

Drowning Jonah in a Thousand Genres

ABSTRACT: The renaissance of literary approaches to the Bible brought with it a (re)discovery of Scripture’s comedic elements. While texts such as the book of Jonah have been approached with the utmost seriousness, they were now retold as comedies and satires. The practice of “reading as”— be it satire, parody, burlesque, farce, seriocomic, etc. — has proved fruitful in recent years, particularly in developing irenic readings of biblical texts which contain violence. However, such comedic readings tend to over-emphasize the interpretive value of genre, and, in the case of Jonah, may even be labeled as anti-Semitic. Using insights from Modern Genre Theory and reception history, this article explores two scenes from Jonah (Jon 1:4; 4:1-3) to argue that identifying humor based on a perceived genre limits a theological or ethical reading of the text rather than illuminating it. By broadening conceptions of genre and acknowledging the role readers play in their creation, interpreters can better appreciate the multi-dimensional qualities of the biblical text and its ability to engage in deeply serious theological reasoning.

KEYWORDS: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Jonah, Satire, Humor, Modern Genre Theory, Reception History, Violence

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Introduction

*I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.*

*But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.*

*They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.*

(Billy Collins)¹

What's so funny about the Bible?² According to some biblical scholars, quite a lot. But even the best of jokes can die the slow death when they are incessantly repeated by otherwise humourless biblical scholars. Such is the case with over-emphasizing the role of humour in biblical texts. The renaissance of literary approaches to the Bible brought with it a (re)discovery of Scripture's comedic elements. Suddenly, texts which had been approached with the utmost seriousness were retold as comedies or recast as satire replete with howling irony. The practice of "reading as"— be it satire, parody, burlesque, farce, seriocomic, etc. — has indeed proved fruitful in recent years, particularly in developing irenic readings of biblical texts which contain violence.³ I wish, however, to address the tendency to over-emphasize the value of humour in interpreting biblical texts. The presence of comedic elements is often used to decipher a text's genre which serves as the basis for subsequent interpretive decisions. This, I will argue, can become problematic when the conventions and style of the presumed genre of a text dominate the interpretive process and

1 Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry" from *The Apple that Astonished Paris*, 1988, Reprinted with the permission of the University of Arkansas Press.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46712/introduction-to-poetry>

2 Special thanks to Andrew Judd for introducing me to modern genre theory and for his feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. Thank you for the feedback of Helen Paynter, Trevor Laurence, and those involved with the IBR Biblical Violence research group.

3 E.g., Helen Paynter, *Reduced Laughter: Seriocomic Features and Their Functions in the Book of Kings*, vol. 142 of *Biblical Interpretation Series* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016); Joel S. Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure," *Interpretation* 54.4 (2000): 363–75; Benjamin J. M. Johnson, "Humor in the Midst of Tragedy: The Comic Vision of 1 Samuel 4–6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 141.1 (2022): 65–82.

force out-of-place textual elements to fit (and this is especially true when the genre is narrowly defined). In such cases, the reader's attempt to illuminate the text can inadvertently commit violence against it. Moreover, such readings can render inert the rich interpretive traditions and restrict the usefulness of the book for ongoing ethical and theological reflection.

To illustrate these points, I will explore the ways humour and genre have hindered rather than helped the interpretation of the book of Jonah. Labelling the book or suggesting we read it as a number of different comedic genres has led not to healthy plurality but exclusionary competition. This zero-sum game of totalizing genre-based strategies has complicated Jonah's use as Scripture by Jews and Christians. Some of these comedic readings ought to be understood as anti-Semitic and/or anti-Jewish. Before diving into some specifics of the story of Jonah, the next section explores the relationship between Jonah, genre theory, and humour. Attention will then turn to two soundings from the book of Jonah—the storm (Jon 1:4) and Jonah's prayer (Jon 4:1-3)—to show how genre has been applied to the book in conflicting ways. While certain parts of Jonah are *funny*, I will argue that broadening our conceptions of genre will allow us to appreciate Jonah's multi-dimensional qualities and its ability to engage in deeply serious theological reasoning.

Jonah, Genres, and Jokes

The focus of many interpreters down through the ages has been on matters of historicity (e.g., was Jonah *really* swallowed by a fish?) and how the character connects to the other mention of Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25.⁴ Some read Jonah as

4 For an overview of the book's reception as it pertains to genre, see T. Desmond Alexander, "Jonah and Genre," *Tyndale Bulletin* 36.1 (1985): 35–59, <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30568>; Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-Examined*, JSOTSS 236 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 14–63; Gerda Elata-Alster and Rachel Salmon, "The Deconstruction Of Genre In The Book Of Jonah: Towards A Theological Discourse," *Literature and Theology* 3.1 (1989): 40–60; Amy Erickson, *Jonah: Introduction and Commentary*, Illuminations (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2021), pp. 38–45; Susan Niditch, *Jonah: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, ed. David Vanderhooff (Fortress Press, 2023), pp. 20–24; Raymond F. Person, *In Conversation with Jonah: Conversation Analysis, Literary Criticism, and the Book of Jonah*, JSOTSS 220 (Sheffield, Eng: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 83–84 fn. 58, 153–157; Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation*, AB 24B (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 227–351; Yvonne Sherwood, "Cross-Currents in the Book of Jonah: Some Jewish and Cultural Midrashim On a Traditional Text," *Biblical Interpretation* 6.1 (1998): 49–79, pp. 49–56; Phyllis Trible, "Jonah," in *Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature; Daniel; Additions to Daniel; Hosea; Joel; Amos; Obadiah; Jonah; Micah; Nahum; Habakkuk; Zephaniah; Haggai; Zechariah; Malachi*, ed. Leander E. Keck, Nachdr., NIB Vol. 7 (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 2000), 463–529, pp. 466–474. For an exploration of Jonah and Psychological treatments of the book, see Stuart Lasine, "Jonah's Complexes and Our Own: Psychology and the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah," *JSOT* 41.2 (2016): 237–60.

historical. It is a story of a prophet, much like that of Elijah or Jeremiah, and thus it fits nicely within Israel's prophetic tradition as part of the Book of the Twelve. As a narrative which lacks any real prophetic utterance it is quite unlike any of the other prophetic books within this corpus. The length of the book, its didactic moral quality, and its use during religious festivals places it in the company of other Hebrew narratives like Ruth and Esther.⁵ Others have viewed it as fiction, myth, or folklore. Perhaps it is simply a "Big Fish Story" with a theological message.⁶ Its reception in paintings, publications, and pulpits, as well as its continued use within Jewish liturgy and Christian sermons, speaks to Jonah's enduring artistic value as literature and as scripture.⁷

Many in recent years have highlighted the humour within the narrative. The exaggerations of repentance in chapter 3, with everyone in Nineveh including the animals donning sackcloth, is surely meant to be *funny*. The ship being worried about breaking up (1:4) and the piety of the pagans outmatching that of the Lord's prophet (1:16), are suggestive of humorous irony. Seeing these as jokes, some readings have recast the story of Jonah entirely as a specific literary genre. Jonah becomes a satire with its critique aimed at the nationalistic ideology of Jonah *qua* Israel, or Jonah becomes a parody of Israel's Scriptures themselves.⁸ Jonah is labelled a farce, burlesque, comedy, and Menippean satire.⁹ On the other hand, Jonah becomes a mixture of them all; this new super-genre threatens to swallow the book whole.¹⁰ Though they are trying to

5 This is evidenced by some publishing choices, e.g., the volume of the Believers Church Bible Commentary series also contains Ruth and Esther, (Eugene F. Roop, *Ruth, Jonah, Esther*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2002)).

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6 For 20 century examples that take seriously the historical-critical questions and theological concerns see Gerhard von Rad, *God at Work in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), pp. 64-68; Brevard S. Childs, "Jonah: A Study in Old Testament Hermeneutics," *SJT* 11.1 (1958): 53-61.

7 There are two stunning examples of physical pulpits being shaped as whales/fish so that the preacher must speak from its mouth. For pictures see, <https://www.heimsath.com/sacred-space-holy-place/creative-pulpits-from-historic-poland>.

8 Arnold J. Band, "Swallowing Jonah: The Eclipse of Parody," *Prooftexts* 10.2 (1990): 177-95; John A. Miles, "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Almond Press, 1990), 203-15; Cf. Adele Berlin, "A Rejoinder to John A. Miles, Jr., with Some Observations on the Nature of Prophecy," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 66.4 (1976): 227-35.

9 André Lacocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *Jonah: A Psycho-Religious Approach to the Prophet*, 1st ed., Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 04), pp. 39-44.

10 For example, Judson Mather, "The Comic Art of the Book of Jonah," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 65.3 (1982): 280-91. Mather does not always specify between genre or generic elements but he describes Jonah as a situation comedy, burlesque, parody, farce, and satire.

answer a salient question (i.e., what kind of story is being told?), these attempts to classify Jonah are, as I will argue, misguided.

With German or European romanticism in the 18th and 19th century and the advent of New Criticism in the 20th century there has been both a renewed interest in genre and a destabilisation of the concept.¹¹ This modern genre theory can offer readers of the biblical text three insights that will complicate the interpretive value of humour and genre.

The first is that genre is primarily the work of readers. Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov writes that, “In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties.”¹² Genres are a way for readers to make sense of the text through classification. Their decisions are based on an aggregate of texts and the discursive properties shared by them. This codification is done by the reader, and more precisely, by a community of readers. Thus, Todorov continues, “It is because genres exist as an institution that they function as ‘horizons of expectation’ for readers and as ‘models of writing’ for authors.”¹³ Though an author might infuse their narrative with a specific genre (or choose to subvert a genre) they do so by appealing to a pre-existing conception of how a story ought to go. The production of a generic text (the “models of writing”) is based on the ability of the reader to identify it. Because in most cases the genre of a text is not explicitly identified by the author/editor, its genre must be “guessed” by the reader.¹⁴ So Frow explains, “genre is not a *property* of a text but is a function of reading. Genre is a category that we *impute* to texts, and under different circumstances this imputation may change.”¹⁵ Though there is a

11 For introductions to modern genre theory and its history, see David Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory* (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2000); John Frow, *Genre, The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2006); Andrew Judd, *Modern Genre Theory: An Introduction for Biblical Studies* (Zondervan Academic, forthcoming); Heta Pyrhönen, “Genre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109–24.

12 Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, First published as “L’origine des genres” in 1976, and reprinted with revisions in Todorov, *Les genres du discours* (Paris, 1978). (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), pp. 17–18.

13 Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, p. 18.

14 E.D. Hirsch, cited in Frow, *Genre*, pp. 101–102. Even if a text is explicitly identified as a particular genre, it might be the case that the author is simply misleading the reader (e.g. purporting a fictional story to be historical) or trying to establish for them particular expectations that will be challenged by the narrative (e.g. mislabelling the story). Examples of this phenomenon are numerous and range from antiquity to the modern day.

15 Frow, *Genre*, p. 102. Frow, p. 102.

dialogical reality to navigate between author, text, reader, and community, the act of genrefication by the reader imposes upon the text particular “horizons of expectation,” which may or may not be congenial to the author’s original purposes or the rhetorical force of the text. This is not necessarily a problem so long as a particular genre is not made to exert totalizing interpretive control over a text.¹⁶

Secondly, the accumulation of discursive elements of a text may orientate readers to a particular genre, but they are not constitutive of a genre in themselves. In short, jokes are not only to be found in comedy, nor is violence only found in action films. These discursive elements may be found in any number of genres. This point is deftly (and densely) made by Derrida in his essay, “The Law of Genre.”¹⁷ He articulates a distinction between “participation” and “belonging” so that discursive properties can flow in and out of a variety of genres. Frow helpfully summarizes Derrida’s argument: “the ‘participation’ of texts in genres cannot mean a subsumption of the members of a class in the closed totality to which they belong. Texts work upon genres as much as they are shaped by them, genres are open-ended sets, and participation in a genre takes many different forms.”¹⁸ So, Western movies generally have horses and people riding horses, but the discursive element “horses” does not constitute the Western genre. Other genres can feature horses, and thus one cannot assume anything about the genre based on this one discursive element. Another example: just because we find ourselves in a dusty, desert town does not mean we are in a western. We could be on the planet Arrakkis from *Dune*, on Tatooine from *Star Wars*, on a dig site with Indiana Jones, or even with the Israelites on their way to Canaan. Things that we can pinpoint as discursive elements of a genre may not necessarily indicate that genre, for a text can participate in multiple genres without belonging to any of them.

16 For an example of how reading biblical texts as a particular genre (e.g., Judges 19 as a horror film) can be illuminating to interpretation, see Andrew Judd, “Playing with Scripture” (Sydney University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2021).

17 Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff, trans. Avital Ronell, Reprinted from *Glyph*, 7 (1980), 202-13. (Routledge, 2000), 219–31. The quotable but not straightforward part of his essay is as follows: “a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the trait of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark. Making genre its mark, a text demarcates itself. If remarks of belonging belong without belonging, participate without belonging, then genre-designations cannot be simply part of the corpus (p. 230).

18 Frow, *Genre*, p. 28.

Following from these two observations, the third point is that readers should resist this impulse of genrefication. Modern genre theory begins in the Romantic period with several authors, but the aphorism of Friedrich Schlegel is particularly fitting: “Every poem is a genre unto itself.”¹⁹ Texts may participate in several genres at once or even participate by subverting a genre. In doing so they create a new variant of a genre and expand prior classifications. This textual complexity allows for a polyvalency of genre. We must as readers resist the narrowing of our “horizons of expectations.” We must resist the urge to classify, that is, to impute a genre to a text at the outset. We may remark that the text behaves in similar ways to this genre or that text, but we must take care not to let an imputed genre *overdetermine* its meaning. To clarify, genres can be helpful for interpretation (e.g., Stephen King’s *It* ought to be understood as horror and thus not suitable for children), but the meaning of a text should not be reduced to a particular genre or limited to only one genre.²⁰

Turning now to Jonah and its humour, it is no straightforward task to discern what we as readers are meant to find funny and what we are meant to take seriously. The text is ambiguous and open to being read in more than one way. The subjective nature of humour and the reality that what one person finds funny another person might not also complicates easy classification.²¹ Too often, readers find comedy within the biblical text that mirrors their own sense of humour; usually only slim justifications are given for why an ancient reader and/or audience would find it funny.²² For certain comedic genres such as satire, the task is even more difficult. One would need to be relatively confident of a number of things: 1) the specific target of the author’s critique, 2) the social location of the author (from where does he criticise?), 3) the audience for whom this satire would appeal or be offensive, 4) the expected response of the audience, and 5) why later tradents would be compelled to retain such a time-bound satire as part of Jewish, and later Christian,

19 Cited in Duff, *Modern Genre Theory*, p. 5.

20 A good example of how film can utilize and subvert multiple genres could be found in films such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* or *The Big Lebowski* by the Coen Brothers.

21 Cf. Athalya Brenner-Idan, “On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible.*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan, Yehuda T Radday, and Margaret Davies (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), 39–58; J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), pp. 1-13.

22 For a spectacular failure in trying to read the Bible as humour see “The Smile Bible” by a pseudonymous R.H. Tatum. As has been pointed out by a variety of scholars, the publications, website, and twitter profile are filled with examples of “‘humour’ that rests on foundations of misogyny, Judeophobia, and sexual violence” (“The Smile Bible: A Source-Critical Analysis”).

scriptures.²³ So Sasson writes, “Satires are by definition intentional, and they require a conspiracy of shared assumptions before they can unravel successfully: The author must own a stance from which to launch barbs, the target must to some degree be transparent and focused, and the audience must be savvy enough to appreciate when details have moved away from the descriptive to the imaginative.”²⁴ As biblical scholars, our knowledge of the ancient world is insufficient for such *historical* reconstructions and the text is just ambiguous enough to resist such literary arguments. The humour and genre of biblical texts must be “guessed” at.²⁵

Like the first observation about genre, humour is primarily the activity of readers. While authors certainly inscribe humour into texts, they do so with some expectation that the reader will get the joke (and hopefully find it funny as well).²⁶ When interpreting biblical texts, readers must necessarily impute their own humour to the story. This imputed humour may be more or less congenial to the text and its subject matter. At times, reading the text in a particular way (e.g., with a “comic vision”) or as a specific comedic genre (e.g., Menippean satire) can be illuminating. Subjectivity in comedic humour is not a problem to overcome, but a present reality. It can, however, become a problem when it is not acknowledged and assumptions about what is and is not funny exert totalizing interpretive control over a text.

The second observation about genre also can be applied to humour and comedic genres. Following Derrida, it was argued that discursive properties of a genre do not in themselves constitute a genre. Just because there is a joke doesn’t mean that it’s a comedy. In the case of Jonah, just because there are some elements that we might read as “humorous” or “satirical” that does not mean that we must (or even should) label it as a comedy or a satire.

23 Arguing that Jonah is a parody, Band suggest that “it is entirely possible that a sage involved in the canonizing process could ‘misunderstand’ a text; it may, in fact, be his sacred mission to ‘misunderstand’ the text so that it could conform to his world view” (“Swallowing Jonah: The Eclipse of Parody”, p. 191. Though parody differs from satire (see Band’s discussion on p. 179-180) it requires the same level of historical confidence plus an additional knowledge of the “pre-existing text which it imitates and distorts.” For an insightful reappraisal of parody see Will Kynes, “Beat Your Parodies into Swords, and Your Parodied Books into Spears: A New Paradigm for Parody in the Hebrew Bible,” *Biblical Interpretation* 19.3 (2011): 276–310.

24 Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible v. 6D (New Haven, Connecticut: YUP, 2014), p. 248; Cf. Sasson, *Jonah*, pp. 331-334. The context of the quotation is a discussion of whether the story of Ehud and Eglon in Judges 3 is meant to be a satire.

25 For practical steps of how to “guess” at genre see, Judd, *Modern Genre Theory: An Introduction for Biblical Studies*, pp. 72-81.

26 The notable exception to this is the “Dad Joke”.

The third observation regarding the polyvalency of genre can apply to humour as well. Readers should not seek to view Jonah—or any text—as one iteration of a series which can be labelled “biblical comedy.” Jonah exhibits its own kind of comic, and interpreters need not attempt to reconcile it to other examples of comedy, biblical or otherwise. While it would be helpful to compare or contrast certain comedic elements in Jonah with one or more texts, this effort is different than trying to delineate a particular genre of ancient humour.²⁷ On this note, Tribble helpfully summarises

In its richness, complexity, and distinctiveness, the book of Jonah resists the categorizing endemic to genres. Although the [various genre designations] illuminate the story to varying degrees, none of them embraces it fully. Perhaps the best interpretive efforts allow Jonah freedom to move among the genres.²⁸

Soundings in Jonah

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the purchase value of this perspective is to provide two examples within the book of Jonah: the narrator’s description of the storm (Jon 1:4) and Jonah’s prayer in 4:1-3. The first example is chosen because it does indicate, as many have noted, the text’s ability to be humorous. The second text is chosen because, unlike at other points within the book, there are no suggestions or generic markers of humour/comedy. Jonah’s character must be inferred, and it is entirely up to the reader to make sense of this speech and how it fits within the narrative. As we will see, many have understood the text to be humorous, or operating within some sort of comedic genre, but this is not the only way to read the text. In fact, it might not even be the most illuminating of interpretations.

*And YHWH hurled a big wind. . . (Jon. 1:4)*²⁹

This statement by the narrator, as well the descriptions that follow in the opening chapter, have been read as humorous. The repeated use of “big” to describe the wind from YHWH (1:4), the storm upon the sea (1:4, 12), and the fish (2:1MT), coupled with a “nervous wreck” of a ship, the somehow sleeping Jonah, and the pious pagan sailors, are understood as generic markers of

²⁷ For an historical account of genres used by Jewish writers in 200BCE–300CE see Sean A. Adams, *Greek Genres and Jewish Authors: Negotiating Literary Culture in the Greco-Roman Era* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 2020). Adams suggests that satire is not well-attested in Jewish literature (p. 196, 296-297).

²⁸ Tribble, “Jonah”, p. 480.

²⁹ Author’s translation

comedy, satire, etc.³⁰ So, one author writes that in this scene, “the grotesqueries so characteristic of satire begin to appear in profusion.”³¹ Hurling (at least in English) connects to another example of comedy associated with the fish vomiting up the prophet.³² These appearances of exaggeration in the narrator’s description of objects and actions *must* point to the genre of the text, or at the very least, its comedic tone.³³ The story so far is *funny*, right?³⁴

As suggested, discursive properties of a genre do not in themselves constitute a genre. The repetition of “big” (גָּדוֹל/גְּדוּלָה) *may* suggest a particular comedic genre, but not always. These descriptions may simply indicate the magnitude of the situation. The so-called exaggeration may point to the story’s terror, not its humour. Jonah and the gentiles are caught in the perfect storm; they are going to need a bigger boat.³⁵ As fierce winds batter the ship and the waves threaten to tear the sailors from the decks, they frantically cry out to their gods whilst throwing overboard everything not bolted down.³⁶ The fact that Jonah remains asleep during the storm may be humorous but not necessarily. The quick pacing of the narrative along with the break in *wayyiqtol* sequence (Jon 1:5b) suggests that Jonah below was unaware of the events above. His rude awakening by the captain may not emphasise Jonah’s folly or laziness, but rather the severity of storm which requires all-hands-on-deck—sailors *and* passengers.

Perhaps the narrator’s descriptions serve to emphasise YHWH’s creative power. Anderson, among others, has highlighted several intertextual

30 Sherwood, “Cross-Currents” p. 50.

31 John C. Holbert, “‘Deliverance Belongs To Yahweh!': Satire in the Book of Jonah,” *JSOT* 6.21 (1981): 59–81, pp. 64–65; Cf. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, pp. 196–200.

32 Miles, “Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody”, p. 210; Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in The Book of Jonah*, Bible and Literature Series 8 (Sheffield: Almond Pr, 1983), p. 52; Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 180–181. Ironically, many jokes have been made about my surname along these lines . . . I have found none of them to be particularly funny.

33 Alexander, “Jonah and Genre”, p. 47.

34 While maintaining a more traditional, non-humorous reading, Uriel Simon views the irony as compassionate and meant to paint Jonah in sympathetic colours. He writes, “It looks down on the hero and painfully exposes his failures, but it is forgiving: It sets the hero in his proper place without humiliating him and restores him to his dignity without abasing him” (*Jonah: the traditional Hebrew text with the new JPS translation*, JPS Bible commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), p. xxii).

35 The iconic line “We are going to need a bigger boat” comes from the Steven Spielberg classic, *Jaws* (1975). Within this thriller film (the movie poster designates it as a thriller), this line is delivered as a serious statement (though it was originally conceived as an inside joke amongst the crew). In the reception of the film, this line has been reused and appropriated as a joke within pop-culture.

36 The genre here has shifted to a disaster film similar to *The Perfect Storm* (2000).

resonances with the creation story (Gen. 1) and the flood story (Gen. 6-8).³⁷ Notably, repeated words like “dry ground” (יַבֵּשָׁה) in Jon. 1:9, 13; 2:11 only appear in the Hebrew Bible to speak of God’s creative or liberative action (Gen. 1:9-10; Exod. 14:22; 15:19; Josh. 4:22; Ps. 66:6; Neh. 9:11). While the sailors may have initially responded in prayer to their gods out of terror, by the end of the chapter, they learn to *fear* the God of Israel, “who made the sea and the dry ground (Jon. 1:9).”³⁸

Still, others have pointed out, the verb translated as “to hurl” in 1:4, 5, 12, 15 (from טול) and the fish’s action of vomiting (from קיא) have strong resonances with exile.³⁹ In another configuration of this story, Jonah’s abandonment of his prophetic mission leads tragically and violently to exile. If the discursive markers of one genre also belong to another (or several) then can it really be suggested that a particular genre is inherent to the text? It is the reader that imputes meaning to these disparate elements, emphasising some over others to (re)construct a story. Jonah’s textual ambiguity and its laconic narration allows it to be read in more ways than one.

Jonah’s Prayer in 4:1-3

*And it was extremely evil to Jonah and he became angry. And he prayed to the Lord, saying, “Please Lord, is this not what I said when I was in my own country? This is why I fled to Tarshish before, for I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, full of loving-kindness, and one who relents from punishing evil. But now O Lord, please take my life from me for my death is better than my life.”*⁴⁰

Readers before could only speculate why he fled to Tarshish, but Jonah’s speech here shockingly reveals his true reason: he already knew what YHWH would do. Though it is not stated explicitly (here or anywhere in the book), the sense is that Jonah is angry at God for his compassionate response to

37 Joel Edmund Anderson, “Jonah’s Peculiar Re-Creation,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 41.4 (2011): 179–88.

38 More information is given about what happens to the sailors in *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 10 where they are said to choose to be circumcised.

39 Lev. 18:28; 20:22; Jer. 16:13; 22:26; L. Juliana M. Claassens, “Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah: Tragic Laughter as Resistance in the Context of Trauma,” *OTE* 28.3 (2015): 655–73; Marian Kelsey, “The Book of Jonah and the Theme of Exile,” *JOT* 45.1 (2020): 128–40; Cf. Brent A. Strawn, “On Vomiting: Leviticus, Jonah, Ea(a)Rth,” *CBQ* 74.3 (2012): 445–64. Strawn argues for a distinction between the uses of vomiting in Leviticus and Jonah, with the former indicating punishment/exile. In Jonah, however, vomiting leads to preservation and the continuation of mission.

40 Author’s translation.

Nineveh.⁴¹ Even so, these verses are filled with ambiguity. In what register are we meant to read this? What emotions can be reasonably solicited from the reader? Pity, derision, laughter, silence?⁴² What follows is a representative sample of the variety of interpretations.⁴³

Jonah's Prayer as Punchline

When read within a broader comedic genre, but often as a satire or a parody, Jonah's "complaint" is silly. It is a revelation of Jonah's absurdity. So Whedbee writes, "Jonah narrows his vision to his own egocentric interests, unable to encompass an extension of divine mercy to another people. The narrator creates a caricature of a prophet, whose parody of famous prophetic words and images intensifies the satirical effect."⁴⁴ The ridicule of readings like this, are directed not really at Jonah, but at his compatriots who would hold similar views. Sprangenberg writes,

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 . . . Jonah

41 Jonah's prayer does not make explicit what he had said in the past, and it does not focus on the actions of God but on his character. Moreover, the true source of Jonah's anger is missing from the narrator's comment in 4:1. Both Sasson and Person Jr. suggest a more explicit rendering of the verse so that it includes the demonstrative "this." So Sasson understands "this" to refer to the outcome of God's actions towards Nineveh (*Jonah*, p. 273). Dependent on Sasson's reading, Person Jr. differs slightly, suggesting that the demonstrative refers to "the Lord's coercion of Jonah to fulfil his mission (*In Conversation with Jonah*, pp. 35 n. 21; 44, 127). What is strange is that the MT lacks any demonstrative. The LXX's rendering is likewise missing a demonstrative or any referent to the preceding chapters. The verbs are directed solely to Jonah (Καὶ ἐλυπήθη Ἰωνᾶς λύπην μεγάλην καὶ συνεχύθη — And Jonah grieved a great pain and he was disturbed). The Targum similarly lacks any demonstrative. While interpreters must necessarily try to fill in the gaps—and it is normal to adjust language for the sake of translation—I find it odd that Pearson Jr. stresses this unattested demonstrative in his reading: "Consistent to his true nature, Jonah remains angry with the Lord for coercing him to prophesy to Nineveh. The Lord as the cause of his anger is not only suggested in the demonstrative 'this' but also in the use of 'large' in the description of his anger . . ." (127).

42 For a helpful list of various readings of Jonah 4:2, see Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 147-148. Pearson Jr., pp. 171-186; Walter Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), pp. 199-204.

43 For fuller treatments of Jonah's reception history see Erickson, *Jonah*; Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000); Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, *Jonah Through the Centuries* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2022).

44 Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, p. 211. Whedbee, 211.

is also an anti-type of the ideal Jew the author envisaged. And this ideal type is seen in the character Yahweh.”⁴⁵

Jonah’s request for death is read as a prophetic temper tantrum. There are numerous difficulties with such classification, namely it is unclear if the satire/parody and its biting comedy must extend to the whole book. Is the prayer (Jon. 2:2-9) part of the joke? How about YHWH’s compassion? Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of such readings is their propensity to sink the meaning of the book into the destructive depths of anti-Semitism/anti-Judaism.⁴⁶ Yvonne Sherwood argues that lying behind such descriptions of Jonah’s rhetoric is an author who looks remarkably like modern commentators.

The author is made out to be a liberal-minded pre-Christian Jew, a true ecumenical, who “opens the door to a wider and more tolerant viewpoint” and sets himself in opposition to a particular ultra-nationalistic Jewish group. A complete historical profile is sketched—“our author” is a “universalist” who opposes the “arrogance” that accompanies “choseness” and who writes specifically to attack a group who “believe that they hold the God of heaven and earth in their pocket.” He is, in other words, a “pre-Christian Christian” or twentieth-century liberal academic, a projection of the critic’s own ideology situated behind (at the origin of) the text.⁴⁷

It would seem then that humour does not always deliver us from evil; in the case of Jonah, it might actually contribute to it. There are, however, other satirical readings which avoid such anti-Jewish rhetoric. Carolyn Sharp for instance, understands the irony to be working not against Jonah but YHWH. Jonah’s speech is ironic because God is *not* merciful: “The more hidden point is that God has been irredeemably unmerciful to God’s own people in exile.

45 Izak J.J. Spangenberg, “Reading the Old Testament in the 21st Century Using the Book of Jonah as Reference,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34 (2013): 1–7, p. 6. (Cited in Stephen Derek Cook, “Who Knows? Reading the Book of Jonah as a Satirical Challenge to Theodicy of the Exile” (Sydney University, Ph.D. Dissertation, n.d.), p. 93). Cf. Lacocque and Lacocque, *Jonah*, p. 41-43; Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1986), pp.84-86.

46 There is a long history of Anti-Semitism and/or anti-Judaism in the interpretation of the book of Jonah, most of which does not rely on the use of humour. For Sherwood, these “comical counter reading is not radical but merely reinforces old perceptions in a more entertaining way” (“Cross-Currents”, pp. 59-60. For more sustained analysis of the Philo/anti-Semitic readings of Jonah, Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, pp. 21-32. For a surprising(?) example of this anti-Semitic trope see *Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie* (2002). The strapline of the movie poster reads: “A comic adventure with a bite.”

47 Yvonne Sherwood, “Cross-currents in the book of Jonah”, pp. 57-58. Her quotations derive from Magonet (*Form and Meaning*) and Good (“Jonah: The absurdity of God”).

God has always been unmerciful with all nations, including the nation called by God's name."⁴⁸

Jonah's Prayer as a Response to Trauma

Another perspective on the humour in Jonah is to view it as “tragic laughter.” The post-exilic audience of the book of Jonah would likely have experiences of trauma or generational memories of trauma associated with exile and imperial violence.⁴⁹ L. Juliana M. Claassens explains that “tragic laughter offers a means of overcoming trauma by contributing to the formation of an alternative consciousness that refuses to succumb to the ideology of the oppressors.”⁵⁰ So while the book does contain comedic elements, they are employed by the author and reader in the service of resistance rather than ridicule.

Other illuminating readings may be found when we choose not to centre humour but adopt trauma-sensitive readings and listen to the perspectives of readers who have endured similar experiences.⁵¹ One striking example comes from Chesung Justin Ryu who proposes a postcolonial reading of Jonah 4. For him, the repentance of the Ninevites rings hollow without proper restitution to the victims of this colonial power.⁵² The exaggeration in chapter 3 (e.g., animals wearing sackcloth) points not to comedy but to hypocrisy—a reading attested by a few Jewish sources.⁵³ Given the power differentials between a world-renowned empire like Assyria and the small, divided kingdoms of Israel/Judah, God's universal love and forgiveness becomes part and parcel of the “rhetoric of the strong.”⁵⁴ The episode with the plant (4:4-11)—rather than a parable designed to make Jonah look silly—is read as an effort by YHWH (as a

48 Carolyn Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 185. For Sharp, Jonah functions as a parody of the psalmist who cries out to a ruthless God (cf. pp. 185-186). Another example of viewing the target of the book's satire as something other than Jonah/Judaism, see John A. Miles, "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody".

49 Cf. Ehud Ben Zvi, *The Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*, JSOTSS 367 (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 151; Niditch, *Jonah: A Commentary*, pp. 30-31. Some of these readings rely on a particular originating context wherein Nineveh represented Assyrian imperial oppression. Yet, the narrative nowhere explicitly connects Nineveh with Assyria. Even though this connection seems obvious in light of history and other biblical texts, the narrator may only have in mind a great city of the far east. Jonah's mission might not be analogous as being sent to 1940's Berlin but only to the “Orient” of the mythic past.

50 Claassens, “Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah”, pp. 660-661.

51 Cf. L. Juliana Claassens, “Surfing with Jonah: Reading Jonah as a Postcolonial Trauma Narrative,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45.4 (2021): 576-87.

52 Chesung Justin Ryu, “Silence as Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of the Silence of Jonah in Jonah 4.1-11,” *JSOT* 34.2 (2009): 195-218, p. 207.

53 *Y. Taanit*. 2.1; *Midrash Jonah*. For comments and explanation see Erickson, *Jonah*, pp. 82-84.

54 Ryu, “Silence as Resistance”, pp. 198, 218.

character) to control the narrative. God's question redirects Jonah's focus (as well as our own) onto the plant, rather than addressing the real source of Jonah's anger. Jonah's silence in the end is an act of resistance. Ryu writes,

From the experience of my own Korean people, who, like the Israelites have suffered under powerful nations and have experienced colonization, I cannot easily take part in condemning Jonah's anger; nor can I easily praise God's universal love. As long as the oppression or colonization and its painful memories are ongoing, how can the oppressed hide their anger in learning that their oppressors and colonizers are saved by their God—the God of the oppressed?⁵⁵

Ryu's postcolonial reading touches upon a pertinent ethical and theological question: is YHWH's character good news for those who have suffered or are suffering from injustice? What is at stake—for both victim and oppressor—when God's merciful forgiveness is granted to one's enemies? It is not easy to forgive someone who has hurt you, nor is it reasonable to expect those who have suffered egregious evil to forgive their oppressors—but how are we to respond when God chooses to forgive? This is “Jonah's dilemma” writes Janet Howe Gaines in her book, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*. In the final chapter, Gaines explores the complexity of forgiveness from two 20th century perspectives—the Holocaust and Apartheid in South Africa.⁵⁶ She focuses on the story of Simon Wiesenthal and his book *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (1997). During his time in a concentration camp, Wiesenthal was forced to hear a German soldier's deathbed confession of his crimes against the Jews. Though Wiesenthal acknowledged that the man had true repentance, he did not offer forgiveness. At the end of the confession, he left the dying Nazi with only silence. Should Wiesenthal have forgiven the man? *The Sunflower* includes responses to Wiesenthal's question from many theologians, authors, faith leaders, and Holocaust survivors, but none are definitive. Though YHWH has compassion, Gaines helpfully points out that “the Lord makes no mention as to whether Jonah should forgive the people. By analogy, then, even if Simon Wiesenthal cannot forgive the Nazi soldier, God retains the more authoritative prerogative to act according to divine

55 Ryu, “Silence as Resistance”, p. 198. For another reading that ties together the work of Ryu and Sherwood, see Karen Bray, *Grave Attending: A Political Theology for the Unredeemed* (Fordham University Press, 2020), pp. 114-125.

56 *Forgiveness in a Wounded World: Jonah's Dilemma*, Studies in Biblical Literature 5 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 134-166.

discretion."⁵⁷ Jonah's response—for silence is still a communicative act—resonates with a deeply human question.

Jonah's Prayer as Confession and Faith

Such serious and probing questions about why Jonah would run away are found also in medieval rabbis and midrashim. Some suggested that Jonah fled because Nineveh's repentance would signal condemnation for Israel. If a wicked gentile nation like Nineveh could listen to YHWH's prophet and repent, why couldn't YHWH's own chosen people?⁵⁸ The 19th century commentator Malbim wrote that YHWH had desired Nineveh (i.e., Assyria) to repent so they would become an instrument of wrath against Israel. It was from this mission that Jonah fled, preferring death over being the cause of Israel's punishment.⁵⁹ Having witnessed Nineveh's repentance, Jonah despairingly asks for death so that he would not have to see Israel's punishment come to pass.⁶⁰ *This* story then takes on a tragic dimension. Jonah attempts to flee from his prophetic mission to spare Israel. In other words, he gives up his life for the salvation of Israel, that is, until YHWH intervenes with the fish. Jonah must accept his prophetic task and, in despair, preach a message he knows will be heard. He waits outside the city, but not in gleeful expectation in the death of the wicked. Rather, Jonah hopes against hope that somehow, Israel will be saved. As indicated by its place as the Haftorah reading on Yom Kippur, Jonah is understood to be about repentance.⁶¹ The story's aim is to inspire that same type of repentance in its readers, particularly Israel.

Within a Christian frame of reference, the figure of Jonah has been regarded as a type or picture of Christ and his resurrection.⁶² In the Gospels, Jesus

57 Gaines, *Forgiveness*, p. 142.

58 *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 10; *Radak* on 1:3

59 *Midrash Tanchuma*, Tzav 14; *Midrash Tanchuma*, Vayikra 8.

60 The Jonah's death wish was viewed as echoing Moses' call to be blotted out the Lord's book (Exod. 32:32). See *Radak* and *Ibn Ezra* on 4:3. For other Rabbinic perspectives on the book see the anthologized commentary by Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz (*Jonah: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed., rev. corr., The Twelve Prophets (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Mesorah Publications, 1980), pp. xxiii-xxxvi, 82-83, 132-136).

61 *b. Meggillah* 31a

62 Augustine, *Letter 102*, translated by J.G. Cunningham, From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 1, Philip Schaff (ed.), (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102102.htm>; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures 14.17,20*, translated by Edwin Hamilton Gifford, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 7, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310114.htm>; Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary of the Twelve Prophets* Vol. 2, Robert Hill (transl.), The Fathers of the Church series Vol. 116, p. 161, 165.

himself invites the comparison when he tells the religious leaders that the only sign they would receive would be the Sign of Jonah (Matt. 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32). While both Matthew and Luke discuss repentance (and that the men of Nineveh would rise up and condemn this generation), only Matthew mentions that Jonah was in the fish for three days and nights. It appears then that Jonah's story signifies two things: repentance and resurrection. Being swallowed by the fish is related to Christ's "descent into Hell," and Jonah being vomited or spit out onto dry land signifies the resurrection.⁶³ The sign of Jesus' messianic identity would be confirmed by a great number of people—presumably both Jew *and* Gentile—turning to God in repentance. If it is appropriate to let the rabbinic traditions outlined above to inform our reading here, specifically that Jonah sacrifices his life for the sake of Israel, then perhaps this sign of Jonah relates to resurrection, repentance, *and* sacrifice.⁶⁴ In post-biblical tradition, the figure of Jonah becomes a fitting portrait of *Christian* resurrection as is evidenced by numerous depictions in early Christian sarcophagi and art.⁶⁵

Conclusions

The readings presented above are meant to showcase the slippery nature of adducing a text's genre. What one reader understands as parody, another may see as pathos; faith can be easily mistaken for farce. What I have tried to show is that all of these (though some more than others) are valid and plausible readings of the text. To argue then that Jonah must be read a certain way or another because of its genre is to narrow the horizons of our expectations. Likewise, when humour is allowed a controlling interest in interpretation *at the expense of other readings and traditions*, it may be less than illuminating. In attempting to undo the violence within the text, humour might further

63 Bolin notes that Jonah is read as part of the Holy Saturday liturgy by the Greek Orthodox Church and was read on the same day in the Roman Catholic church until Vatican II (*Freedom beyond Forgiveness*, p. 186 n.18). Sherwood includes a photograph of the Jonah Window, which depicts Jonah stepping out of the fish's mouth with a banner that reads "something greater than Jonah is here." (Sherwood, "Cross-Currents", pp. 51-52.). In contrast to this tradition, others have argued that being swallowed by the fish constitutes Jonah's rescue. In other words, there is no resurrection for Jonah because he never died. This is especially true for a Jewish reading.

64 Matthew's statement that "Something greater than Jonah is here" (12:41), should not be understood to denigrate Jonah. Jesus' sacrifice can be considered *effectual*, whereas Jonah was prohibited from sacrificing himself by God.

65 Erickson, *Jonah*, pp. 143-155; "Sarcophagus | British Museum," *The British Museum*, n.d., https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1957-1011-1; "Sarcophagus 'of Jonah,'" *Musei Vaticani*, n.d., <https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-cristiano/buon-pastore-e-giona/sarcofago-di-giona.html>.

contribute to it by trampling over other valid readings. In the case of Jonah's prayer in chapter 4, the readings that snatched Jonah from the pit of interpretation were, in my opinion, the ones that did not focus on humour or seek to label the story as a particular comedic genre.

At a broader hermeneutical level, these examples may inform the ongoing project to read the Bible for irenic ends. In this pursuit, readings need not run roughshod over others—especially when the same data is used to confer different meanings. Liberative and ethical readings can exist in a non-exclusionary relationship with other historical and literary approaches.⁶⁶ The text might be ironic, it might be satire, but it *is* open to being read in more than one way. Interpreters should not get carried away with trying to discover the comedic genre of every text, failing to recognise that it is they as readers who are doing the heavy lifting—these genres are simply what they use as handles. The multi-dimensional quality of many biblical texts helpfully opens them to these types of humorous readings, but it also allows of other types. And it is these other readings which may provide a brighter light for illuminating deeper and more meaningful questions for today. To borrow the poetry of Billy Collins, let us not mistake the search for meaning with the violent act of waterboarding a text with genre. If readers are not careful, their quest for genre might only succeed in drowning Jonah.

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66 For an extended and provocative treatment of this issue, see David Janzen, *The Liberation of Method: The Ethics of Emancipatory Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021).

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