

JONAH AND GENRE

By T. Desmond Alexander

I

Some years ago C. S. Lewis, in addressing a group of theological students in Cambridge, expressed grave reservations about the presuppositions and conclusions of some biblical critics. As a sheep 'telling shepherds what only a sheep can tell them', Lewis made a number of astute observations, two of which are of particular relevance to this present paper. His first bleat concerned the ability (or more correctly, the lack of ability) of biblical scholars to make literary judgments. Lewis commented:

Whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading . . . These men ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight.¹

At the very heart of this complaint lay the apparent inability of critical scholars to recognise correctly, in Lewis's opinion, the literary genre of biblical books, in particular, the Gospels.

The other bleat, to which I wish to draw attention, concerned 'the principle that the miraculous does not occur'. On this thorny problem Lewis remarked,

Scholars, as, scholars, speak on it with no more authority than anyone else. The canon "If miraculous, unhistorical" is one they bring

1. C. S. Lewis, *Fern-seed and Elephants* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1975) 109, 111.

learned from it. If one is speaking of authority, the united authority of all the Biblical critics in the world counts here for nothing. On this they speak simply as men; men obviously influenced by, and perhaps insufficiently critical of, the spirit of the age they grew up in.²

Now these bleats draw attention to two issues which have figured prominently in modern discussions on the book of Jonah: how should we classify this short work, and what are we to make of the miracles recorded within it? It is these issues which I wish to examine in this lecture.

II

1. *Classification of Jonah*

Having observed Lewis's sensitivity regarding the ability of biblical scholars to make literary judgments, one wonders how he would have reacted to modern suggestions for classifying the book of Jonah. Even a partial survey reveals a wide variety of proposals: history;³ allegory;⁴ midrash;⁵ parable;⁶ prophetic parable;⁷

2. Lewis, *Fern-seed* 113.

3. G. C. Aalders, *The Problem of the Book of Jonah* (London Tyndale Press, 1948); B. Trépanier, 'The Story of Jonas' *CBQ* 13 (1951) 8-16; E. F. Sutcliffe, 'Jonas', in B. Orchard, E. F. Sutcliffe, R. C. Fuller, R. Russell (eds.), *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London Nelson, 1953) 669-671; D. W. B. Robinson, 'Jonah', in D. Guthrie, J. A. Motyer (eds.), *New Bible Commentary Revised* (London: IVP, 1970) 746-751; G. Mater, *Der Prophet Jonah* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1976); J. Walton, *Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

4. G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, II (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898²); A. D. Martin, *The Prophet Jonah: The Book and the Sign* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926); A. R. Johnson, 'Jonah 2,3-10. A Study in Cultic Phantasy', in H. H. Rowley (ed.), *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy presented to T. H. Robinson* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950) 82-102; G. A. F. Knight, *Ruth and Jonah* (London: SCM, 1950).

legend;⁸ prophetic legend;⁹ novelle;¹⁰ satire;¹¹ didactic fiction;¹² satirical, didactic, short story.¹³

5. K. Budde, 'Vermutungen zum "Midrasch des Buches der Könige"' *ZAW* 12 (1892) 37-51 (a midrash on 2 Ki. 14:25); L. H. Brockington, 'Jonah', in M. Black, H. H. Rowley (eds.), *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London: Nelson, 1962) 627-629 (a midrash on Je. 18:8); P. L. Tribble, *Studies in the Book of Jonah* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1963) (a midrash on Ex. 34:6).
6. J. A. Bewer, *Jonah* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912); J. Smart, 'The Book of Jonah', *The Interpreter's Bible*, VI (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956) 871-894; J. D. W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975); L. C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); P. C. Craigie, *The Twelve Prophets*, I (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1984).
7. A. Rofé 'Classes in the Prophetic Stories: Didactic Legenda and Parable', *SVT* 26 (1974) 143-164.
8. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament. An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965) 403-406; A. Jepsen, 'Anmerkungen zum Buch Jona', *Wort-Gebot-Glaube. Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments. Walter Eichrodt zum 80 Geburtstag* (1970) 297-305.
9. E. Haller, 'Die Erzählung von dem Propheten Jona', *Theologische Existenz Heute*, n.f., 65 (1958); C. A. Keller, *Jonas* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestle, 1965).
10. H. W. Wolff, *Studien zum Jonabuch* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1965); O. Kaiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975) 194-198; G. M. Landes, 'Jonah, Book of', *IDB Supplement* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 488-491.
11. M. Burrows, 'The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah', in H. T. Frank, W. L. Reed (eds.), *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) 80-107; Allen, *Jonah*.
12. A. Weiser, *Das Buch der zwölf kleinen Propheten*, I (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949); H. W. Wolff, 'Jonabuch', *RGK*, III (Tübingen, 1959) 853-856; W. Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971).
13. T. E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977); W. H. Wolff, *Dodekapropheten 3: Obadja und Jona* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1977).

Of course such a list is of very limited value, since it gives no indication as to how the majority of scholars actually categorise the book of Jonah, nor does it indicate the direction in which such studies have developed. To add some flesh to this skeleton two factors are worth underlining:

Firstly, among recent writers there has been a strong move away from referring to Jonah as either allegory or midrash. The arguments for so doing have been clearly outlined by others and there is no need to rehearse them again.¹⁴

Secondly, since the turn of the century there has been ever increasing support for the view that the events underlying the book of Jonah are fictional rather than factual. Thus most recent writers prefer to classify Jonah as either parable or didactic fiction.¹⁵

2. *Parable or didactic fiction*

Although the classification 'parable' remains popular, reservations have been expressed about the appropriateness of this term. B. S. Childs, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, comments,

There are several reasons why we prefer the term "parable-like" rather than making an immediate identification of the Old Testament book with the form of the parable. First, the nature of the genre of parable is itself a highly controversial issue . . . Secondly, there are certain unique features within the book of Jonah which are not part of the parabolic form.¹⁶

Here Childs draws attention to the problem of defining what is meant by the term parable. This is encapsulated by R. Stein when he writes,

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14. Cf. Aalders, *Problem* 15-16; Burrows, 'Literary Category' 88-90; I. H. Eybers, 'The Purpose of the Book of Jonah', *Theologia Evangelica* 4 (1971) 212-213; however, Allen (*Jonah* 181) maintains that the book contains 'certain allegorical features'.
15. See above, notes 6 and 12.
16. B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979) 421-422.

It is clear that a parable is more than "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning". At times in the Old Testament and/or the New Testament a parable (*mashal* or *parabolē*) can refer to a proverb, a simile (whether extended into a similitude or not), a taunt, a riddle, or a metaphor, as well as to various kinds of story type of parables and allegories. As a result, defining what a parable is becomes most difficult. Some scholars have even stated that any such attempt is hopeless because of the variety of figures the term describes.¹⁷

Given that the term parable (*mashal* or *parabolē*) can be applied to such a broad category of literary forms, it can hardly be viewed as a particularly suitable designation for defining the genre of the book of Jonah. We would surely be served better by the use of a more precise designation.

However, even if one restricts the term 'parable' to designate a 'didactic story' (e.g., the story of the Good Samaritan) it is clear that Jonah differs quite markedly from other OT passages which have been so labelled (Jdg. 9:8-15; 2 Sa. 12:1-4; 14:6-7; 1 Ki. 20:39-40; 2 Ki. 14:9). As was demonstrated by G. C. Aalders in the Tyndale Lecture of 1948 these OT parables are distinguished by two important features.

First they are simple and not compound.
Secondly, they are accompanied by an explicit indication of their meaning.¹⁸

In both these aspects Jonah differs considerably. Likewise, Childs argues, as mentioned above, that Jonah contains features which are untypical of parables; in his opinion, the prophetic formula which introduces the book,¹⁹ and the prayer of Jonah in Chapter 2;9 both indicate that the book cannot be simply labelled a 'parable'.

17. R. H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 22. On the 'parable' in the OT, see A. S. Herbert, 'The "Parable" (MASAL) in the Old Testament', *SJT* 7 (1954) 180-196; R. A. Stewart, 'The Parable Form in the Old Testament and the Rabbinic Literature', *EQ* 36 (1964) 133-147.

18. Aalders, *Problem* 13; see also D. J. Wiseman, 'Jonah's Nineveh', *TB* 30 (1979) 32.

19. Childs, *Introduction* 422.

20. *Ibid.* 424.

Given the distinctive nature of Jonah when compared with other OT (or even NT) parables, it is perhaps worth asking, how did it come about that the term parable was applied to Jonah? Two factors possibly explain this happening. First, the designation 'parable' was understood in very general terms. E. M. Good, for example, writes,

Most commentators now call The Book of Jonah a parable, using the word more or less to mean a story with a didactic point.²¹

Thus for 'parable' one could simply read 'didactic fiction' Second, the term 'parable' was perhaps preferable for polemical, or perhaps pastoral, reasons. Given popular attitudes towards the Bible, it is obvious that the classification of Jonah as a parable was more likely to gain acceptance than to classify it as a didactic fiction. Certainly, of the two expressions, parable would be viewed by many sincere Christians as the less offensive.

From this examination of the term 'parable' it should now be apparent that this is not a particularly suitable designation for the book of Jonah. The description 'didactic fiction' is certainly more precise.

3. *Authorial intention*

To ascertain the genre of Jonah various scholars have asked the question, 'What was the author's intention?' Aalders expressed the matter in this way:

What is the author's purpose? Did he intend to write down an historical record of real occurrences, or to present his readers with a moral in fictitious form? . . . Did the author intend to write history or to compose a parable?²²

More recently M. Burrows has written,

We can well agree that the real point at issue is what the author intended. The historical

21. E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965) 40.

22. Aalders, *Problem 7*.

accuracy of his narrative is another question. No historian can give a completely accurate account of the past; but if his purpose is to write history, his work cannot be assigned to any other category. For the book of Jonah our main question is not what happened or could have happened, but how the writer intended his book to be understood.²³

Beyond doubt, the author's intention is all-important.

However, in stating that the author's intention is decisive for uncovering the genre of Jonah, Aalders and Burrows both commit a similar error in outlining the possible option available; specifically, both speak of the author's intent 'to write history'. Yet the expression 'to write history' requires careful scrutiny. Burrows implies, in the passage already quoted, that this is something undertaken by an historian, and that works of this nature must fall into a single category. Yet it is surely fallacious to think that all literary works which narrate some historical event must belong to a single genre. Are we to accept that historians, and historians alone, have the sole prerogative to write about real happenings? One would hardly dream of placing in the same category the carefully documented work of an academic historian and the reports of a newspaper journalist. Yet both write about historical events.

Aalders falls into the same trap; he presents us with a very restricted choice: Jonah is either, 'an historical record of real occurrences', or a 'moral in fictitious form' either the author intended to 'write history' or 'compose a parable'. Yet it may have been the author's intention neither to 'write history' (as perceived by Burrows and Aalders) nor to 'compose a parable'.

4. *Determining authorial intention*

But how, it may be asked, are we to determine the author's intent on? Obviously this is an important issue

23. Burrows, 'Literary Category' 81.

which deserves further consideration. On occasions we may discover that the author explicitly states his intention in writing (*cf.* Lk. 1:1-4), and when this occurs we are at an immediate advantage. Unfortunately, the book of Jonah lacks any such statement, and so we are forced to look elsewhere for the solution to our problem.

A possible answer lies in the recognition that each literary form or genre has its own set of 'generic signals' by which the author influences the way in which the reader is to interpret his work. Attention is drawn to this feature by Heather Dubrow in her book, entitled *Genre*, and she illustrates it in the following manner, which I have modified slightly.²⁴

Imagine, if you will, that we have come upon a rather tattered book, bereft of its cover and title page, in the midst of the theological section of the local second-hand: bookshop. Our curiosity being aroused, we begin to read the opening paragraph:

The clock on the mantelpiece said ten thirty, but someone had suggested recently that the clock was wrong. As the figure of the dead woman lay on the bed in the front room, a no less silent figure glided rapidly from the house. The only sounds to be heard were the ticking of that clock and the loud wailing of an infant.

Now if we are reliably informed by a passing devotee of detective fiction that the book is entitled *Murder at Marplethorpe*, we shall probably react in this manner:

We mentally file the allusion to the clock as a clue that might later help us to identify the murderer. We interpret the inaccuracy of the clock not as a symbolic statement about time but rather as part of a game the author is playing to confound our own detective work; hence we become alert for further clues about the peculiarities of this unreliable machine - can the person who commented on it be trusted? has anyone observed the butler tampering with

24. H. Dubrow, *Genre* (The Critical Idiom, 42) (London: Methuen, 1982) 1-2.

it? The Woman on the bed, we assume, is likely to be the victim, and the "no less silent figure" may well be the murderer himself. Perhaps the crying of the baby merely provides an appropriate melancholy atmosphere, or perhaps it represents yet another clue (has its nursemaid abandoned it for more nefarious pursuits? has the murderer disturbed it, and, if so, what might that fact indicate about his route through the house?).

On the other hand, if we are then told by the sagacious owner of the bookshop that the book was actually entitled, *The Personal History of David Marplethorpe*, and that it was a typical *Bildungsroman*, our appraisal of the opening paragraph is more likely to be as follows:

The reference to the clock once again seems to be a clue, but a clue in quite a different sense: we read that allusion symbolically, as a hint that time is disordered in the world that our novelist is evoking. In this case we become alert not for additional details about the mechanics of the clock but rather for further images of and ideas about time. We are much more likely to assume that the woman has died of natural causes. Above all, we focus far more attention, and a far different type of attention, on the noisy baby. Because the *Bildungsroman* so often opens on the birth of its central character, the possibility that the infant will be the protagonist might well flash through our minds, leading us to speculate, though perhaps subconsciously, that the dead figure is his mother and the silent one either his distraught father or an unsuccessful midwife.

In each of these cases our reading of the opening paragraph is shaped consciously, and perhaps also subconsciously, by the supposed genre of the narrative. We react to what Dubrow calls 'generic signals'; in this instance these signals are communicated by the title of the book and how it has been described: detective fiction or *Bildungsroman*.

With regard to Jonah it is extremely important to identify these generic signals for by them the author communicates to his reader how he wishes his work to be

interpreted; generic signals are thus a vital clue for uncovering our author's intention.

Although they are not usually referred to as generic signals there are a number of features which have been taken as significant for determining the author's intention, and subsequently the genre of Jonah. These generally fall into two main categories. On the one hand, there are those which indicate that the entire work is the product of the author's imagination, and, on the other hand, there are those who suggest that the events underlying the account actually took place. As we shall presently observe, the deciding factor between these two categories is not as obvious as others may lead us to believe.

III

1. *Historical improbability*

The historical improbability of the events narrated in Jonah is frequently voiced as a strong argument for the fictitious nature of the entire book. For example, T. E. Fretheim comments,

It is . . . improbable that the beasts of Nineveh fasted, cried out mightily to God and turned from their wicked ways (3:8). It is improbable that Jonah would have prayed a Song of Thanksgiving for having been delivered while in the belly of the fish (2:2-9). It is improbable that a city with hundreds of thousands of people hostile to Israel and Israel's God, would have been instantaneously and completely (without exception!) converted.²⁵

J. A. Bewer expresses the matter in even more dramatic terms:

At almost every step the reader who takes the story as a record of actual happenings must ask questions. How was it possible that a true prophet should disobey a direct divine command? Is it likely that God should send a storm simply in order to pursue a single person and

25. Fretheim, *Message* 63.

thus cause many others to suffer too? Do such things happen in a world like ours? Is it not curious that the lot should fall upon Jonah at once, and evidently without manipulation on the part of the sailors, and that the sea should become calm directly after he had been thrown overboard? That the great fish was at once ready to swallow Jonah may be passed, but that Jonah should have remained in the fish for three days and three nights and should have prayed a beautiful psalm of thanksgiving inside, exceeds the limits of credibility, not to mention the point that the fish did not simply eject him but threw him up on the shore. What an exaggerated idea of the greatness of Nineveh the author had! What language did Jonah speak in Nineveh? How could the people understand him? And what a wonderful result followed his preaching! The greatest prophets in Israel had not been able to accomplish anything like this . . . And what shall we say of the extraordinarily speedy growth of the plant?

It is all passing strange. We are in wonderland! Surely this is not the record of actual historical events nor was it ever intended as such.²⁶

Obviously these are considerations which cannot be easily dismissed. Those who have argued on the grounds of historical improbability have certainly presented a plausible case for saying the Jonah is fictional.

Yet several observations are worth making. Firstly, Aalders quite rightly notes that in discussing historical improbability it is important to distinguish between the views of modern and ancient men as to what may be considered probable and improbable.

What people today might regard as improbable is beside the point: an author of ancient times might implicitly believe many things which people today would call impossible, and he might relate

26. Bewer, *Jonah* 3-4.

as historic fact what a number of modern scholars would stamp as legends. We have to discuss what was the idea of the author, and this cannot be ascertained by appealing to our idea regarding the contents of his writing.²⁷

In this regard it is perhaps worth recalling the miraculous events recorded in connection with Elijah and Elisha (1 Ki. 17 to 2 Ki. 13). It seems reasonable to suppose that the author of Kings incorporated these happenings into his account because he viewed them as actual historical events. If ancient Israelites believed that God had sent ravens to feed Elijah, could they not also accept as historically probable the sojourn of Jonah inside the belly of a great fish? As Aalders comments,

If the story of Jonah, as we find it in the book, appeared in the book of Kings, there would be no reason to doubt that it was meant as a record of historical events . . .²⁸

Secondly, if we allow that an ancient writer might accept as probable events which we today would view with considerable scepticism, we must also allow for the possibility that the author of Jonah may have been mistaken in thinking that certain events actually occurred. Thus, even if we could demonstrate beyond all doubt that an event recorded in Jonah never took place, this, of itself, would not prove that the author himself did not view the event as historical.²⁹ It is the author's intent, not historical probability or accuracy, which is decisive 'for determining the nature of the work.

27. Aalders, *Problem 7*.

28. *Ibid.* 12-13. Aalders, however, rejects this as an argument for the historicity of the book; he continues, 'But, taking into consideration the rather isolated position of the book of Jonah and its unique place among the Twelve, we are not justified in drawing any conclusion from its form and style'.

29. Some writers appear to assume that their case is complete if they can show that the events recorded probably never took place; cf. Burrows, 'Literary Category' 81-84.

As well as highlighting the historical improbability of the events narrated in Jonah, most writers argue that the manner in which the author presents these happenings also indicates that he did not intend to write history. Attention is drawn to a number of literary features, which function as generic signals.

2. *Exaggeration and surprise*

It is observed that everything in the book is deliberately exaggerated; various factors indicate this. Perhaps the most obvious is the repeated use of the Hebrew word גדול 'great'. (In Jonah it comes 14 times; this represents a third of all occurrences in the minor prophets). Jonah is summoned to Nineveh, a great city (1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:11); God sends a great wind (1:4), causing a great storm (1:4, 13); the sailors have a great fear (1:13, 16); Jonah is rescued by a great fish (1:17 [Heb. 2:1]); later he expresses great anger (4:1) and great joy (4:6).³⁰ Everything is larger than life.³¹

Jonah, however, not only exhibits exaggerations; the book is full of surprises. As L. C. Allen remarks,

While one or two exciting events would raise no questions, the bombardment of the reader

30. For a fuller exposition, see Fretheim, *Message* 43-44, 54.

31. Burrows ('Literary Category' 95-96) develops the idea that everything is exaggerated and suggests that the book was composed as a satire. Similarly, Fretheim (*Message* 51-55, esp. 54) sees these exaggerations as ironical; cf. Good, *Irony* 39-55; J. S. Ackerman, 'Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah', in B. Halpern, J. D. Levenson (eds.), *Traditions in Transformation* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981) 213-246. S. D. Goitein ('Some Observations on Jonah', *JPOS* 17 [1937] 74) rejects the view that the book of Jonah is a satire: 'The whole tenor of the story is much too earnest for a satire; Jonah is not painted with the brush of mockery or disdain, but drawn with the pencil of deep and sympathetic insight into human weakness' (quoted by J. Magonet, *Form and Meaning. Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* [Bern: Lang, 1976] 86); cf. K. A. Keller, 'Le portrait d'un prophète', *TZ* 21 (1965) 329; A. D. Cohen, 'The Tragedy of Jonah', *Judaism* 21 (1972) 170-172.

with surprise after surprise in a provocative manner suggests that the author's intention is other than simply to describe historical facts.³²

For Allen the presence of exaggeration and surprise in Jonah is beyond doubt the product of literary creativity;³³ the author intends his reader instinctively to see everything as totally unrealistic. Yet, is this so?

In spite of the proposal to the contrary, it is apparent that our author does not exaggerate incidents by the repeated use of גְּדוֹלָה. Given that Nineveh is portrayed as a city of 120,000 inhabitants, it is hardly an exaggeration to describe it as a great city.³⁴ Similarly, there is no reason to assume that the author is exaggerating when he applies גְּדוֹלָה to the wind, the storm, the fear of the sailors, and the fish. It would obviously require a strong wind and a mighty storm to threaten the lives of the sailors; and given such a situation this would inevitably create great fear. Also, if Jonah was to be swallowed by a fish, it is only natural that it would have to be large enough to do so. Taking these factors into consideration it is surely unnecessary to conclude that the different incidents in the story are exaggerated.³⁵

32. Allen, *Jonah* 176.

33. Indeed he views these very characteristics as typical of parables: 'It is significant that the elements of surprise and hyperbole are characteristic of the parable' (*Jonah* 177). However, it should be noted that not all parables exhibit these features; nor are the characteristics of surprise and hyperbole found only in parables.

34. The claim that this figure refers only to children results from a misunderstanding of the expression 'who cannot tell their right hand from their left' (4: 11). As J. Craghan (*Esther, Judith, Tobit, Jonah, Ruth* [Wilmington: Glazier, 1982] 192-193) observes, 'Although some authors tend to interpret the 120,000 as children, the text ("persons") and the context speak in favour of understanding the adult population as children. The fact that the inhabitants of the city are unable to make their own judgments is all the more reason why Nineveh should be preferred to the plant'; cf. Wiseman, 'Jonah's Nineveh' 39-40.

35. It should also be noted that in four instances the term גְּדוֹלָה is found in a similar type of construction (1:10, 16; 4:1, 7). On each occasion גְּדוֹלָה comes in an expression which employs a verb and a noun based on the same root.

It has also been observed by some commentators that the miraculous events in Jonah are recorded in a very low key.³⁶ God's provision of the great fish, and Jonah's subsequent sojourn is narrated without any special embellishment; indeed, the author presents this miraculous happening in a simple, straightforward manner:

But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow
Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days
and three nights (1:17 [Help. 2:1]).

We might add that it is with some lack of imagination that our author uses the same basic expression (וַיִּזְרֵךְ, and he provided') to narrate not only the divine provision of the great fish (1:17 [Help. 2:1]), but also the vine, and the worm (4:6,7; cf. 4:8). Now this approach contrasts sharply with that of most modern writers who dramatise these events by painting vivid pictures of what took place. This, unfortunately, distorts the original presentation of the story. Thus, whereas modern dramatised versions of the Jonah story highlight the unrealistic nature of the account, the same is not true of the Hebrew original. The characteristics of exaggeration and surprise are not inherent features of the story; rather they are the products of modern imaginations.

3. *Dependence on other works*

A further argument in favour of Jonah's being a literary creation concerns the relationship between Jonah and other Hebrew writings. This approach is developed by Allen in two ways. Firstly, he believes Jonah to have been modelled upon 'old Genesis narratives':

The overturning of Nineveh (3:4) sounds like a recapitulation of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:25, 29). The theme of collective punishment is reminiscent of the destruction of those cities, and of the Flood. The moral charge of "violence" is one that features in Gen. 6:11, 13. Jonah's role is that of the divine messengers sent to announce

36. Cf. Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978) 124 n.8: 'It should be noted that the wonders in his tale (especially about the fish), which have greatly exercised the imagination of many readers, are told very briefly, in a low key'.

the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 19:1, 15). This rather than any previous prophetic experience is the precedent for Jonah's mission.³⁷

However, although it is possible to see some links between Jonah and Genesis, these are surely insufficient to demonstrate that Jonah is modelled upon various Genesis narratives. For example, Allen's suggestion that Jonah's role parallels that of the divine messengers sent to Sodom is highly debatable; whereas Jonah makes a public proclamation of the coming destruction of Nineveh, the divine messengers inform only Lot, and he in turn is left with the responsibility of warning his future sons-in-law (Gn. 19:12-14). Further, Jonah is commissioned merely to announce the forthcoming destruction of Nineveh; the divine messengers, however, are actually sent to destroy the city of Sodom (Gn. 19:13, 'we are going to destroy this place'). These considerations suggest that the link between Jonah and Genesis is not as real or significant as Allen suggests.

Secondly, Allen draws attention to passages from 1 Kings, Joel and Jeremiah which are similar to parts of Jonah. He comments,

Another pervasive element highlighting the degree of literary creativity is the apparent echoing of experiences or statements of particular prophets in a different key from the original. In 4:4, 8 Jonah is portrayed as a parody of Elijah (1 K. 19:4); he apes Elijah's words but by so doing shows himself to be far inferior to his model - and so the author intended. Jon. 3:9; 4:2 look suspiciously like quotations from the probably postexilic Joel 2:13, 14, and so surely they are intended ... Jon. 3:9, 10 is dependent on Jer. 18:7, 8, 11 in theme and terminology - designedly so, for the author is implicitly appealing to Jer. 18 as an accepted prophetic principle and claiming it as the warrant for an incident the audience would otherwise have found much harder to swallow than the fish found Jonah to be.³⁸

37. Allen, *Jonah* 176.

38. *Ibid.* 177; cf. A. Feuillet, 'Les sources du livre de Jonas', *RB* 54 (1947) 161-186. However, note the detailed response of Trépanier, 'The Story of Jonah', *CBQ* 13 (1951) 9-13.

A number of observations are worth making. The proposal that Jonah echoes passages from other works assumes that Jonah is to be dated after these works. This assumption, however, raises further difficulties; the relationship between Jonah and Joel is disputed, and indeed a number of writers have argued that Joel borrows from Jonah.³⁹ A similar situation exists regarding the Jeremiah material. Given that the dating of Jonah is disputed, with dates ranging between 780 BC and 350 BC, it is perhaps best to remain cautious about the relationship between these works.⁴⁰

Yet, even if it could be clearly demonstrated that the book of Jonah is late, this does not necessarily mean that it must be an imaginary creation. A. Feuillet as early as 1947 had already proposed that Jonah drew upon material from 1 Kings and Jeremiah.⁴¹ However, he saw no need to suggest that the author of Jonah modified significantly the material which he borrowed. Thus Allen certainly overstates the case when he suggests that Jonah echoes experiences or statements of other prophets 'in a different key from the original'.

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39. G. H. Cohn, *Das Buch Jona im Licht der biblischen Erzählkunst* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1969) 99 n.2. The possibility also exists that these works may not be directly dependent upon one another. As Maier (*Der Prophet Jona* 21) remarks, 'Es könnte ausserdem sein, dass elle drei Bücher oder elle in Frage kommenden unabhängig voneinander an einer ähnlichen Tradition teilhaben'; cf. Aalders, *Problem* 8-9; Trépanier, 'The Story of Jonah' 14,
40. For a helpful summary of the arguments for dating the book, see I. H. Eybers, 'The Purpose of the Book of Jonah', *Theologia Evangelica* 4 (1971) 216-219.
41. Feuillet ('Le sens du livre de Jonas' 340-361) argues that because Jonah borrows from these other works it must be a parable. However, as Trépanier ('The Story of Jonas' 15) has pointed out, even if the author of Jonah has been influenced by other works, this need not imply that his work is purely fictional: 'The biblical reminiscences which we may find in that work can in no way induce the reader to the conclusion that the prophet Jonas never existed. One may find many such biblical reminiscences in the canticle 'Magnificat', which is not a proof that the Blessed Virgin never existed. It rather proves that Mary had her mind and heart filled with the Scriptures and that her inspired prayer sprang from her daily meditations of the Psalms and the Prophets'.

Although it is probable that the author of Jonah was well aware of the account of the flight of Elijah in 1 Kings 19, this need not lead us to conclude with Allen that 'Jonah is portrayed as a parody of Elijah'. Jonah, as A. D. Cohen has argued without reference to Elijah, can be viewed as a prophet who is suffering from deep depression.⁴² This raises the possibility that Jonah, familiar with Elijah's own depression and flight, may have quite deliberately used identical language in the hope that he too would experience a similar theophany. Further, one cannot discount the possibility that the author of Jonah may have wished to draw his reader's attention to some parallels between a previously recorded event and the one which he is now narrating; indeed the presence of narrative analogy in other Old Testament books ought to make us alive to this possibility.⁴³

In the light of these observations there would appear to be insufficient grounds for maintaining, on the basis of dependence upon other writings, that Jonah is a fictional creation.

4. *Symmetrical structure*

Another generic signal which suggests that the book of Jonah is an 'imaginative product' is, according to Fretheim, its symmetrical structure. He writes,

The carefully worked out structures in the book. . . suggest a non-historical intention on the author's part. Such a concern for structure and symmetry is not as characteristic of straightforward historical writing and is more suggestive of an imaginative product.⁴⁴

This argument, however, must be treated with extreme caution. Our assessment of the historicity of a narrative cannot depend solely upon its structure. In the

42. Cohen, 'The Tragedy of Jonah' 170-172.

43. Cf. P. D. Miscall, 'The Jacob and Joseph Stories as Analogies', *JSOT* 6 (1978) 28-40; P. D. Miscall, *The Working of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Further examples of stories which bear marked similarities are to be found in R. C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 33-64.

44. Fretheim, *Message* 66.

study of English literature we would never dream of suggesting that because a piece of literature is in the form of poetry, it must *a priori* be unhistorical. Rather we recognise that a skilful author may take historical material and present it in a poetic format; although we would acknowledge that he must have some special motive for doing so.

As regards OT narrative in general, it has become clear that Hebrew narrators frequently sought to shape their material into particular literary structures, the most frequently used being possibly the palistrophe or chiasmus.⁴⁵ Given that ancient Hebrew authors were familiar with this structure, it is quite possible that a skilful writer could have presented historical material in this form. At any rate, our present limited knowledge of narrative writing ought to preclude us from making sweeping statements concerning the relationship between structure and history. Furthermore, it should be added that while the book of Jonah exhibits a certain structure or pattern, this is in no way as restrictive and limiting as Fretheim implies. Within the structure itself there is considerable scope for variation.

5. *Didactic nature*

Fretheim also sees the didactic nature of Jonah as indicating that the work was never intended to be read as history.

The pervasiveness of the didactic element in the book suggests a similar conclusion (i.e. a non-historical intention on the author's part). Virtually every phrase in the book is intended to teach. The kerygmatic and theological possibilities in every verse far

45. For general surveys of chiasmic forms in the Old Testament and references to other works, see A. Di Marco, 'Der Chiasmus in der Bibel', *Linguistica Biblica* 36 (1975) 21-97; 37 (1976) 49-68; W. Vosloo, 'Balance Structure in the Old Testament', *Theologica Evangelica* 12 (1979) 48-60; Y. T. Radday, 'Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative', in J. W. Welch (ed.), *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981) 50-117.

exceed that which is to be found in other historical narratives in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Ki.). The abrupt ending, which makes an appeal to the reader rather than informing us about Jonah, betrays this central concern of the author.⁴⁶

Now there can be no disputing the fact that the book of Jonah is didactic. Unfortunately, however, in discussions concerning genre, insufficient attention has been given to this important aspect of the book's character. This has resulted in two contrasting trends: those who maintain an historical basis for the narrative usually ignore or play down its didactic nature, but those who view Jonah as fictional generally emphasize this very feature. Indeed for some scholars the didactic nature of Jonah is a decisive factor for treating the work as unhistorical. Thus J. Licht comments,

Its fondness for wonders, in the manner of folktales, is less decisive in determining its fictional character than its clear subservience to a moral. It is a story made up to convey an idea, not a piece of history told in a way that shows its significance.⁴⁷

Here, however, a quite false distinction is drawn between 'historical' and 'didactic' works; because Jonah is obviously didactic, according to Licht, it cannot be historical. Such a conclusion, however, need not follow; the possibility cannot be ruled out that the author of Jonah may have shaped his didactic narrative around actual historical events.

Clearly it is the author's intention to make an impact upon the mind of his reader. However, to achieve this it is not merely sufficient for him to narrate an interesting story about a reluctant prophet; rather he must involve his reader in the story to such an extent that by the end of his account the reader too finds himself being challenged, as Jonah was, by God's concluding remarks. Thus the didactic nature of the book explains best why the author ends his narrative as he does, and why no other information is supplied concerning Jonah's ultimate response.

46. Fretheim, *Message* 66,

47. Licht, *Storytelling* 124.

This naturally raises an important consideration: does the author's didactic concern influence other parts of the narrative? Could it be, for example, that the king of Nineveh remains anonymous, not because he is fictitious, but because his name has no particular bearing on the author's intended purpose? Similarly, is it not likely that for didactic reasons the author of Jonah deliberately omits any explanation for Jonah's flight until Chapter 4? Had he wished he could certainly have introduced this information earlier (*cf.* 4:1, 'Is this not what I said when I was still at home?'). Yet this would have obviously taken away from the climax which is reached in Chapter 4. Further speculations are possible. These, however, highlight the fact that didactic constraints may have played an important part in determining the form of the narrative.

In the light of these observations the possibility arises that some historical details may have been deliberately omitted from the story because of its didactic emphasis. This, however, need not mean that the author had no regard for historical accuracy. Rather it reflects the fact that on occasions didactic considerations may have determined not only how the material was presented but also what was incorporated into the account.

Thus far we have considered various features, or generic signals, which have been taken as indicating that the author of Jonah intended to write a didactic fiction: historical improbability; exaggeration and surprise; dependence on other works; symmetrical structure; didactic nature. There remain, however, a number of factors in favour of the view that the author thought the events underlying Jonah to have actually occurred.

IV

1. *Historical setting*

It is generally accepted, even by those who view Jonah as fictional, that the events narrated are placed in a particular historical setting. Thus Burrows acknowledges that Jonah ben Amittai 'was a real prophet, who predicted the territorial expansion of Israel under Jeroboam II as recorded in II Kings 14:25'.⁴⁸ Now

48. Burrows, 'Literary Category' 81.

the presence of the name Jonah ben Amittai is certainly important, but by itself it need not mean that the book is historical. It is always possible that an author may have created an imaginary story around an earlier historical figure.

More significant than the name Jonah, however, is the style of the opening verses of the book. Here the reader encounters material which is presented in a manner very similar to that of other historical writings; for example, the opening words, 'The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, "arise, go to Nineveh, . . ."' are reminiscent of 1 Kings 17:8-9, 'The word of the Lord came to him (Elijah), "Arise, go to Zarephath, . . ."' . As a result, the generic signal, communicated by the initial section of the book, suggests to the reader that this material ought to be treated as factual.

Some scholars have sought to avoid this conclusion by arguing, as we have noted above, that these opening verses contain other generic signals which favour the fictional character of the book. However, these arguments are not conclusive, and rest on an overly subtle interpretation of the narrative.

This initial generic signal that the book is historical is most important because it influences in two differing ways the reader's attitude to what follows. First, the reader instinctively places these events within a particular historic framework. This is especially significant because it affects the way in which the narrative is interpreted. Thus details not supplied by the author must be provided consciously, or subconsciously, by the reader.⁴⁹ This, however, does not rule out

49. In this regard, it is interesting to observe modern discussions concerning the composition of the first audience, and their reaction to the story of Jonah; cf. D. F. Payne, 'Jonah from the Perspective of its Audience', *JSOT* 13 (1979) 3-12. Allen (*Jonah* 202-203), for example, places considerable emphasis upon the fact that a Judean audience would view Jonah, a northern prophet, as an 'unpopular' hero. This assessment of the audience reaction presupposes that they were familiar with the background to the events narrated, for the story itself makes no mention of the place of Jonah's origin.

the possibility that the author of Jonah may have quite deliberately selected a particular historical setting, so enabling him to proceed with an imaginary account without having to supply background material.

Second, the reader's initial reaction to the text will determine how he continues to view the narrative. If the opening lines are stylistically in keeping with other historical narratives, it is only natural that he should treat the text as factual. However, if he begins by believing that these events took place, only to discover later, perhaps in Chapter 3, that this is pure fiction, he will feel misled, if not actually deceived, and this is something which any competent author would clearly avoid.⁵⁰ Thus the initial generic signal is most significant. This factor ought to be a prime consideration when attempting to evaluate the impact of the various suggested generic signals.

2. *Traditional understanding*

In connection with this previous view it is perhaps worth emphasizing how Jonah has been traditionally understood. The tendency to view Jonah as fictional is a relatively recent development. By way of contrast, however, the vast majority of early Jewish and Christian writers adopted the view that the events recorded in Jonah actually occurred.⁵¹ Such unanimity cannot be

50. See Dubrow, *Genre* 2-4.

51. Among the Jewish writers, Josephus clearly views the book of Jonah as historical and incorporates the story into his history of the Jewish people (*Jewish Antiquities*, IX 206-214): 'But, since I have promised to give an exact account of our history, I have thought it necessary to recount what I have found written in the Hebrew books concerning this prophet' (from the translation by R. Marcus, *Josephus*, VI [London: Heinemann, 1937] 109-111). For a survey of how early Christian writers viewed the book of Jonah see R. H. Bowers, *The Legend of Jonah* (The Hague: Hijhoff, 1971) 20-32, esp. 28-29. He concludes, 'The written documents, then, of the first five centuries of Christianity, provide consistent recording of the apologetic use of the Jonah legend as a proof-text for eschatological assertion, in which Judaic typology based on the concrete reality of historical events, rather than Greek allegory based on abstractions, is most evident' (31-32).

easily dismissed, especially when considering authorial intention. The fact that generations of scholars and writers were convinced that the author of Jonah did not intend to write fiction argues against the modern view that the form or style of the narrative conveys this very impression. Were these earlier generations completely blind to features which we are asked to believe are immediately apparent? Did these earlier writers not live and study in an environment much closer to that of the author of Jonah than we do? And if so, would they not have been more attuned to the generic signals of an ancient narrative? With these factors in mind, we must surely expect good reasons for ignoring or rejecting the traditional appraisal of Jonah.

3. *God and fiction*

One final issue deserves consideration, although it should probably not be counted as a generic signal. This concerns the references to God in the book of Jonah. As the narrative now stands, God is a central character in all that takes place; we are informed not only of his actions, but also of his words. This, however, raises an important question: given Jewish attitudes concerning God, in particular the prohibitions against the making of idols and the improper use of the divine name, is it not highly improbable that a Jewish author of the period 780 to 350 BC would have dared create a fictional account with God as a central character? Would not this have been viewed by devout Jews of that time as tantamount to blasphemy?

V

Before we draw our discussion to a conclusion two points should perhaps be underlined. Firstly, proper attention must be given to the fact that the book of Jonah seeks to challenge the reader; its didactic nature must be taken into account when attempting to categorise the work. If Jonah is based on real happenings, its didactic nature will obviously influence the way in which the author has presented these events; we should not, therefore, expect a simple straightforward factual account of what took place. Secondly, extreme caution must be exercised in conveying the general tone of the book. It is important to avoid reading into the narrative features which are not immediately present. Unfortunately, as we

noted earlier, many modern dramatised accounts of the story give a somewhat inaccurate impression of the true nature of the book; as a result they bear little resemblance to the Hebrew original.

Earlier I have stressed the importance of generic signals, for these alone indicate how the author intended the reader to understand his work. From our investigation of these it seems probable that the author of Jonah intended his work to be read as a didactic history, rather than as a didactic fiction. This fact, as I hope to demonstrate elsewhere, has an important bearing on how we should interpret this fascinating work.