The Rhetoric of Jonah:
An Analysis of Phyllis Trible and Jonah 3
by Jacob Rennaker

Phyllis Trible's analysis of the book of Jonah reveals a literarily complex work that carries a great deal of rhetorical force. An expert in Rhetorical Criticism, Trible not only identifies the literary devices present in the book of Jonah, but also explores the possible purposes of those devices in furthering the narrative and the resultant effects on its audience. Her mantra is: "Proper articulation of form-content yields proper articulation of meaning."[1] Keeping this in mind, the following exegetical paper will examine the book of Jonah (especially chapter 3) from Trible's perspective in order to understand the structure, genre, setting, and intention of this book.

I. Translation and Critical Notes

Jonah 3

1. Now[2] the word of the LORD was to Jonah a second time,[3] saying:

2. Get up-[and]-go[4] to Nineveh, that[5] great city, and proclaim to it the proclamation[6] that I am speaking to you.

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[1] Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 91.

[2] ויהי here signals that this new scene is related to the preceding scene. See Dennis Tucker, *Jonah: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), p. 63.

[3] The use of שנית also serves to bind this scene with a preceding one (specifically, with the scene introduced by Jonah 1:1). Sasson notes that "Here, *šēnît* does not necessarily imply repetition of the previously received message; rather, it emphasizes that this particular message is the second one to be delivered" (Jack Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* [New York: Doubleday, 1990], p. 225).

[4] The phrase קום לך is a hendiadys, combining the two imperatives to create a single sense of motion.

3. And Jonah got up-and-went[7] to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD (and Nineveh[8] was a great city[9] to God,[10] a walk[11] of three days [across])[12].

4. And Jonah began[13] to enter the city a walk of one day, and he called out-and-said[14] "Forty days more,[15] and Nineveh[16] will be overturned.[17]"

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[5] Sasson argues that "the articles [ה prefixes to both "great" and "city"] are used here in their capacity as weak demonstratives,…as if to insist that everyone is aware of Nineveh's reputation as that large city" (Sasson, *Jonah*, pp. 71-72).

[6] הקריאה is a *hapax legomenon* in the Hebrew Bible, and appears to be playing with the verb קרא used earlier in the sentence (in order to preserve the word play in English, I have chosen to translate קרא as "proclaim" here, whereas elsewhere I translate קרא as "call out"). It appears frequently in rabbinic literature (see Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi, Midrashic Literature and Targumim* [New York: Pardes Publishing Co., 1950], p. 1419).

[7] While separated by a noun (ויקם יונה וילך), this phrase carries the force of the previous hendiadys (see note 4), implying a single action.

[8] In this clause, the noun has been fronted for added emphasis (instead of following the verb, as is regular throughout the text).

[9] Unlike the previous appearance of this phrase in verse 2, "great city" does not have definite articles because it is the object of the verb היה "was." See Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 228.

[10] The phrase לאלהים may be interpreted in three primary ways: 1. It indicates a superlative phrase; 2. Reading אלהים as a plural noun, it suggests that Nineveh was a city containing a plethora of Assyrians gods; 3. The city belongs to God, and he is ultimately responsible for it (see Sasson, *Jonah*, pp. 228-29). Given the emphasis on God's response to the Ninevites' repentance in v. 10, I choose to translate according to the third option.

[11] In the Hebrew Bible, the word מהלך "a walk" only appears in this chapter (vv. 3, 4) and in Neh. 2:6. It is, however, used in Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew (see Uriel Simon, *Jonah: The JPS Bible Commentary* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999], p. xl).

[12] Sasson notes that this phrase "is a two-part circumstantial clause that is cut into the narrative to provide relevant background information. The technique is frequent in Scripture (Num. 13:22; Ruth 4:7; 1 Sam. 9:9), and we can best reproduce its intended effect by displaying such clauses between brackets, parentheses, or the like" (Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 228).

[13] Simon argues that this verb is used to contrast Jonah's earlier response to the word of the Lord. Whereas in chapter 1, Jonah fled upon hearing the word of the Lord, in chapter 3 he immediately begins to act upon the Lord's word. See Simon, *Jonah*, p. 28.

5. And the men of Nineveh believed in God,[18] and they called a fast and put on sackcloth,[19] from the greatest of them unto the least of them.[20]

6. And the word[21] reached the king of Nineveh,[22] and he got up from his throne, and he removed his robe[23] from upon him, and he put on[24] sackcloth, and sat upon the dust.

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[14] I take the phrase ויקרא ויאמר as a syndedic hendiadys, given the frequent use of this general grammatical form in the preceding verses.

[15] A *casus pendens*, providing the temporal information for the following phrase.

[16] Once again, "Nineveh" is fronted for emphasis (as in verse 3).

[17] The verb הפך in this phrase is ambiguous, and plays a significant role in the plot of this chapter. In the Qal, it can carry the meaning of "overturning, of a city as a result of judgment." In the Niphal, however, the verb can convey "the sense of changing or turning back, as well as that of deliverance." See Tucker, *Jonah*, pp. 70-71.

[18] Targum Jonathan makes explicit that the Ninevites did not just believe in אלהים, but that it was the word of יהוה that prompted their repentance (והימינו אנשי נינוה במימרא דיוי).

[19] These two acts constitute a single element of mourning. Sasson writes, "The two acts of penance, fasting and wearing sackcloth, for a single unit in which organic suffering is mirrored by a public exhibition of a humiliated body" (Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 246).

[20] This phrase constitutes a *merism*, denoting the entire population of Nineveh. Simon writes that "in the older books, the idiom for the entire population always places the small before the great; the reverse order is found only here, in Esther, and in Chronicles, and is considered to be a 'diachronic chiasm'" (Simon, *Jonah*, p. xl). However, Sasson suggests that the order of this word pair may simply reflect the literary taste of the author: "To my mind, if there is any principle guiding the sequence of the words (and I am not certain that there is), it may be that in Jonah *gādôl* occurs first because the narrator will son pick it up when alluding to the king and his entourage" (Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 246).

[21] Here, דבר may mean either the "word / message" delivered by Jonah, or the "matter" concerning the penitential acts of Nineveh's inhabitants. See *HALOT*, p. 211, s.v. דבר. I chose to translate this as "word," maintaining the ambiguity inherent in its usage here.

[22] In the entire Hebrew Bible, the title "king of Nineveh" is only used here. Simon notes that "in contrast to the Assyrian custom and the dozens of references to the 'king of Assyria' in the Bible, only here is he referred to by the name of his capital, as befits the urban perspective of the narrative" (Simon, *Jonah*, p. 30). Sasson also explains that "the way the king is addressed, 'king of Nineveh,' has elicited much interest because cuneiform documents never use this phrasing for the reigning Assyrian monarch" (Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 248).

[23] The Syriac text depicts the king as removing his ܬܓܐ "crown," rather than an article of clothing.

7. And he cried out-and-said,[25] "In Nineveh; By the authority[26] of the king and his great ones:[27] The human and the animal,[28] the herd and the flock,[29] must not taste anything, must not graze and must not drink water.

8. And let the human and the animal[30] cover themselves [with] sackcloth, and let them call out[31] to God in strength,[32] and let them turn[33] each from his evil way and from the violence which is in their hands.[34]

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[24] Whereas the verb לבש "clothe" is generally used with שק "sackcloth," the author likely used the verb כסה "cover, put on" to play upon the noun כסא "throne."

[25] I see the phrase ויזעק ויאמר as another example of syndedic hendiadys. See note 14.

[26] טעם can mean either "taste" or "judgment" (see *BDB*, p. 381, s.v. טעם). Those who prefer the meaning "decree" see here an Aramaism occurring only here in the Hebrew books of the Bible, but attested in Aramaic sections (Dan. 3:10 and Ezra 4:21). See Simon, *Jonah*, p. xl. However, Trible offers a literary explanation for its use that does not require this text to be dated late. She argues that the author's use of טעם here "prepares for a pun with the first instruction," where the people and animals are commanded not to טעם "taste" anything. See Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 185, and Tucker, *Jonah*, p. 76.

[27] The use of גדליו "his great ones" echoes the earlier description of the peoples' response (מגדול ועד־קטנם) to Jonah's words. Trible suggests that this prhase serves to connect "the popular and royal responses" in this situation. See Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 185.

[28] A *merism* denoting all living things within the city.

[29] Tucker argues that this is another *merism* serving to qualify הבהמה "the beast" (Tucker, *Jonah*, p. 77). Trible, however, sees this as an example of *synechdoche*, where "a part of the animals…represents the whole" (Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 185). In either case, this phrase serves to demonstrate the inclusiveness of the king's decree.

[30] The repetition of this *merism* from the previous verse provides literary balance: "In verse 7, the merismus appears along with three prohibitions, and equally so, in verse 8, the merismus appears along with three injunctions" (Tucker, *Jonah*, p. 78).

[31] The verb קרא "call out," when followed by the preposition אל "to" and the divine name, indicates "an act of invocation," and is used in relation to the sailors (1:5, 14), the captian (1:6), the Ninevites (3:8), and Jonah (2:3). See Tucker, *Jonah*, p. 79.

[32] This verb (חזקה "strength") may "serv[e] as a device by which to gauge the depth of a worshiper's conviction" (Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 258).

9. Who knows,[35] the God[36] may turn-and-repent[37] and He may turn from his anger so that we do not perish.[38]

10. And the God[39] saw their works,[40] that they had turned from their evil way, and the God repented concerning the evil that he said to do to them, that he did not do [it][41].[42]

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[33] The imagery present in this verb שוב "turn, repent" "plays on the verb 'overturn' (*hpk*, 3:4). On the one hand, the turning of the Ninevites may counter the overturning of them. It may counter destruction. On the other, the turning of the Ninevites may correstpond to the overturning of them. It may correspond to deliverance" (Trible, *Jonah*, p. 186). Tucker suggests that this use of the verb "further heightens the ambiguity surrounding the initial proclamation of Jonah" (Tucker, *Jonah*, p. 79).

[34] These two phrases, one using a 3 ms suffix ("his way") and the other using a 3 mp suffix ("their hands"), is not necessarily a scribal error: the author may have been employing a synthetic parallelism, with the second phrase ("the violence which is in their hands") extending the meaning of the first phrase ("from his evil way"). Trible suggests that "the pronominal suffixes 'his' and 'their' fix responsibility individually and corporately, and the nouns 'way' and 'hands' signify the means" (Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 80).

[35] Trible writes that this phrase sets the tone of the decree, and "expresses possibility and uncertainty, both the premise of hope" (Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 187). The king is unsure whether Jonah's words constituted a conditional announcement or an unconditional proclamation, and is acting in the hope that the impending disaster can be averted.

[36] This could be rendered "the gods," but given that Jonah's God immediately responds to the city's repentance, it is better translated as "the God." Targum Jonathan avoids any ambiguity by replacing האלהים with the Tetragrammaton (בידיה).

[37] This word pair (ישזב ונחם) may form yet another syndedic hendiadys (contra Tucker, who believes that these verbs "should not [be] construed as occurring simultaneously…but instead should be understood as sequential" [Tucker, *Jonah*, p. 82]).

[38] This is the exact same phrase (ולא נאבד) used by the captain in 1:6.

[39] See note 36.

[40] The author uses the root עשה "do" three times in this verse, which surround two uses of רעה "evil," which, in a sense "appropriates the familiar principle of cause and effect…In repentance, human and divine, 'doing' matters. It leads to the eradication of evil" (Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, pp. 188-89).

[41] This last clause "matches the crispness of the Ninevites' own wish as expressed at the end of v 9, *welō nōbēd* ["that we do not perish"]" (Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 264).

[42] This final statement of God's response is syntactically complex: it employs three independent clauses that are separated by two subordinate clauses. God is the subject of the independent clauses, demonstrating the focus of the narrative, as well as the completeness of God's response. See Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 188.

II. Demarcation and Structure

Trible states that the primary tasks of the rhetorical critic are twofold; first, "to define the limits of a literary unit by using the criteria of form and content,"[43] and second, "to discern structure: to delineate overall design and individual parts, show how they work together, identify literary devices and explicate their functions in marking sequences and shifts within units."[44] This section will deal briefly with these two tasks as they relate to Jonah 3.

The first rhetorical task (the delineation of the literary unit), is stated succinctly by Trible's mentor James Muilenberg: "to define the limits or scope of the literary unit, to recognize precisely where and how it begins and where and how it ends."[45] Jonah 3 begins with the statement "Now the word of the LORD was to Jonah a second time." This not only mirrors the first verse of Jonah 1, but serves to separate this literary unit from the preceding one.[46] Thus, the subject of this unit is the content of the word of the Lord, viz., the "overturning" of Nineveh (see v. 3). Concerning this unit's end-point, Trible states that "major motifs, usually given at the beginning of a unit, come to a resolution at the end."[47] The theme of "overturning," introduced

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[43] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 27.

[44] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, pp. 27-28.

[45] James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88:1 (1969), pp. 8-9. Trible writes, "Within organic unity the limits of a text vary. They may signify the entire Bible or a major division or a single book or chapters within a book or a single narrative or an episode or a poem or a proverb. However large or small the division, the criterion of form-content determines the boundaries" (*Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 93). By way of critique: If the size of the unit is variable, then the method of analysis can only properly be evaluated against another text whose unit has been delineated similarly. This risk is inherent in any approach that emphasizes the unique nature of texts.

[46] In addition, ancient manuscripts reflect a scribal recognition of a distinct shift between chapters 2 and 3. Sasson explains, "The Murabbaʻāt scroll of Jonah leaves a small space empty after 2:11, before it proceeds with what in our texts is labeled chapter 3…In some Hebrew manuscripts this gap is recognized by the insertion of the consonant *pê*,…instructing scribes to leave a space vacant. This feature is important because it tells us that at least in the Roman period, if not earlier, those who read Jonah recognized that they had reached a juncture in the narrative" (Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 225).

[47] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 27.

at the beginning of chapter 3, reaches a resolution in verse 10, when God sees the repentance of the Ninevites and decides not to destroy the city. Thus, Trible's primary criteria for delineating the boundaries of Jonah 3 are a combination of form and theme.

Regarding Trible's second rhetorical task, she never provides a detailed outline of each chapter's structure; she only supplies a brief thematic outline based upon parallels she sees between other chapters.[48] However, the following chart represents my own discernment of structure within Jonah 3, paying special attention to Trible's commentary:

I. The "Overturning" of Nineveh

  A. The Command of the Lord: Declare a message to Nineveh   3:1-2

    1. Prophetic word formula (ויהי דבר יהוה אל־יונה)   3:1

    2. The commissioning proper (קום לך אל־נינוה)   3:2

  B. Jonah's response   3:3-4

    1. Jonah fulfills the Lord's command (ויקם...וילך אל־נינוה)   3:3a

    2. Jonah's journey to Nineveh   3:3b-4a

      a. Nineveh's size (מהלך שלשת ימים)   3:3b

      b. Jonah's location (מהלך יום אחד)   3:4a

    3. Jonah's message: Nineveh will be "overturned" (נהפכת)   3:4b

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[48] See Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, pp. 110-11.

Regarding the text as a whole, Trible sees in Jonah a finely crafted literary work. Using

Aristotle's criteria for a "proper arrangement of the component elements within plots," Trible

echoes that to be considered whole, a story must "have a beginning and a middle and an end."[49]

Viewing the book of Jonah as a whole, she explicates the plot of Jonah as follows: the beginning

(1:1-3) is YHWH's command and Jonah's response; the middle (1:4-2:11) is the story of Jonah

at sea; the end (4:6-11) is YHWH's appointments and Jonah's responses to those.[50]

This overall structure of beginning, middle, and end, however, overlays a more

sophisticated structure wherein two parallel "scenes" exhibit symmetrical features *including*

symmetrical beginnings, middles, and ends. The first scene begins with the word of the Lord to

Jonah and his subsequent response (1:1-3), the middle of this scene contains events at sea (1:4-

16), and the scene ends with the story of the fish and Jonah returning to land (1:17-2:10). The

second scene also begins with the word of the Lord to Jonah (3:1-2), the middle contains Jonah's

response and the events in Nineveh (3:4-10),[51] and the end contains the dialogue between the

Lord and Jonah (4:1-11).[52] According to Trible, "double images of beginning, middle, and end

shape the book. Symmetrical design yields a well-constructed plot."[53] Thus, the structural

emphasis of the book of Jonah, according to Trible, is that of symmetry.

The book of Jonah contains four chapters, with chapters one and two mirrored by

chapters three and four. She notes that her division is based on "the recognition of two scenes, of

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[49] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 116.

[50] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 116.

[51] Trible fails to note why she includes Jonah's response to the word of the Lord in the first scene as part of the "beginning," while including Jonah's response to the world of the Lord as part of the "middle" in the second scene.

[52] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, pp. 116-17.

[53] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 117.

numerous verbal repetitions, and of contrasting characters."[54] Her primary criteria for this

division, however, are verbal parallels. The similarities between Jonah 1:1-3 and 3:1-4 suggest

that these signal the beginning of two separate, but related, narrative "scenes." Jonah 3:1 ("And

the word of the Lord was to Jonah a second time, saying…") repeats almost verbatim Jonah 1:1

("And the word of the Lord was to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying…"). Trible notes that most of

Jonah 3:2 repeats 1:2, and the first two words of 3:3 are the same as 1:3 ("And Jonah rose"). She

argues that such an introduction "shows narrative continuity; that it diverges thereafter allows the

plot to develop."[55]

Trible identifies nine parallel elements that she believes shape the story of Jonah. They

are: Word of YHWH to Jonah (1:1; 3:1); Content of the word (1:2; 3:2); Response of Jonah (1:3;

3:3-4a); Report of impending disaster / Prophecy of impending disaster (1:4; 3:4b); Response to

impending disaster (1:5; 3:5); Unnamed captain of the ship / Unnamed king of Nineveh (1:6;

3:6-9); Sailors and Jonah / Ninevites and God (1:7-15; 3:10); Response of the sailors / Response

of Jonah (1:16; 4:1); and finally, YHWH and Jonah (2:1-11; 4:2-11).[56]

While using themes to establish parallels can be useful, one must be cautious. Trible

warns that "thematic analysis can be arbitrary and slippery."[57] One must be mindful of other

elements, as well. Trible argues that in the book of Jonah the "theme acquires symmetrical

validity vis-à-vis the corresponding position of these verses, the subject matter, and the

surrounding content."[58] For example, Trible notes that her identification of symmetry between

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[54] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 110.

[55] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 111.

[56] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, pp. 110-11.

[57] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 112.

[58] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 112.

Jonah 1:5 and 3:5 is based on "equivalent length, equivalent verb forms, equivalent characters, equivalent themes, and equivalent locations within the external design."[59] Although at times she appears to be playing fast and loose with the themes that she identifies,[60] Trible convincingly demonstrates striking symmetry throughout the book of Jonah.

This overall symmetry serves a double rhetorical purpose for Trible; while it serves to give the overall story a sense of unity, it also highlights smaller areas of asymmetry within the text. One such example of asymmetry occurs in Jonah 1:4 and 3:4b, when the report of impending disaster is compared to Jonah's prophecy of impending disaster. Whereas the first disaster impacts both the sailors and Jonah, the second only impacts the Ninevites. Trible notes that "the two accounts show no parallels in characters, vocabulary, grammar, or type of discourse. *Nevertheless*, the units that surround them…abound in verbal and formal links, thereby securing the juxtaposition of [this unit] in the total design."[61] In addition, some of the parallel units suggested above by Trible contain major variations in length.[62] Such jarring juxtapositions, Trible argues, enhance the symmetry exhibited elsewhere,[63] and "provide a delicate pattern of overall balance."[64]

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[59] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 112.

[60] E.g. "The first time the deity makes no verbal reply to Jonah's prayer; narrated discourse sets distance between Yhwh and Jonah (2:11). The second time Yhwh replies directly (4:4)…When Jonah continues to express his death wish, God continues to question him (4:9, 11). Dialogue supplants distance" (Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 115).

[61] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 120.

[62] E.g. The final units in both scenes. Trible writes, "Even with the inclusion of the psalm, the ending of scene one (2:1-11) does not match in length the extended ending of scene two (4:2-11)" (Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 120).

[63] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 118.

[64] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 120.

III. Genre and Language

In considering the entire book of Jonah, Trible does not go beyond the label of "narrative." I believe part of her hesitancy lies in the plethora of proposals made by Form Critics. She writes: "Form Criticism offers no certainty, only an array of proposals: allegory, fable, fairy tale, folktale, legend, *Märchen*, *māšāl*, *midrash*, novel, parable, prophetic tale, saga, satire, sermon, short story, and even tragedy."[65] However, she believes Form Criticism can provide useful information for understanding smaller units within the text. According to Trible, "form criticism augments rhetorical analysis by collecting numerous parallels in other biblical texts,"[66] which in turn allows for the identification of genre and setting.

Regarding the genre of Jonah 3 in particular, Trible argues that this chapter "belong[s] to a community of literature with conventional speech for crisis settings."[67] While she does not propose a more concise title for such a genre, perhaps it can appropriate be referred to as "crisis speech." Although she employs a number of thematic elements to make an argument for the existence of this genre,[68] she also identifies a vocabulary shared by such narratives: "cry" (*z'q*), "evil" (*rā'â*), "do" (*'śh*), "turn" (*šûb*), "repent" (*nḥm*), "perhaps" (*'ûlay*), and "who knows" (*mî yôdēa'*). However, each of these vocabulary items do not appear in every narrative that Trible identifies as belonging to this genre; Jonah is the only example that contains the entire list. This supplementing a theme with shared vocabulary makes a stronger argument for identifying a genre than either would independently. However, Trible's argument would have been more convincing if she would have identified a general form that such a genre assumes across texts.

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[65] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 108.

[66] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 191.

[67] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 193.

[68] See Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 191-93.

IV. Setting

Trible's form of Rhetorical Criticism downplays the significance of this text's historical setting, as she is concerned primarily with the text itself and its unique formulation. Following her mentor James Muilenberg, Trible's work shows a "lack of interest in social setting and function."[69] She explains that hers is "basically an intrinsic approach [;] it focuses on a text rather than on such factors as historical background, archaeological data, authorial intention, sociological setting, or theological milieu."[70]

However, since genre flows forth from a particular setting (be it historical or literary), Trible addresses both the setting and genre of Jonah 3 together. The setting resulting in this chapter arises from an occasion where "a people faces disaster, responds in penitence, and receives deliverance."[71] She identifies a number of biblical settings that are similar to the situation portrayed in Jonah. These include: the threat of the Philistines against Israel (1 Sam. 7), Jeremiah's prophetic warning against Judah (Jer. 36), Ezra's interaction with the returning exiles (Ezra 7-10), the threat of king Ahasuerus against the Jews (Esther 3-4), and Holofernes' campaign against Israel (Judith 4). Trible argues that in each of these settings, most (if not all) of the following elements are present: "1. The situations typically involve an entire society…2. Individual leaders emerge in the crisis…3. Cultic sites often provide the settings for the crises…4. Penitential acts characterize responses to potential disaster…[and] 5. Penitential acts lead to deliverance."[72] Thus, while she does not identify a particular historical setting for the text of Jonah 3, she does situate it within the context of a community in crisis.

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[69] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 51.

[70] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 94.

[71] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 191.

[72] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, pp. 191-93.

V. Intention

Unlike early Rhetorical Critics, whose purpose in analyzing biblical texts was to understand the "texture and fabric of the writer's thought,"[73] Trible believes that arriving at the precise intention(s) of the original author is impossible. Instead, she hopes to illuminate possible intentions, using linguistic and thematic cues from within the text itself. In this enterprise, she is aware that a reader may imbue the text with meaning that the author never intended.[74] Both the author (real or implied) and reader (real or implied) provide points of reference for discovering the meanings of a text, but never a definitive answer. Thus, caution is necessary when trying to determining the intention of any given text.

That being said, Trible suggests that Jonah 3 can be understood by itself as a textual unit, as well as in light of a parallel construction in Jonah 1.[75] When viewed by itself, Jonah 3 responds to Jonah's pronouncement that "yet forty days and Nineveh will be overturned" (3:4). The subsequent text follows a theme of "overturning." Trible writes, "Through acts of penance and repentance Nineveh overturns, as Jonah predicted but not as he intended…From God's perspective their repentance overturns divine evil to bring deliverance, [and] from Jonah's perspective, the divine deliverance overturns his prophecy to discredit it."[76] The text artfully depicts a series of "overturnings" or reversals, which serve as a catalyst for Jonah's confrontation with God in the following chapter.

When viewed in light of Jonah 1, chapter 3 acquires an additional level of meaning. The characters of God and Jonah are the same in both chapters, but the supporting cast is also similar.

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[73] Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," p. 7.

[74] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 96.

[75] See above for explanation of this parallel.

[76] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 190.

In chapter 1, it is the ship's captain and its crew. In chapter 3, it is the city's king and its

inhabitants. The narrative in chapter 1 focuses on the crew, with a brief appearance of the

captain, while in chapter 3 the focus is on the king, while the inhabitants of Nineveh are only

mentioned briefly. Regarding the characterization of these individuals, the parallel texts invite a

comparison of their actions. For both the sailors and the Ninevites, "efforts to avert calamity

lead to change of fortune,"[77] be it the cessation of a devastating storm or the devastating

intentions of God toward a city. In this sense, the characters are similar.

However, Trible notes that these characters were portrayed differently in the two texts in

order to make a point. For the sailors in Jonah 1, their recognition of the deity comes gradually,

both before and after the miraculous cessation of the storm, at which point they finally make

vows and offer sacrifices.[78] For the inhabitants of Nineveh, however, "recognition comes full

blown just after Jonah's announcement…Immediately the people believe in God, call a fast, and

put on sackcloth. Their king follows suit. His decree recognizes simultaneously the power and

worship of God."[79] Thus, Trible argues that by comparing the actions of the Ninevites to the

sailors, it appears as though those in Nineveh were portrayed as being especially speedy in both

their recognition of God, as well as in their acts of worship.

This characterization of the Ninevites (presumed to be the enemies of Israel) as quick to

repent and quick to worship is meant to emphasize the magnitude of this event. Trible notes that

in this portrayal, the author is "present[ing] types while eschewing stereotypes."[80] That is to say,

while the inhabitants of Nineveh are depicted generically, there is no doubt that this city of

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[77] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 190.

[78] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 190.

[79] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 190.

[80] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 191.

supposed villains is actually quite righteous. It also highlights Jonah's reaction to their actions in the next chapter (Jonah 4). As the one who warned of impending disaster, Jonah is disappointed when disaster is averted. The intention of Jonah 3, then, is to show that the wicked may repent quickly when given the opportunity, God acts mercifully to those who do repent, and that even an Israelite who knows the will of God can remain stubbornly "self-centered"[81] despite witnessing such mercy.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, Trible's mantra is: "Proper articulation of form-content yields proper articulation of meaning."[82] In dealing with the form-content of the book of Jonah, Trible highlights its literary intricacies, as well as its rhetorical force. In order to tease out possible meanings, however, Trible is forced to deal with issues of theme. Despite her warning that "thematic analysis can be arbitrary and slippery,"[83] Trible was able to ground much of her discussion of Jonah's thematic elements in the vocabulary, syntax, and literary structure of Jonah. Through this, Trible makes a compelling argument for understanding of Jonah as a unified work whose purpose is to juxtapose two separate experiences in the life of Jonah: his unsuccessful flight to Tarshish, and his successful ministry to the people of Nineveh. What emerges from this juxtaposition is a very stubborn and selfish Jonah, but an even more merciful God. While recognizing that other meanings are possible, Trible nevertheless makes a convincing argument for this particular interpretation, and in the process, demonstrates how a rhetorical analysis can be useful in biblical studies.

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[81] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 191.

[82] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 91.

[83] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, p. 112.

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