

G.F. Snyman

Prof. G.F. Snyman, Professor Extraordinarius and Research Associate, Department of Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, University of South Africa.

E-mail: gfsnyman@global.co.za,
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5145-2822>

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Acting queerly: Jonah as the implicated subject and vulnerability¹

ABSTRACT

The article poses the following question: How is queerness implicated in the Book of Jonah? Queerness is viewed more in light of politics than identity, defining the term more in relation to power and the questioning of power than in light of gender and sexuality. A decolonial turn is incorporated into Queer Hermeneutics. After a brief presentation of the story, the article examines specific points of departure involved in the reading of the book, namely a double ethics of interpretation, vulnerability, and an implicated subject. With these in mind, the question about queerness in the Book of Jonah is discussed. The article concludes that the spectacle of the conversion of the Ninevites constitutes a drag performance, whereas Jonah's watching of this drag performance queers himself in as much as he suffers the heat and wind while remaining silent.

1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine a Jew from Auschwitz during WWII being sent to the Nazi Headquarters in Berlin, or to Hitler's private home, the Berghof, near Berchtesgaden in Bavaria, with the message from the deity that he needs to stop his evil or face the consequences. Or imagine a Ukrainian citizen being dispatched to President Vladimir Putin in Moscow demanding an end to his invasion. This



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is what Jonah had to do: A Jew being sent by Yahweh to Nineveh, at the time the archenemy of Israel, pronouncing judgment over them. To Israel, Nineveh was an evil empire, but usually such pronouncements were only meant for Israel's ears. For example, Nahum (3:1, 4, 5-6 RSV) says to Israel:

Ah, City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty – no end to the plunder! ... Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute, gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery, who enslaves nations through her debaucheries, and peoples through her sorcery, ... I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt, and make you a spectacle. Then all who see you will shrink from you and say: 'Nineveh is devastated; who will bemoan her?' Where shall I seek comforters for you?

Similar confrontations happened in the past in my context of South Africa. On 9 August 1956, women confronted the apartheid regime at the Union Buildings in Pretoria about the pass laws. A similar event on 21 March 1961 ended tragically with the Sharpeville massacre. At the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s, Jonah, in the guise of Archbishop Tutu and his commissioners, could not extract an apology for apartheid from the then President F.W. de Klerk (see Krog 1998:124-128):

Archbishop Tutu's skin hangs dull and loose from his face. His shoulders covered in defeat. I [Antjie Krog] want to go to him, to make an infantile gesture or other. To kiss his ring, to touch his dress. When De Klerk walked out, it was [as] if something slipped through my fingers for ever. ... That was the day – the day the 'Big Dip' began. The Day of the Undeniable Divide. One moment it was the closest. The next moment the farthest apart that people in this country have ever been.

What is it with Jonah's anger and depression in his story? Is he querying the deity for not following the Nahum line? Or is the deity queering him? Nineveh is definitely put in drag with their excessive conversion. Even the animals are put in sackcloth. Jonah is certainly questioning God for giving Nineveh another chance, but can one add and remove another vocal to the verb "querying" and ask whether Jonah is not acting *queerly*? In other words, following the norms set up by Nahum's prophecy, is Yahweh's action, according to Jonah, not challenging Jonah's own ethos and partisan discourse of Israel, Yahweh's chosen people?

Bearing in mind my own queerness, let me provide a summary of the story. In the story of the Book of Jonah, the main protagonist, Yahweh, a deity partisan to Israel, decides to give Israel's archenemy, the Assyrians in Nineveh, a chance to redeem themselves (Ch. 1). He calls a specific

prophet to proclaim his words, but Jonah is not willing. Yahweh tries to force Jonah, to the point of bringing a storm to the ship on which Jonah is hiding. Jonah let the sailors throw him into the sea, in order to acquiesce the deity. Ironically, his act converts the sailors, a resulting act he did not want to see happen with the Ninevites! Chapter 2 sees Jonah making a full turn and, in Chapter 3, he does as commanded by the deity: He proclaims the pending calamity that will befall Nineveh if they fail to turn to Yahweh. The reader realises in Chapter 4 that Jonah wants them to fail. Contrary to his expectations, they listen. With Jonah dumbfounded and highly irritated by their unexpected response – even the animals took part in the mass conversion – Jonah acts with anger in Chapter 4. His argument is that he knew the deity would find grace in Nineveh and he, therefore, wished to die. He went east to observe what will happen in the city and the deity sends him a castor oil tree to provide some shade in the heat. The next day, the tree dries up and Jonah is scorched by the sun, adding to his anger and desperation, still blaming the deity for his anger. The deity ends the narrative by showing Jonah's incongruence: He is angry about a tree he did not grow or care for, and he would not allow the deity to save a city that does not know its left from its right. Jonah is questioning the deity's mercy to the Ninevites and the lack of mercy towards him by taking away the tree. In his view, the deity acts in a queer way, and he gives him the silent treatment when the deity makes his case. But Jonah too acts in a queer way, exactly the opposite of what a prophet is supposed to do. Moreover, his calling itself is out of sorts, queer: He must confront the city of Nineveh directly. He thought that he would end up, as the saying goes, in "Queer Street". Hence, my research question: How is queerness implicated in the Book of Jonah?

2. POINTS OF DEPARTURE

One noteworthy interpretation of the Book of Jonah had a particular influence on my reading. It is the essay by a Korean scholar, Chesung Justin Ryu (2009), titled "Silence as resistance: A postcolonial reading of the silence of Jonah in Jonah 4.1-11". In his postcolonial reading, Ryu argues that Jonah's anger and silence relate to the power differential between Israel and the Ninevites, and his stance reflects the resistance of the weak against the strong. From a queer position, I can align myself with his interpretation of the issue of the power differential.

My first point of departure is a double ethics of interpretation (Snyman 2007) in line with Schüssler-Fiorenza's (1988) double ethics of reading. I assume a twofold responsibility. First, the reader needs to serve justice

to the text in its context, by exploring the possible different meanings attributed to the text in the past and present. Secondly, the reader needs to be explicit about his/her own geopolitical context to lay bare the reader's own power relationships and the role the text would play in his/her context. In the Book of Jonah, one deals with a story world of the 8th century BCE, whilst the world of text production is most likely much later, at least after the demise of the Assyrians. The current post-apartheid context is still dealing with the ramifications of systemic racism, those who have for years carried the brunt of colonialism and apartheid and those who enforced it. It is comparable to Ryu's weak and strong, although the intersections of the weak and strong with current aftermaths may provide different positions.

My second point of departure is an ethics of vulnerability, as explained by Gilson (2016:85). Gilson differentiates between an epistemology of invulnerability that cultivates ignorance, and an ethics of vulnerability that cultivates humility. The former is found among powerful elites who occupy positions of privilege and who participate in domination. They are served by values such as detachment, self-containment, self-mastery, and control (see Snyman 2017:192). An ethics of vulnerability (Gilson 2016:94-97) relates to an epistemic vulnerability which cultivates openness and affectivity. It is an openness to not knowing or to be wrong, yet brave enough to venture into contexts where one's thinking, philosophy, and world view are challenged and put to the test. According to Ryu (2009:198), those readings of Jonah emphasising God's universal and inclusive love and mercy mirror readings of the powerful and the privileged, whereas Jonah's resistance in being angry and questioning the deity's behaviour identifies with the weak and oppressed. In this sense, Jonah can be associated with vulnerability.

Epistemic vulnerability functions in a context where one is unknowing and foreign, a context where one is not in power, yet in a position to learn (Snyman 2017:192). Applied to the twofold vulnerability of an ethics of interpretation, I would assume a consequent double vulnerability in this process: A vulnerability on the text's side, due to its past and current usage, which renders the text vulnerable to abuse by readers (no text speaks for itself; it needs an interpreter who speaks on its behalf), and a vulnerability on the reader's side regarding his/her own understanding of the text within a particular context, in which the status quo may change as a result of the interpretation of the text. The reader not only has a responsibility towards the text, but is also response-able to the text (Snyman 1997). In my 1984 mini-dissertation for the Baccalaureus Theologia degree, I sided with

those in domination: God presents his grace to those he wishes (Snyman 1984:38). Ryu forces me to question this position, due to my own context and points of departure.

The reading of the text has consequences. An ethics of interpretation requires the reader not only to put his/her methodologies on the table, but also the consequences a reading with these methodologies would have on, and would be foreseen to others. Such foresight is not always possible, but a historical view may be indicative of possibilities for the future. For the early Christians, Jonah foreshadowed Jesus Christ with his stay in the fish; he is also a negative stereotype of the Jew for the likes of Augustine and Luther; for Calvin, Jonah represents a type of discipleship that is docile and, for others, Jonah relates to monsters and threatens its credibility (see Sherwood 2000:11). Ben Zvi (2009:12) tries to find a way out, by suggesting a double reading: One that reinforces Yahweh as a compassionate deity and another that recognises his power in that Nineveh is later destroyed. At this moment, White South African Bible readers should be very aware of the consequences a particular interpretation of some biblical texts, pre- and during apartheid, had on their life, enabling privilege to a few of them in contrast to the suffering those same readings caused others. When an interpretation causes injury to others, as is the case with apartheid and racism or with homosexuality and gender, where some people of faith refuse to allow women and gay men in the ministry, the ethical repercussions of such readings need to be made evident. For this reason, a hermeneutics of vulnerability has as its object to facilitate a process of coming to terms with past harmful readings and to generate new meanings that empower people.

A hermeneutics of vulnerability implies an epistemic vulnerability, which rejects the closure of the self that renders a person invulnerable. Epistemic vulnerability is defined by an openness to not knowing, to be wrong, to be ambivalent to the own responses over against a closure that refrains one from knowing the self (Gilson 2016:98-100). On an epistemological level, it means recognising and acknowledging the norms that are used to read the text. It entails losing one's innocence, or rather, breaking down an epistemology of a smug ignorance and denial of racism (see Wekker 2016:17-18). To Ryu (2009:198), the issue of the Ninevites' conversion and Jonah's subsequent anger raises the following question:

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* (my italics, GFS) God – the God of the oppressed?

Ryu (2009:199) also asks:

If God shows the same love to two different power groups, one of which is oppressing the other, where is the God of justice?

Such a situation is familiar within the South African context: An inclusive Christianity divided between the smug ignorance of former oppressors looking on with glee how the recently oppressed destroy the country and the anger of the oppressed with their continuing dire situation and being confronted with a ruling class that betrayed their struggle. My question is: What is happening on an epistemological level within these two groups? How do they account for the shift in power?

Anderson (2009:31-44, followed by Snyman, 2011) verbalised a series of norms, of which a Bible reader no longer can claim ignorance. She labelled it a *mythic norm* of reading the biblical text which suggests an intersection of various identity positions: *A heterosexual, masculine, White, wealthy, middle-class, Christian, patriarchal reader*. However, each of these positions has an implied binary opposing epistemology: Decoloniality, black consciousness, black theology, various brands of feminism, critical race theory, constructivism, queer theology, and so on. With the shift in power in 1994, where does each of these binary oppositions leave a reader regarding the Book of Jonah? Intersectionality may throw light on the issue.

Intersectionality is a term coined by Crenshaw (1989), with which she tried to describe the interlocking nature of various levels of social forces, identities, and ideologies that create uneven power relations and result in disadvantage and discrimination. For example, women may experience discrimination on the basis of gender, but a Black woman would have an added disadvantage, namely her blackness. Moreover, as Anderson illustrated, one may experience a disadvantage on one level, but one would have an advantage on another.

As a non-heterosexual, I would not properly fit the mythic norm, but my masculinity, whiteness, middle-class economic status, and participation in Christianity would make me part of this norm, of which I can no longer claim ignorance. Anderson's project of revealing cases, where this mythic norm operates, feels like unmasking, being found out, and rendered shameful. But pulling off masks in a masked society is of critical importance to understanding the other, especially when that other lurks in a binary way in the background of the mythic norm and gets seldom critically accounted for (Snyman 2021:4). It is part of an ethics of interpretation to put all the cards on the table as far as possible and as far as one can recognise them. This is what happens when one gets asked to queer the prophet, Jonah.

With Greenough (2020:111), I would claim that the unmasking brought about by queer hermeneutics liberates the biblical text from normative academic captivity. Greenough (2020:111) argues as follows regarding queer hermeneutics:

In this way, queer biblical interpretation resists straight-jacketing by traditional hermeneutics and exegesis and opens up new ways of disclosing and understanding subtexts. In turn queer biblical studies can rewrite marginalised characters in the Bible, or trace the contextual significance of the times in which the ancient texts may have been produced, and this can destabilise the politics at play in the biblical texts. These activities are all activist to the core.

The task of queering the prophet brings forward the above issues and the reader's own positionality regarding the prophet Jonah: I share with him masculinity and the Hebrew parts of Christianity. I am no prophet, not a Hebrew, and I do not know anything about his ethnicity, education, and economic status. To me, he is more like a cardboard character. He is given a task, he refuses and does the opposite, he is forced to get in line with his task, does the job, and then retreats in anger to look at what happens to the city. I share with him a few of the intersecting positionalities, of which two seem important to me. We are both implicated subjects in our different life stories, and we are both somewhere on the continuum of invulnerability-vulnerability. Is his feeling of dejectedness perhaps like Tutu's own disheartenment in the face of former President de Klerk's inability to account for apartheid? Let me examine the themes of implicated subject and queerness first before discussing Jonah's act of queering.

3. IMPLICATED SUBJECT

The unmasking of the mythic norm referred to earlier is to make explicit the tools we use in the reading process. Since these tools are linked up with ideologies, their explication will also reveal our level of implication in our readings of the biblical text. A hermeneutic of vulnerability enables us to confront our own implications. With implication, I mean "indirect, structural, and collective agency that enabled injury, exploitation, and domination" (Rothberg 2019:1). Implication suggests that one is not a direct agent of harm but nonetheless aligned to power and privilege and contributing to domination and benefitting from it. An implicated subject does not have a clearcut role of perpetrator or victim, but s/he participates, nevertheless.

With the term "implicated subject", I hope to get beyond the usually invoked perpetrators, victims, and bystanders (Rothberg 2019:202). Not being passive bystanders either, their actions or failure to act contribute to the positions of perpetrators and victims.

Modes of implication ... are complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory, but are nonetheless essential to confront in the pursuit of justice (Rothberg 2019:1).

As with the terms “victim” and “perpetrator”, the term “implicated subject” is not an essence but an abstraction, or rather “an analytical tool” to come to grips with

discomfiting forms of belonging to a context of injustice that cannot be grasped immediately or directly because they seem to involve spatial, temporal, or social distances or complex causal mechanisms (Rothberg 2019:8).

The term relates to responsibility but is distinctive from the realm of legal justice that works with guilt and complicity (Rothberg 2019:13). It does not ignore injustice, but innocence in this sense is a myth (Rothberg 2019:202). Implication is the result of interlocking systems of oppression resulting into collective political responsibility and a concomitant complex implication of perpetration and victimhood (Rothberg 2019:202). For the purpose of this exercise, I align my definition of the implicated subject with that of Rothberg (2019:12) who, in turn, aligns it with Levi's (1989) notion of the “grey zone”:

The implicated subject serves as an umbrella term that gathers a range of subject positions that sit uncomfortably in our familiar conceptual space of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.

To me, Jonah exemplifies this complexity. As a Hebrew, he is implicated as a victim, but as a prophet, closely aligned with the ruling class and their partisan deity, he is implicated on the side of coloniality.

Davies and Rogerson (2007) make a few interesting remarks on prophecy and the prophets, which may be of help regarding Jonah. Prophecy is associated with the royal court as well as the cultic centre linked with the king's house (Davies & Rogerson 2007:168). This means that it is closely associated with power. However, prophecy is largely a literary product and attributed to people who were later called prophets. It is an institution of the past that later became textualised while reflecting on the reasons for the end of the monarchy (Davies & Rogerson 2007:173). Some of these texts were finalised under the influence of Deuteronomistic thoughts, whereas others were critical of Deuteronomistic thought, for example the Book of Jonah. Rogerson and Davies (2007:135) thought it to be a satire on Deuteronomistic thought, poking fun at a few theological conventions. Jonah preaches with astounding success; yet he is angry at his success; Jonah does not sound sincere in his prayer when incredibly

swallowed by a big fish, and the deity makes things happen at a stroke. The king in Nineveh acts like a totalitarian ruler: Excessive penitence with even animals in sackcloth (see Davies & Rogerson 2007:135).

The story has a definite comic element (see Van Heerden 2003). However, as a reader under the mythic norm, the story is usually taken very seriously and not as satire or even with humour. Looking at the issue of implication, the story presents me with multiple implications. The most obvious one would be the implicated evil doers in Nineveh, the colonisers. The association with the Ninevites' implication puts to me the question of decoloniality as a proper response to the experience of the victims of apartheid. A less obvious implication is the idea of a partisan deity that once underscored apartheid theology. Yahweh is to Jonah an implicated subject. Sharing this deity with the colonisers is to Jonah a big problem and, ultimately, theologically questionable. I am reminded of Warrior's (1989:265) words:

As long as you believe in the Yahweh of deliverance, the world will not be safe from Yahweh the conqueror.

In this instance, queer hermeneutics enters: Jonah as well as Yahweh end the story questioning each other's position of power and subsequent theology. Can one argue that Jonah is queering Yahweh, and/or that Yahweh is doing the same with Jonah? Jonah is questioning the theological assumption found in Exodus 34:6-7. In letting the deity know of his anger and questioning him, is he queering the one implicated in the judgement of Nineveh? The deity, in pointing him to his own concerns with a people not knowing their right from their left over against Jonah's petty concern over a bush he did not grow, puts Jonah in Queer Street.

4. QUEER HERMENEUTICS

My understanding of queer hermeneutics is preliminary, and this section is open to querying. In this article, the word "queer" is understood in a very wide and positive sense. Whilst it is mainly used in connection with sexuality, the main force this article would attribute to the word "queer" is that of a latent *anti-institutional ethos* (Amin 2020:18), *to be out of order or to be peculiar*, that is, *not according to the current norms* in society, challenging and causing enough trouble, being in Queer Street. In the late 19th century, "queer" denoted homosexuality in a derogatory manner, but, in 1991, De Lauretis (1991:iv) turned the tables and put a positive meaning to it, by linking the word "queer" to a theory:

We would, I hoped, be willing to examine, make explicit, compare, or confront the respective histories, assumptions, and conceptual frameworks that have characterized the self-representations of North American lesbians and gay men, of color and white, up to now; from there, we could then go on to recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual. As I will suggest, that is what the essays do, each in its own way. And hence the title of the conference and of this issue of differences: 'Queer Theory' conveys a double emphasis – on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences.

Queer theory deconstructs by challenging the normativity of privilege, especially regarding class, race, and economy in the different modes of sexuality. She intended to avoid the finer distinctions (at the time, gay and lesbian) in the discourses and endeavours to transgress and transcend them (De Lauretis 1991:v). Thus, a queer hermeneutic intends to embrace the multiplicities of experiences assumed to exist in narrative representations: As Cheng (2002:122-123, in Cornwall 2011:84) argues, queer hermeneutics implies a lens of multiplicity – it is multiply named, multiply silenced, multiply oppressed, and multiply fragmented.

Grzanka (2019:3) differentiates between using queer as an identity category and as a politicised sexual identification that expressly rejects heteronormativity:

The former functions as a catch-all umbrella under which people who identify as a gay, lesbian, bisexual might stand, whereas the latter suggests a potentially narrower frame that has less to do with sexual orientation per se and more with an antinormative relationship to heterosexuality and its adherent structures, such as marriage, monogamy, capitalism and White supremacy.

My concern is aligned with what Grzanka defines as queer hermeneutics' political nature: A narrowly defined power position between parties with a resulting antisocial, antinormative, and counter-hegemonic agenda found in decoloniality. With Grzanka (2019:7), I also want to add what has become valid criticism of queer criticism, namely the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of difference. In other words, there is a distinctive need to account for the subject positions – the lived experiences – of the people who are situated at the intersections of the multiplicity of inequality. No doubt it asks difficult questions relating to the ethics of interpreting the empirical universe with alternative frameworks,

not knowing what the answer will be (Grzanka 2019:10). Jonah is a perfect example, as the story ends not really with an answer and thereby not boosting the readers' confidence!²

Queerness initially made me think of Eilberg-Schwartz's (1994:3-4) view on the homoerotic nature of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. But, as I read further on queerness, its questioning of unproblematic normativity as Anderson, for example, explains with her reference to the mythic norm of Bible reading, it becomes to me an instrument with a much further reach. If it can be used to explore sex and gender identity, it can help in questions of racial implication and the decolonial turn, as it constructs

new and creative forms of morality which engage critically with all kinds of behaviour without giving trite, glib, pat answers about the way forward (Cornwall 2011:23, 103).

In my argument (siding with Amin 2020:21), the issue in queer hermeneutics is not sexuality but normativity: “[Q]ueer’ refers not to LGBT (*sic*), but to whatever subverts, resists, or creates alternatives to various forms of normativity.” Cornwall (2011:33, her italics) states that it is “profoundly *discontinuous from and incommensurate with* liberationist methodologies”. With Althaus-Reid, she argues that it rather seeks to disrupt and overturn the existing paradigm than redeem it (Cornwall 2011:34).

To summarise, queer hermeneutics works with deconstruction, where meaning is constructed and gender is performed, making identity unstable and comprehension relative to discourse, the reader becoming an implicated subject as well as subjected to the norms predicated by the discourse (Lowe 2009:11, in Cornwall 2011:27).

To be implicated is important when one bears in mind that the genealogy of queer studies is based on whiteness and European and Euro-American identities. In other words, it developed its own normativities and exclusions that need to be reckoned with, as queerness became interdisciplinary with tentacles reaching into decolonial and post-colonial studies that brought Asia, Latin America, and Africa into its realm (Amin 2020:22). These studies started to contest the queer hermeneut hiding behind a white mask. In

2 Acknowledging the contradiction in the phrase “queer theory”, Amin (2020: 18) mentions the following about the nature of the contradiction: “it exhibits antidisciplinary tension yet emerged in the disciplinary location of human sciences; it constructs an anti-identitarian ethos but ‘uneasily pairs’ with dissident sexualities and LGBTI+ identities; being in itself part of the margins, it theorises over marginalised objects but in the process marginalises other objects, areas, periods, and methods.”

unmasking the role of settler colonialism in queering racial formations (Amin 2020:24), the sexually aberrant and materially oppressed became excluded from heteronormativity behind the white mask. In other words, if the sexuality of European and Euro-American men has been shaped by the colonial impulse, their experience will differ from the colonised, whose difference has been associated with the sexually aberrant. Pilgrim (2002 [2012]) states that anti-Black stereotypes emerged in the expansion of the sea routes and subsequent colonialism and slavery that are described in the writings of Europeans depicting Black men as brutes and Black women as Jezebel whores. European sexuality interpreted scantily clad people, polygamy, and tribal dances as uncontrolled sexual lust. To white masked heteronormativity, blackness, since the 17th century, constituted a derogatory queerness. The latter has turned into a contestation of norms and has become, by definition, whatever is against the habitual norm, the valid custom, and the ruling power. Moreover, contestation becomes equally necessary when queer obtains normative status (Cornwall 2011:105).

To summarise, in this article, to queer is understood to challenge privilege and its concomitant power. Jonah is queering the existing Deuteronomistic theology in acting in the way he does, namely initial disobedience to a call and then anger when he is forced to fulfil his calling. His queerness is juxtaposed with the deity's questions about his theology as a prophet. Jonah challenges the deity regarding the outcome of his preaching and the deity questions what lies behind Jonah's actions or emotions. It seems to me that the challenging on both parts is not so much about identity but about theology and thus politics. Jonah subverts the theology and resists the deity. The deity, in turn, remains in power and has the last say. Nineveh, its citizens, autocratic leader, and animals operate as the collective drag queen with their over-the-top conversion. But, in the end, in history at the time of text production, the audience would have known that they no longer exist or that they are no longer the coloniser. Another kingdom took their place, the Achaemenids in all probability. Their queering in drag redeems them for the moment in the narrative.

5. QUEERING JONAH

It appears that those readings of the book that fail to consider the world of text production and text reception put Jonah at fault. He is accused of nationalism and of turning the Yahweh cult into an exclusivist group (see Snyman 1984). When I wrote this dissertation in 1984, it was at the height of apartheid's oppression and I was fully embedded within the

stranglehold of whiteness and colonialism at the age of 28 years. Ryu (2009:195-196) refers to comprehensions like these that fail to consider the historical context of the book. Such a reader then also fails to view a colonised Jewish author with his audience identifying with Jonah's anger and challenging the deity's notion of justice (Ryu 2009:197). Ryu (2009:199) mentions that he cannot reject Jonah's anger, given Korea's subjection by powerful nations:

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?

Ryu (2009:197) argues thus that Jonah's anger (Jonah 4.1-11) can be recognised as legitimate, given the power differential between the Israelites and the Ninevites. In 2022, 38 years after my own first step into academic theology, Ryu's reading makes sense to me, but it makes me uncomfortable, because I could also be judged with the Ninevites' violence and programme of colonisation. As Warrior (1989:264) reminds me, the violence in the biblical text has made its way into my consciousness and ideology, made me part of the Calvinistic predestination, and thereby provided me with "a rhetoric to mystify domination". Guillaume (2009:6) suggests that "[e]lites prefer a tame book of Jonah, a herald of endless divine forgiveness". I was part of that ruling elite.

Ryu (2009:199) asks a valid and difficult question to answer: Why does Jonah remain silent in the end? One can argue that Jonah's silence functions as resistance on the part of the weak over against the rhetoric of the strong, which mystifies domination by ignoring unbalanced power structures in the name of universalism. In fact, Ryu argues that mostly first-world readers with an epistemology of universalism find Jonah's silence unproblematic, as obedience or as weakness. However, he regards it as a naïve interpretation that ignores the feelings of colonised people, pleading innocence (Ryu 2009:205). They do not follow up on the implication of the silence of Jonah (he is accused of particularism and nationalism), either because of their wilful ignorance about the Jews, or because of their privilege as part of the dominant culture and theology with its fixed presumption of God's inclusive love and mercy as the universal truth (Ryu 2009:199). The universality of their truth gives preference to exclusivity, drowning the voices of the marginalised and oppressed, masking their own privilege and power.

Timmer (2009) offers a few perspectives on the role the book can play within a post-colonial (decolonial?) perspective. The story is situated in the 8th century BCE, but Israel's dealings with colonial powers do not limit the dating of the book to the 8th century.

Israel's history testifies to numerous occasions on which she was forced to serve the interests of a more powerful entity (Timmer 2009:3).

For sure, the Neo-Assyrian empire imposed itself for nearly 300 years on the region and, by the 8th century, there was a marked relationship between Assyria and Israel. At the time of Jeroboam II, according to Timmer (2009:4), the Assyrian Empire started to decline, enabling the growth of a small-scale kingdom in Palestine, only to be reduced to rubble and Samaria fully absorbed within the larger empire at the end of Sargon's reign. Assyria was a brutal and merciless military force that convinced states to become vassals rather than be destroyed (Timmer 2009:6), signifying the supremacist ideology behind Assyria's domination, which also entailed an over-writing of the identity of these client states who also became Assyrians. What is Jonah resisting or fearing? The Assyrians usurping Israel's history of salvation?

In this view, the audience is associated with the 8th century. Tiemeyer (2017:3-9) argues four reasons for Jonah absconding his mission in relation to the 8th century:

1. Jonah knew what was involved and, by not going, his reputation as a prophet was at risk if the readers did not know that Nineveh was destroyed a hundred years later. Indeed, in some rabbinical texts, he is proclaimed as a false prophet.
2. If Jonah knew of Nineveh's eventual downfall, he could have feared the survival of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In other words, he did not want to go to Nineveh because he could foresee the consequences of Yahweh's change of mind.
3. If the book of Jonah was written in the 8th century, Jonah could have feared that, if Nineveh is not destroyed, Israel would have suffered the wrath of the deity. He rather defended Israel's honour than going to Nineveh.
4. Jonah turned himself into a martyr on behalf of Israel. He wanted to ensure Israel's survival and, by not going to Nineveh, it would have been destroyed and Israel would not have endured an Assyrian invasion.

But what if the world of text production and reception is later, 4th or 3rd century? The Jonah of the Book of Jonah is intended to be associated with the prophet referred to in 2 Kings 14:23-25. Zvi (2009:9) suggests as much. The readers had no doubt that the Jonah of the Book of Jonah is associated with the Jonah, son of Amittai, referred to in 2 Kings. Tiemeyer (2017:2) argues that this connection the reader needed to make was intended by the author. If the book is later, one can assume that the readers would also have known that Nineveh was destroyed in 605 BCE. With Nineveh wiped off the earth never to rise again and the Assyrians long gone, the audience of colonised readers would already have experienced the destruction of Nineveh. Ryu (2009:206) argues that the repentance of the Ninevites would have been received sceptically, for the mere fact that Israel suffered a great deal under the Assyrian yoke and they never received notice of such a repentance event nor any compensation. They would have labelled Nineveh in the story as hypocritical and deceiving. Because of their disbelief, they would have sided with Jonah's anger and questions. On the other hand, a reader whose mask of colonisation has not been ripped off would give the Ninevites the benefit of the doubt because colonisers would, in all probability, also want to forget their own violent colonising actions. It is a different story when your land has been stolen and plundered and there was no compensation.

Nineveh's repentance implied Israel's fall (Ryu 2009:208):

This was not an issue between 'Israel is God's chosen people' and 'foreigners can be included in this chosenness'; rather, the issue was between 'God chose Israel as God's people' and 'God withdraws God's favour of Israel' and instead shows that favour to the enemy of Israel.

Given the partisan nature of the deity, Nineveh's salvation meant doom to Israel. Moreover, Nineveh's repentance did not entail any punishment, whereas, in royal history, a king may be pardoned, but he could never avert the punishment.³ Forgiveness does not make punishment superfluous. A later reader would have realised that Nineveh received its comeuppance.

The deity's change of view regarding the Ninevites, given their role of subjugation and expansion at the cost of Israel, forces a sense of betrayal in Jonah's response. Nineveh's repentance bothers Jonah. He feels cheated. Jonah's claim to a Hebrew identity who believes in Yahweh, the

³ In Snyman (2017), I discuss how Manasseh changed his ways in the book of Chronicles but failed to avert the pending catastrophe for Jerusalem.

creator of the sea and earth, marks him as the only character in the book of Israelite origin. To Timmer (2009:9), this gives the story a

rhetorical edge that puts one question squarely before its (Israelite) readers: Is their identity that of Jonah, or is it other?

Timmer (2009:10) further observes that Jonah marks himself as non-Assyrian (Hebrew) and, in the process, fails to renounce Nineveh as oppressors. He states his belief, linking ethnicity and religion closely together. Ironically, his self-depiction of parents and his occupation become peripheral as soon as it is revealed. Timmer (2009:10) sees in him “a colonized individual identifying himself first ethnically, and then religiously”. Jonah may revere Yahweh, but he betrays his calling as a prophet in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, with his prayer, his self-depicted faith in Yahweh seems unbreakable, but the words in his mouth are that of repentant prayers and not his own. Is he going through motions to entice the deity to rescue him or to get him on his side, because, despite him being spitted out and surviving the ordeal, he remains critical of Yahweh?

Yahweh’s action in Chapter 3 does not suit Jonah in Chapter 4. The reader encounters Jonah’s anger and discomfort when he spills the beans on his previous behaviour. He reminds Yahweh of what He said to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7:⁴

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (NRSV).

But here is the problem for Jonah. These life-giving attributes have the opposite effect on Jonah. Once he fulfilled his mission, Jonah prays for death (Timmer 2009:11). What he sees playing out in front of him (the deity showing mercy and his enemy repenting in an excessive way), does not suit him at all.

The credo is problematic. Ryu (2009:213) asks the following question:

[I]s this credo really eulogy and commendation? Or is it a mocking or challenging or complaint of what God did to Nineveh?

4 Wöhrle (2009:16) calls this the “Grace-Formula” that determines divine forgiveness. It appears in the Book of the Twelve (Joël 2:13; Jonah 3:10; Jonah 4:2; Micah 7:18-20; Nahum 1:2b-3; Malachi 1:9a). These verses specify the conditions, the theological reasons, as well as the limits of divine forgiveness (Wöhrle 2009:12). For a counter point of view, see Spronk (2009).

Jonah feels complicit. It is the only credo in which the deity's love for a foreign country is praised. The other credos he refers to have Israel as its recipient. There is more. Usually a judgement proclamation is given to the people who would become the recipients of those judgements (Ryu 2009:210). The judgement against Nineveh is the only judgement that has been given directly to the recipients in a foreign country. Spronk (2009:8) states that it is the best example among the prophetic texts of a purely negative oracle against a foreign nation. All the other judgements about foreign nations were not given to them, but they were intended for Israel's ears so that they could change their ways. When Yahweh makes a decision against people, he would not necessarily warn them beforehand. This happened with the flood and Sodom and Gomorrah. Jonah seems to be the only prophet to receive an assignment to confront a foreign nation. Ryu (2009:211) argues that, when Jonah received his commission, he knew what the odds were for Nineveh to repent. He rather did not do it and fled.

Yahweh's attributes in this credo are meaningful to Israel when they experience them. In the Book of Jonah, Israel's credo is accredited to their archenemy, Nineveh. Compared to Nahum 1:2-3, Yahweh is praised for his wrath on Nineveh, but in Jonah, this wrathful deity accepts Nineveh's repentance. Jonah braces himself from being injured or harmed in a negative way. As part of the colonised and having experienced the ravages of the violent Assyrian imperial power, he cannot accept the Assyrians' conversion. Yet, to the sailors, he offers salvation by sacrificing himself in being thrown into the sea. In his vulnerability in the sea, he becomes a coloniser to the sailors – they believe in Yahweh and made a sacrifice – but his negative vulnerability is not positive enough to save himself. Jonah fails to acknowledge his rescue from the fish; he is blinded to recognise that a group of non-Yahwist sailors turn to Yahweh and rescue themselves; he is so taken up in him being implicated that he cannot rejoice in the conversion of Nineveh (see Timmer 2009:19).

What is it then with Jonah's dissatisfaction? Is it Yahweh's supreme power as revealed in the above three contexts, his failure to destroy those who made Israel suffer? Tiemeyer (2017:19) thinks so:

[I]t opens the question of God's right in the first place to forgive an evil that was not done towards him but towards the victims of Nineveh's evil.

There is a *double entendre*, with Jonah expecting evil to be punished and Yahweh proclaiming that repentance warrants forgiveness.

In the last scene, Jonah is angry and he reproaches Yahweh, revealing his reason for his flight, and quotes a credo that is associated with Israel, but, in this instance, it is associated with Yahweh. The deity questions him regarding the legitimacy of his anger. Since there was no point in responding, Jonah remains silent and turns away and sits at the east of the city. This interaction appears to have been unsatisfactory as it is taken up later with the deity trying to prove his point, by sending a castor oil plant, a worm that ate the plant, and a scorching east wind. The text tells us what the deity initiates and does, and what Jonah does in reaction. His anger is deep-seated, and from a decolonial perspective, Yahweh takes the place of the coloniser or oppressor. An oppressor does not want to talk about the past, but only about the current situation, the bush, in this instance. But the oppressed have a painful past of slavery and colonisation, which is ignored (Ryu 2009:217).

From a general question about the legitimacy of Jonah's anger, God now moves to a more particular question, namely whether Jonah is angry about the plant that died (Ryu 2009:216; Jonah 4:8). The position of power changes. Jonah becomes impetuous and he shows his vulnerability in his anger that has not subsided (Ryu 2009:216):

He is in his angry mood not just because of the plant, but because of all the events which had happened to his people and God's treatment of his people and Nineveh.

He feels mistreated by the deity and by the rhetoric of the deity driven into a corner. His anger is linked to a plant and not to the painful colonising history with Nineveh. Thus he remains silent, as a sign not of obedience, but of resistance. But Yahweh has the last word, never losing his cool, and this does not fit well in the narrative in terms of a proper conclusion (Guillaume 2009:2). According to Guillaume (2009:3), all the props (the storm, the fish, the plant, the worm, the sun, the wind) have served their purpose, as did Jonah and Nineveh:

Each agent is pitilessly discarded once it has served its purpose. Jonah, as the plant, becomes irrelevant as soon as he preaches his sermon of doom. Nineveh is likewise redundant after it has chastised Israel.

This argument makes sense if one sees in the story a particular determinism or, as Guillaume (2009:5) puts it,

Yahweh dons his robes of fate as the one who determines in advance what takes place in the world and when it happens.

To him, the deity is dispassionate and the assertive reading of Jonah 4:10-11 asks from the reader a similar detachment. He does not see a rhetorical question at the end of the book, but an affirmation of God's lack of pity contrary to Jonah's pity (Guillaume 2009:8). Reading it as a rhetorical question (as Ben Zvi 2009 did) is to him a remnant of the Christian colonisation of the Book of Jonah (Guillaume 2009:9).

6. CONCLUSION

Jonah can be understood within the frame of decoloniality in recognising him as being part of the colonised people, due to the imperial power of Nineveh. As a prophet within that colonised group, he was sent to the colonising's centre of power, Nineveh, demanding something unheard of: The colonisers' conversion to a deity of the group that is colonised – to convert to Yahweh. It is usually the other way around. The colonised convert to the deity/ies of the colonisers. Jonah's task as a prophet associated with Yahweh, however, went against his grain, and he tried first to abscond and then, upon failure to escape his responsibility, argue with the deity. The reason he presented to Yahweh for not wanting to go, is part and parcel of Deuteronomistic theology that makes him uncomfortable. He preaches with extreme success, converting not only sailors, but an entire city with all its inhabitants, including animals. But he laments his success. He is subverting the current thinking and challenges the power of the deity, asking how the deity dares showing pity to the Ninevites after all the colonised Israelites went through.

With his anger and depression, sitting under a rotten tree in a scorching wind, Jonah has indeed become vulnerable. But his vulnerability is from being harmed and terribly inconvenienced. He provides a reason for his actions and feelings, but the story does not inform the reader whether Jonah's vulnerability is open to change. He remains silent. The insight given by Ryu, namely that Jonah is part of the colonised and the Ninevites are indeed the colonisers, gives the story a new angle that may be helpful in our current world context of the decolonial turn. In South African terms, the story pushes White readers to an identification with the Ninevites about the apartheid past. The hyperbole, with which the conversion is described, confronts whiteness with drag, a notion that may not fit well into heteronormativity's mythic norm with which the Bible is read. In queering the White reader, the point of reviewing the racist past and doing something about it, is put on the table. Regarding the prophecy and the intended grace from the deity, a White reader may be urged to associate with the Ninevites as implicated subjects. The story seems to queer the

Ninevites, and, by implication, the heteronormative White reader: Their role in the Assyrian empire is alluded to and in wearing sack cloth with the animals included, their mask of power and superiority is pulled off. Would their conversion cause them to view the Israelites differently – an epistemic vulnerability which Jonah seems unable to achieve?

Jonah contests the habitual norms of Deuteronomistic theology: A single deity with a central place of worship demanding respect from all nations (see Römer 2014:330). Given the destruction and exile that would happen to Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the Deuteronomist linked these events to a lack of respect and worshipping of Yahweh. In Jonah, Yahweh gives a foreign nation, who never worshipped him and oppressed his selected group of people, a chance to have a slice of his gracious cake. To Jonah, a deity who rejects its former elect for a nation that gave these formerly elect people a lot of trouble, war, and destruction, is impossible to believe. In response to such a deity, Jonah also ended up acting queerly: Stepping aside, watching the spectacle, suffering heat and exhaustion, but stubbornly remaining silent, creating a spectacle of himself.

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