in the act ... Reading is an act of interpretation'. As human beings, we are constantly interpreting our surroundings and environment. This is the only way for us to survive. This act of survival also plays a role when we read, and what makes reading so fascinating is that no two readers' journeys through a text 'coincide exactly with that of their neighbours' (Marguerat & Bourquin 1999:141). Why is this? The previous sections tried to explain it. As stated in the introduction to this article We are all influenced by the environment in which we grew up, our relationships, our church tradition, our level of education, even the century in which we live has an effect on our readings.

As trained biblical scholars, we are also influenced by the paradigms according to which we were educated and trained. Some are more at home in the Word-of-God paradigm, whilst others are at home in the Bible-as-cultural-product paradigm. Most church members are not acquainted with the latter and constantly want to discipline those theologians and scholars working within the Bible-as-cultural-product paradigm.

This is a pity, since I am convinced that this paradigm could create a better church and society. I would like to illustrate this by considering two recent events in South Africa: (1) the furore around the painting 'The Spear' and (2) the murder of Thapelo Makutle, a gay citizen of Kuruman on 08 June 2012.

The recent actions related to the painting entitled 'The Spear' left me somewhat perplexed and depressed. I could not understand why a Christian would feel obliged to destroy a painting which tried to communicate something about our government and society. The painting is a satirical piece of art and does not concern only the president of the Republic of South Africa. It also concerns the African National Congress (ANC) as a political party and the dominant party in the government. In a way, the painting is similar to the Book of Jonah, which not only concerns a Jewish prophet, but is also a satirical novel which tried to bring about changes in the convictions and attitudes of Jews living in the 5th-century BCE in Yehud. The narrator tried to do this by reflecting the narrowness and unsympathetic behaviour of the elites in the society of Yehud. Satire often works with a hero and an anti-hero, or a type and an anti-type. Jonah is the anti-type of the ideal prophet the author longed for. But Jonah is also an anti-type of the ideal Jew the author envisaged. And this ideal type is seen in the character Yahweh. The Jesus saying reported in Matthew 5:48, 'There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds', encapsulates the message of the Jonah narrative in one pithy saying.

The first readers of the Book of Jonah were surely offended and deeply humiliated by the book, but it found its way into our Bibles, and for no small reason. It could bring about change if readers were willing to become skilled interpreters. That South Africa does not have many skilled interpreters is reflected in the events surrounding the painting by Brett Murray. A number of artists argued that 'The Spear' was a satirical painting which had tried to bring about change in our government and society. Satire in whatever art form ridicules, offends and humiliates, but with the hope of improvement on the part of those who are ridiculed.

For me, the most disturbing aspects of the furore around the painting were the call by Pastor Enoch Mthembu of the Nazareth Baptist Church for Brett Murray to be stoned to death, and the death threats received by *City Press* editor, Ferial Haffajee. Anne McClintock hits the nail on the head with her comment that '[c]ensuring Zuma's painted penis could be a chilling short step to censoring gay sexuality' (2012:33). I wondered whether the death of Thapelo Makutle of Kuruman could be linked with criticism of the painting, as it was claimed that to exhibit someone's penis in public is not part of 'African culture'. Following this, a Member of Parliament for the ANC recently maintained that homosexuality was not part of 'African culture'. This being the case, it could also be asked: Is the Bible part of 'African culture'? And is the satire we encounter in works like the Book of Jonah not an aspect of the same culture? Could it

be argued that the Bible-as-cultural-product paradigm is also not part of 'African culture' and that this paradigm should be banned from African universities, even from the University of South Africa, which claims to be *the* African university in the service of humanity?

Conclusion

We all belong to different communities and church communities but these communities should not censor academic freedom and prescribe only one way of reading the Bible. It would serve our society well if biblical scholars could train more students to become skilled readers. This could contribute to a healthier society in which doubt and criticism were not barred from public discourse.

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Competing interests

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