

“Jonah’s gourd” and its early Byzantine interpretations

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Abstract

Many modern scholars consider the Old Testament Book of Jonah being written in a boldly parodic manner. The narrative engages many details that sound humorous for a modern reader. However, from the standpoint of late Antique and early Medieval patristic exegesis, it is often unclear whether Byzantine interpreters perceived such passages laughable or at least inappropriate for a prophetic writing. This study presents a few examples of early Byzantine commentaries to the episode with Jonah and a gourd (Jonah 4:6–11). None of the commentaries expresses any explicit amusement caused by the discussed text. However, the style, method, or context of each commentary appears to be passing the traditional bounds of Bible interpretation. The earlier interpreters adhere to the most expected moral reading of Jonah 4, but they use epithets, metaphors, or omissions, which produce the effect of paradox comparable to the biblical wording itself. The later commentaries tend to involve unexpected and even provocative senses. In such interpretations, God can be thought of as being able to play with a human or even to fool and deceive. What seems us humorous in the Bible, Byzantine commentators take primarily as a paradox, which they did not explain or remove but elaborate further paradoxically. The later an interpreter is, the bolder his paradoxical approach appears. The results of the study provide some clues to understanding how the interpretation of humorous, parodic, or ironical passages were developing in the history of Byzantine intellectual culture.

Keywords: Book of Jonah, parody, Byzantine exegetics, paradox, theology

1. Introduction

Since the late 1910s, a significant number of publications have been proposing arguments for and against admitting humour present in the Bible.¹ The Old Testament Book of Jonah is one of the most problematic narratives from this standpoint,² and it has produced real scientific polemics around literary and theological interpretations of this book (Miles 1975; Berlin 1976) and the Hebrew Bible as a whole (Friedman 2000; Morreall 2001; Friedman 2002). Although most modern Bible scholars no more intend on absolute seriousness and historicity of the Book of Jonah (Band 1990: 178-179), there is still no consensus on particular qualifiers of humorous, comic, or ironic modes of writing in the Bible (Pelli 1979–1980; Hauser 1985; Moberly 2003; Peters 2018). The most popular approach to Jonah considers the book a parody of earlier prophetic writings (Miles 1975; Band 1990; Friedman 2000: 282).

For centuries, Hebrew and Christian exegetes considered the Book of Jonah a part of the Scriptures, as much serious as holy. The humorous reading of the Book can be expected in the earliest historical period, when the book was not canonized as a part of the Hebrew Bible (and Christian Scripture as well). This approach proved to be successful in the work of Band (1990).

Dozeman obtained significant results in an intertextual comparison of Jonah with other books of the Twelve Prophets, revealing the process of gradual formation of these books as an integral corpus, with mutual influences and common fragments (Dozeman 1989). Other scholars have been exploring different aspects of humour in the text from the modern reader's standpoint, i.e. taking in account what brings us to smile or laugh (Kim 2007; Ostriker 2005: 286-292; Fisher 1977: 577). However, a long period of history, when *Jonah* was considered undoubtedly sacred writing, is barely discussed, probably because of an obvious argument that a pious reader takes a piece of sacred writing in a serious and straightforward way, excluding any dubious allusions or equivocalities.³ Below, we will investigate whether this is true for Christian writers of late Antiquity and early Middle Ages.

In this paper we are going to address two questions:

- 1) Did early Byzantine interpreters of *Jonah* find some of its episodes humorous, especially ironic or parodical? If the answer is positive, then,
- 2) How did they explain the presence of such an expressive tone, mostly inappropriate for the prophetic genre?

The major difficulty for our study is the fact that the Book of Jonah contains no explicit evidence that it was considered in any way humorous by its author. The whole narrative contains no explicit mentions of laughter also. In the same way, the exegetes of Jonah, whose writings we are going to discuss, do not mention laughter or humour explicitly.

After the works of Hershey Friedman and John Morreall, it is almost obvious that we should not trust our modern feeling of humour and modern distinctions of its particular kinds when speaking about humour in the Bible. What we appreciate as sarcastic or ironic in the Bible, could be dramatically serious for the Hebrews or early Christians (and *vice versa*).

Modern studies of humour start from the initial definition related to what makes us laugh or smile (emphasizing that not everything that makes us laugh is related to humour, like tickle is, for instance). However, in our case, we do not know whether the ancient authors or readers

¹ Among the earliest relevant works are those dating back to 1919 and 1930 (Hazard 1919; Mallett 1930). One of the most cited modern monographs on the subject was published in 1990 (Radday & Brenner 1990).

² For the most extensive bibliography on Jonah studies, see two surveys of Claude Lichtert (Lichtert 2005a; Lichtert 2005b).

³ There are certain psychological grounds for this argument, especially when considering a modern reader (Saroglou 2002). General aspects of this question are discussed in many studies (Mather 1989; Friedman 2002: 217).

laughed or smiled at a particular piece of writing. For the same reason, we cannot accept definitions of humour as an opposite to seriousness (cf. Halliwell 2008: 19-25).

For the purpose of this study, we suggest the following definitions based chiefly on the properties of a text, rather than on a reader's experience. These definitions do not pretend to have a universal meaning and are related to particular subjects of this study:

- *humour*: a common term, embracing (but not limited by) all other terms listed below. Anything may be considered humorous if it is either explicitly marked as laughable, or if it carries formal signs, which are related to humour in the studied text. Following John Morreall, we distinguish two types of humour: related to the 'superiority theory' and the 'incongruity theory' (Morreall 1989: 243-257):
 - terms related to the 'incongruity' type:
 - *pun*, *wordplay*, and similar patterns based on the ambiguity of meaning, phonetic similarity and other language-related phenomena; also, this group includes jokes based on logical incoherence or error;
 - *parody*, when applied to Biblical texts, is based on an incongruity between the genre of a writing and its actual contents (Radday & Brenner 1990: 205; Band 1990: 179);
 - *irony*: an incongruity (or a direct opposition) between the speech and the speaker's thought, which was stated before or is simultaneously expressed in a non-verbal form (cf.: Clark & Gerrig 2007: 25-29);
 - *grotesque*: an incongruity between the sizes or shapes of objects with their description or image; or between the strength of human emotions with their causes;
 - terms related to the 'superiority' type:
 - *mock* and *scorn*: laughing at someone with disdain or contempt, usually focusing on a person's negative character, deed, or deficiency. In the Bible, it is the most frequent context of explicit mentions of laughter (e.g., Ps. 2:4, 36[37]:13, 58[59]:9; for more examples and discussion see: Morreall 1989: 245);
 - *sarcasm*: irony used to express contempt for someone or something (cf.: Attardo 2007: 137).
- *paradox* is based on a pair of mutually opposite assertions, which both seem to be true, logically consistent, or have equal authority (especially in theology). Paradox does not necessarily imply humour or laugh.

This list is not exhaustive, but other related terms will not be used in the discussion below.

The selected exegetical texts will be discussed from the standpoints of (a) linguistics and literature, revealing the tropes, which may be related to humour, such as hyperbole, metaphor, as well as wordplay or phonetic similarity; (b) philosophy, including metaphysical and ethical explanations; (c) theological doctrines of early Christianity.

The following discussion represents our results of an extensive textual analysis of Greek writings authored from the 2nd through the 7th centuries CE within the TLG database, appended with some other sources, such as genuine works of Ephrem the Syrian (as distinguished from Greek Ephrem represented in TLG). Among the writers who mentioned the Book of Jonah, we have selected a list of extracts which provide some kind of humorous or paradoxical reading of *Jonah* 4. These extracts belong to Justin the Martyr, Origen of Alexandria, Ephrem the Syrian, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor. Some other writers are discussed in Section 4.4.

Below, we will concentrate on the ideas and their textual expression in the selected writings. Whether the respective ideas or phrasing were capable of producing laughter or not, remains a question to be answered in the course of the study.

2. The Bible exposition

In this section we will discuss a small fragment of the Book of Jonah, 4:6–11 and commentaries to it. In this passage, Jonah spends days near the walls of Nineveh while waiting for God’s decision on the people of Nineveh. One night, a large gourd grows up to cover Jonah from the heat of the sun, and a night later, the gourd faints. That makes Jonah deeply grieved, so he says it is “better for me to die than to live.” This appears to be a God’s lesson to Jonah, showing that the prophet grieves because of a dying plant in the same way as Lord takes pity on the people of Nineveh, neither killing them nor destroying their city.

This narrative became a widely known example of the power of repentance. Noticeably, according to the Hebrew tradition, the Book of Jonah has been read at Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, until the present days. However, behind the bold moral allegory of *Jonah* 4, there is an emotional hyperbole based on the disproportion between the literary ephemeral life of a plant and the life of a human, and even more, a God’s prophet (“better for me to die”). A modern reader will probably find this exaggeration grotesque, and the prophet’s behaviour childish.

Some introductory remarks seem necessary here. Almost all authors whose writings we are going to discuss, quote the LXX version of the Book of Jonah.⁴ The Septuagint reading of Jonah 4:6-11 slightly differs from other commonly known versions. Firstly, the ‘gourd,’ Greek κολοκύνθη or κολοκύντη, actually is *not* gourd, but a castor oil plant, *Ricinus communis* (Janick & Paris 2006), whose stem and leaves contain a highly-toxic sap. For the genuine gourd, Greek has another name, σικύα, which sometimes is used as a synonym for κολοκύνθη.⁵ Probably, both the plant and its name were rare in some areas so particular authors could have known the word from literary sources only. Therefore, there is no surprise in the confusion of a poisonous plant with a common vegetable.⁶

Secondly, because the prophecy did not come true, Jonah was ‘very upset,’ or σφόδρα λελύπησαι. This Greek term renders Hebrew *charah*, literally ‘to be burned or kindled,’ and figuratively — to be or to become angry; ‘to be upset’ here is another figurative reading⁷ which matches further Jonah’s wish to die rather than to live: σφόδρα λελύπημαι ἐγὼ ἕως θανάτου. Moreover, this ‘σφόδρα λυπέω’ is written twice in Jonah 4:9, introducing the effect of hyperbole.

In Vulgate, Jonah 4:9 reads “to be angry” (*irascaris / irascor*), as well as in later translations that depend on it, such as King James version. “Willing to die” as an expression (or cause) of ‘anger’ is hardly comprehensible and carries no signs of humour. For this reason, we have limited our study by the writers, who read Septuagint or translations based on it (such as Ephrem the Syrian).

3. Early commentaries: reproducing the oddity of the Bible text

In the earliest commentaries to Jonah 4:6-11, the moral reading dominates. Here we find just hints to a humorous or at least paradoxical understanding of the fragment. Three authors of the 2nd – 4th centuries will be discussed: Justin the Martyr (ca. 100 – 165), Origen of Alexandria (ca. 184 – 253/254) and Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306 – 373).

⁴ Except Ephrem the Syrian, who used the Syriac version, and possibly Origen, who was aware of the Hebrew text and its different Greek translations.

⁵ See the quotation of Justin the Martyr and note 10 below.

⁶ By contrast, ancient medicine treatises contain many instances of κολοκύνθη clearly distinguished from similar plants. See, e.g. Galenus, *De compositione medicamentorum*, both parts, passim.

⁷ This ambiguity was noticed as early as by the time of Jerome of Stridon, see his *Commentarium in Jonam liber*, PL 25, 1146BC.

3.1. Justin the Martyr

The earliest relevant interpretation, which we could find, belongs to Justin the Martyr. His *Dialogue with Trypho* contains the following:

Then, when Jonah was vexed (ἀνιωμένου) because the city had not been destroyed on the third day, as he had announced, a gourd (σικυῶνα) sprang up out of the earth according to [God's] design (διὰ τῆς οἰκονομίας), and Jonah sat under it, and was shaded from the heat of the sun (this was a surprise gourd (ὁ σικυῶν κολόκυνθα αἰφνίδιος) which grew suddenly (ἐξαίφνης ἐπανατείλας) and provided Jonah with shade, and he had neither planted nor watered it...⁸

(Justinus Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 107.3.)

The adjective αἰφνίδιος is usually understood as ‘unforeseen, sudden’ (Liddell, Scott & Jones 1996: 45); in the later Greek, αἰφνιδιάζω means ‘to attack suddenly’ (Lampe 1961: 54). Both αἰφνίδιος and ἐξαίφνης are etymologically linked to the adverb αἴφνης, “suddenly” (Beekes 2010: 45). Two derivatives of αἴφνης repeated in adjacent lines produce an expressive tautology, especially if taking into account that both αἰφνίδιος and ἐξαίφνης are very rare in Justin’s vocabulary.⁹

Also, the connection of κολόκυνθα with σικυῶν makes the ‘gourd’ a head noun in a noun phrase, which may be rendered in English like ‘a sudden pumpkin gourd’ or ‘a surprise gourd-like pumpkin,’ which sounds equally odd as in Greek.

One can suppose that Justin carefully distinguishes ‘gourd’ from ‘pumpkin,’ so their connection may produce some new, more detailed sense. But in the following paragraph (107.4) Justin quotes *Jonah* 4:10 exactly word by word reproducing the LXX for the only exception: he changes ‘τῆς κολοκύνθης’ for ‘τοῦ σικυῶνος.’¹⁰ Probably, the only explanation of this change is that Justin treats both words (κολοκύνθη and σικύα) as close synonyms. Therefore, duplication of the ‘gourd’ along with duplication of the ‘suddenness’ is a double tautology, whatever purpose it had. Either Justin wants to emphasize the miraculous growth of the gourd, or the oddity of the whole Biblical passage, or maybe it is an intended expression of humour. Unfortunately, we cannot reliably state Justin’s purpose here, but his wording is anyway odd, and this oddity correlates with the style of *Jonah* 4. It is possible that Justin’s feeling of *Jonah*’s oddity could be almost intuitive, so he does not discuss it and just reproduces in his own wording.

3.2. Origen of Alexandria

The only mention of *Jonah* and the gourd in the extant writings of Origen is found in a quotation from Celsus’ *Ἀληθῆς λόγος*. In that passage, Celsus inquires why Christians did not choose a ‘better,’ i.e. more ‘heroic’ person instead of Jesus:

How much more suitable than he would have been your *Jonah* “under a gourd (ἐπὶ τῇ κολοκύντῃ),” or *Daniel* [delivered] from the wild beasts, or any of a still more portentous kind!

(Origenes, *Contra Celsum* 7.53.22-24, Koetschau 1899: 203 / Marcovich 2001: 505)

Several paragraphs later, Origen starts to discuss these words of Celsus in the following manner:

⁸ Translation with our minor corrections following the Greek text.

⁹ In Justin’s writings, αἰφνίδιος here is *hapax legomenon*, and ἐξαίφνης is used just once more in *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 4.1.

¹⁰ Neither Symmachus nor Theodotion used σικύα in *Jonah* 4; see Origen’s *Hexapla*, ad loc. (Field 1875, vol. 2: 986).

After this, ... he advises us “to choose Jonah rather than Jesus as our God” ... He would have us to regard as God a man who, by a strange miracle, passed “three days and three nights” in “the whale’s belly (ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ τοῦ κήτους);” and he is unwilling that He who submitted to death for the sake of men. ... Moreover, Jonah was swallowed by the whale for refusing to preach as God had commanded him; while Jesus suffered death for men after He had given the instructions which God wished Him to give.

(Origenes, *Contra Celsum* 7.57.1-15 (Koetschau 1899: 206-207, Marcovich 2001: 508)

It seems that Origen substitutes Celsus’s mention of “Jonah under a gourd,” ἐπὶ τῇ κολοκύντῃ, with “inside the whale’s belly,” ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ τοῦ κήτους. In Greek, these phrases are phonologically similar. Probably, in order to improve the phonetic assonance, Origen prefers a less common spelling ‘κολοκύντη’ instead of ‘κολοκύνθη’ (*tau* instead of *theta*).¹¹

The publishers of *Contra Celsum* before P. Koetschau introduced a conjecture reading ‘κοιλία κήτους’ instead of ‘κολοκύντη’ in the words of Celsus. Koetschau, however, states that such conjecture disregards Celsus’s mockery (‘der Spott des Celsus’) and forces the paragraph 7.53 to conform to 7.57, which actually differ in the meaning (Koetschau 1899: 203). In other words, Koetschau suggests that Origen introduced a kind of wordplay in these paragraphs. The same reading is provided in the modern edition of *Contra Celsum* by M. Marcovich (2001: 508).

Relevant evidence is reported by Augustine of Hippo. He claims that pagans mocked the Christians of his time as they quoted the story of Jonah in the whale’s belly and considered it an extreme absurdity (*multo cachinno a Paganis graviter irrisum animadverti*).¹² We consider this Augustine’s evidence a confirmation of Koetschau’s position.

If we follow Koetschau and Marcovich, then we should conclude that Celsus read Jonah 4:6–11 as a fabulous tale, and used this extract as one of the reasons for his mockery of Christians. Most probably, Origen could not miss the derisive tone of Celsus. Therefore, Origen’s response was not serious either. We can expect that Origen enters the game, which Celsus has started, and tries to beat him on his ground.

One can notice that Celsus lists Biblical persons that look “more heroic” than Jesus does. Actually, he does it sarcastically, because from his standpoint the related narratives show these persons as helpless and feeble, rather than heroic. “Jonah under his gourd” is an impressive example of this kind. Ending his enumeration, Celsus says of something even “more portentous,” οἱ τερατωδέστεροι. Origen, on his part, when speaking of three days, which Jonah spent in the whale’s belly, calls it “a strange miracle,” τεραστῶς ... καὶ παραδόξως. Perhaps, he gives a “better” example of a “portentous” story, which could beat Celsus’ examples, if they are taken playfully. Therefore, the substitution of the “gourd episode” with the “whale’s belly episode” may be a ‘return pass’ to Celsus. However, Origen’s examples carry a significant serious meaning also, as they build up a list of really miraculous events, all of which was surmounted by the deeds of Christ.¹³ Origen’s main goal here was to turn the sarcastic tone of Celsus into the serious narrative of the Christian apology, and the change from the gourd to the whale’s belly seems to fit his goal.

In all other extant writings of Origen, we could not find any mentions of Jonah under the gourd, while his staying inside the whale’s belly is referred about a dozen times. It seems that Origen deliberately avoids mentioning Jonah 4:6-11. It is difficult to judge whether such

¹¹ According to the TLG word index, there are over 660 mentions of words starting with κολοκυνθ-, vs 265 mentions of words starting with κολοκύντ-.

¹² Epist. 102.30-38, PL 33, coll. 382-386. This section begins with the name of Porphyry of Tyre, who is said to use such a mockery, however with some doubt. The extant fragments of *Contra Christianos* do not contain such fragment; however, its editor R. J. Hoffmann trusts Augustine’s evidence (Hoffmann 1994: 167).

¹³ For a more extensive analysis of this passage, see: Prikhodko 2021.

omission was related to a possible mockery of pagans, who considered this Biblical passage ludicrous, or because of some other reason. Nevertheless, Origen was undoubtedly aware of a ‘humorous’ reading of Jonah 4, at least in a pagan interpretation.

3.3. Ephrem the Syrian

One of the first verbose reflections on the Book of Jonah was written by Ephrem the Syrian in the genre of *mēm̄rā* (a kind of sermon in verse) dedicated to Jonah and the repentance of the Ninevites. The text was authored in Syriac and soon was translated in Greek (Kubat 2014: 194). Mar Ephrem mostly focuses on the moral meaning of the episode with Jonah and the gourd. However, his poetic and metaphorical style allows him to make a new exegetic step: the gourd in his reading becomes a personified character, who forms Jonah’s opposite:

Jonah had preached, that he might shew
How indignant justice was;
The dying gourd had declared
How merciful was goodness.

(Burgess 1853: 99, part 8, lines 27-30)

However, this stanza continues with words used in a rather rhetoric way:

The people who had come to Jonah
Uttered praise aloud,
For what they had heard with their ears,
And for all their eyes had looked upon.
With their ears they heard that severe one
With their eyes they saw the gourd
In the gourd which sprang up suddenly,
They beheld a sign which was not natural;
In its being cut down they thoroughly learned,
That grace abounds above all.

(Burgess 1853: 99, part 8, lines 29-38)

Mar Ephrem emphasizes sharp contrast between Jonah’s zeal and God’s clemency, or ‘indignant justice’ opposed to ‘merciful goodness.’ God appears overcoming the prophet’s just anger and forgiving the people in repentance. However, the Book of Jonah exposes a symmetrical relationship: as Jonah grieved about the shade-giving plant, God grieved about the city and its people. In other words, Jonah’s narrative suggests that the gourd could be compared with Nineveh as ‘objects’ of grief in the same way as God and Jonah are grieving ‘subjects.’ Noticeably, Greek Ephrem version renders exactly such understanding: “The drying gourd was an image (τύπος) of the whole city’s [i.e. Nineveh] life.”¹⁴

In the Syriac version of the sermon, however, the personified gourd is not a ‘type’ or ‘symbol’ of the city, but God’s messenger, who ‘declares’ the will of God. The ephemeral vegetable, which becomes God’s herald, produces a rather incongruous pair. This expressive contrast is developed below: the growth of a plant is called ‘not natural,’ as long as its death is said to reveal God’s grace. Of course, the ‘unnatural’ vegetable growth and the death as grace are easily understood in the context of Jonah 4:6–10, but Mar Ephrem’s wording here is

¹⁴ Ephraem Syrus, *Sermo in Ionam prophetam et de paenitentia Niniuitarum* 332.4-5 (Frantzolas 1998).

deliberately contrasting in order to emphasize the apparent paradox. It could sound even ironic, if the rest of the text were not so solemn.¹⁵

In other words, the wording of this sermon's fragment is deliberately built on striking contrasts. Partly, this is related to the overall emotional style of the sermon; however, we cannot evade the intentional sense of paradox introduced by Mar Ephrem. Noticeably, it is represented as a straight consequence of the Biblical text rather than an exegetical interpretation.

4. Late commentaries: involving paradoxes in the Jonah exegesis

Late Byzantine commentaries are more complicated. If the abovementioned authors mostly reproduced the narrative of *Jonah* 4 in an odd or paradoxical way, later writers introduced a paradoxical understanding of God Himself. Three authors of the 4th-7th centuries will be discussed: John Chrysostom (ca. 347 – 407), Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376 – 444), and Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580 – 662).

4.1. John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom refers to Jonah and the gourd several times. In the third Homily *Against the Anomoeans*,¹⁶ he discusses *Jonah* 4:6-11 in the vein of God's apology of himself before Jonah: πρὸς τὸν Ἰωνᾶν ἀπολογούμενος. Jonah cannot accept the divine decision not to destroy Nineveh, so God does not just explain his reasons, but instead he *apologizes*. It is important to emphasize that, according to St John, God does not apologize to the inhabitants of Nineveh, but to Jonah for not fulfilling his promise to ruin the city.

Actually, here are two paradoxes that are mutually connected. Firstly, God is thought to be absolutely reliable and trustworthy as He always keeps his promises. But in *Jonah* 4, God 'changes his mind,' and it is not said to disprove God's truthfulness.

In the same way, God has absolute power, and as a supreme Sovereign does not need to explain his decisions to anyone. For example, we can recall Job in an extremely miserable condition appealing to God for justice. God refuses to give any form of explanation: "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me" (*Job* 38:2-3).¹⁷ However, in *Jonah* 4, God is not simply explaining His reasons but apologizes before Jonah for leaving his prophecy unrealized.

In other words, John Chrysostom takes the initial paradox of God's truthfulness and 'mind-changing,' and extends it to 'apology,' which constitutes a paradoxical contrast with the image of magnificent and almighty God known from other Bible books, especially, the Pentateuch. The Biblical paradox is appended by the other paradox, introduced by the exegete. The same

¹⁵ Outside the *Sermo in Ionam prophetam*, Jonah's gourd is mentioned in the *Sermo in Abraham et Isaac* 239.2–240.7 (Frantzolas 1998), but only in a natural explanation of how a plant could grow up in a desert.

¹⁶ Joannes Chrysostomus, *Contra Anomoeos* (= *De incomprehensibili dei natura*), hom. 3, ll. 418-424 (Malingrey 1970).

¹⁷ The parallels between the books of Job and Jonah have been noted since Maximus the Confessor (for instance, cf.: *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 64.5-6, lines 74-120 (Laga & Steel 1990; Conostas 2018: 489–491)) to modern scholars (Miles 1975: 177–180; Band 1990: 187). A similar comparison between Jonah and Job was discussed regarding abovementioned Mar Ephrem's sermon on Jonah (Kubat 2014: 202–203).

motif of God's apology before Jonah is repeated in the fourth Homily *On Fate and Providence*.¹⁸ Four other texts attributed to John Chrysostom mention Jonah and the gourd in a moral tone.¹⁹

4.2. Cyril of Alexandria

While John Chrysostom has left just scattered remarks on Jonah and a brief overview of the prophetic book, his younger contemporary, Cyril of Alexandria, has written a commentary, specially dedicated to *Jonah*. He is probably the first Greek interpreter who tried to provide a comprehensive explanation of the strangeness of *Jonah* 4.

Firstly, St Cyril emphasizes that Jonah expresses exaggerated emotions related both to his prophecy that did not fulfil, and to the gourd too, which grew up suddenly and brought him protection from the heat of the Sun. Therefore, his grief because of the fainted plant could also be expected. Cyril of Alexandria assumed such hyperbolic emotions being a trait of Jonah's childish temper:

Notice in this as well his tendency to innate simplicity of mind (τῆς ἐνούσης αὐτοῦ διανοίας τὴν εἰς ἀπλότητα ῥοπὴν): whereas he was extremely distressed that the outcome to his prophecy was not realized, in turn he *was very happy* with a vegetable and a plant. The unsophisticated mind is very easily disposed to both distress and satisfaction; you will see the accuracy of my comment if you observe the ways of infants (νηπίων), who often get upset at something of no consequence and weep loudly at nothing, while, on the other hand, finding enjoyment and undergoing a sudden change from distress to joy, sometimes under the influence again of a thing of no consequence.²⁰

(Cyrillus Alexandrinus, *Commentarius in XII prophetas minores*, p. 595, ll. 15-24 (Pusey 1965))

Secondly, if Jonah's attitude is similar to an infant's, then God talks to him like a parent talking to their child, and even more, playing or amusing him or her:

The Lord said to Jonah, Should you be very distressed at the pumpkin plant? He replied, I am distressed enough to die (v.9). Notice once more the God of all in his immeasurable loving-kindness playing (μονονουχὶ προσαθύροντα), as it were, with the innocent souls of the saints especially, and falling in no way short of the affection of parents (πατέρων φιλοστοργίας).²¹

(*Comm. in XII prophetas minores*, 596.20–597.1 (Pusey 1965; Hill 2008: 176))

Naturally, St Cyril pays considerable attention to the moral layer of *Jonah* 4:6–11 and continues the comparison with a loving parent when he speaks of God and the inhabitants of Nineveh.²² However, this moral reading is obvious in the original text and was reproduced by preceding interpreters, of whose works Cyril was surely aware.²³ What is actually new in Cyril's commentary is the idea of Jonah's childishness and the image of God playing with his prophet as with an infant. Surely, the episode with the gourd can be understood as a moral lesson to be understood by the 'simplest mind.' However, it is not represented as a game, and a possible reason for such an exegetical approach of St Cyril may be his feeling of a humorous tone in the ending of *Jonah* 4.

¹⁸ Joannes Chrysostomus, *De fato et providentia* 4, PG 50, col. 766: ... ἀπολογεῖται διὰ τῆς κολοκύνθης.

¹⁹ Joannes Chrysostomus: 1) *Ad eos qui scandalizati sunt*, 6.17.1–18.8 (Malingrey 1961); 2) *Comm. in Job* 31.6.20–29 (Sorlin & Neyrand 1988: 134–135). Spuria: 3) *In Psalmum* 94, PG 55, col. 619; 4) *De circo*, PG 59, col. 570.

²⁰ The quoted English translation by Robert Hill (Hill 2008: 175).

²¹ For προσαθύροντα see in Lampe's dictionary s. v. προσαθύρω, which is translated as 'play with' and explained via this very quotation of St Cyril (Lampe 1961: 1164).

²² *Comm. in XII prophetas minores*, 597.19-24.

²³ *Comm. in XII prophetas minores*, 593.10-12.

The interpretation of Jonah's infancy is related to an opinion according to which people who cannot "discern between their right hand and their left" are infants, and their innocence was a reason for God to spare the lives of guilty adults. Such a view was held, for instance, by Ephrem the Syrian,²⁴ Theodore of Mopsuestia,²⁵ Jerome of Stridon,²⁶ and Theodoret of Cyrus.²⁷ Taking into account the acute theological polemics between Cyril and Theodoret, it is more probable that they both followed a common exegetic pattern and did not depend one on another.

4.3. Maximus the Confessor

Maximus the Confessor left a comprehensive analysis of the Book of Jonah that provides several different interpretations. All of them are given in the *Responses to Thalassios* 64. The 'response' is prepeded by the question of abbot Thalassios, who asked about those "who do not know their right hand or their left" (Jonah 4:11). He is aware of the interpretation which identifies them with children,²⁸ but discards it, because, he says, the Scripture calls them 'men,'²⁹ and not infants.³⁰ This is the formal cause for all the following hermeneutic steps.

The exegesis of the gourd episode starts with the following:

The gourd plant (κολόκυντα)³¹ signifies the transient shadow of the corporeal observance of the law (νόμου τῆς σωματικῆς λατρείας), which possesses nothing at all that is permanent or capable of enlightening the mind. The worm (σκώληξ) is our Lord and God Jesus Christ, since He says of Himself, through the prophet David: "I am a worm and not a man," (Ps. 21:6) who became and was truly called man on account of the seedless flesh He assumed. ... In addition, the Lord placed His flesh around the fishhook of His divinity as a lure to deceive the devil (ὡς δέλεαρ πρὸς τὴν ἀπάτην τοῦ διαβόλου τῷ τῆς θεότητος ἀγκίστρῳ), so that the insatiable, intelligible dragon would swallow it (since by nature the flesh is easily overcome) and thus be caught on the fishhook of the divinity (τῷ τῆς θεότητος ἀγκίστρῳ περιπαρῆ), and, by virtue of the holy flesh of the Word that He took from us, would vomit out the whole of human nature that he had already consumed. The Lord's aim was that, just as the devil had formerly swallowed human beings by luring them with the prospect of divinity, so too the devil himself might now be lured by the covering of humanity and subsequently vomit out his human prey, which had been deceived by the expectation of divinity, with the devil himself being deceived by his expectation of devouring humanity.

(*Quaest. ad Thal.* 64.20, lines 480-500 (Laga & Steel 1990; Conostas 2018: 503))

Several lines below St Maximus repeats, by "the worm that 'smote the gourd plant and caused it to wither,' ... I mean the one who abolished the observance of the law, as if it were but a shadow."³²

The idea of God deceiving the devil has a long history, and the analogy of Christ's flesh with a fishhook is well known since the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus.

²⁴ Ephraem Syrus, *Sermo in Ionam prophetam*... 7, ll. 186–191 (Burgess 1853: 92-93).

²⁵ Theodor of Mopsuestia, *Comm. in Jonah*, PG 66, 344D; see also note 36 to the English translation (Hill 2004: 205).

²⁶ Hieronymus Stridonensis, *Epistola* 107.6, PL 22, col. 873.

²⁷ Theodoretus Cyrrensis, *Interpretatio in XII prophetas minores*, PG 81, col. 1740: Τὸ δὲ, "Ὅτι ἐγνωσαν δεξιὰν αὐτῶν ἢ ἀριστερὰν αὐτῶν," τινὲς ἐπὶ ἀπλότητος ἐξειλίφασιν· ἐμοὶ δὲ δοκεῖ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ἐνοικούντων νέων αἰνίττεσθαι.

²⁸ However, he does not name any particular commentator.

²⁹ Maximus Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 64.1, ll. 6-7: Οὐ γὰρ εἶπε 'παῖδας,' ἵνα περὶ νηπίων νομίσω, ἀλλ' ἄνδρας (Laga & Steel 1990; Conostas 2018: 487).

³⁰ Actually, in Jon. 4:11, the LXX contains 'ἀνθρώπων,' not 'ἄνδρας.'

³¹ Noticeably, St Maximus prefers spelling κολοκύντη with τ, not θ, a less frequent version, which was preferred by Origen, as was shown above.

³² *Quaest. ad Thal.* 64.20, lines 505-507 (Laga & Steel 1990; Conostas 2018: 504).

An extensive study of this motif is provided by Nicholas Conostas (Conostas 2004). His analysis covers many important early Greek patristic sources; however, his survey is not exhaustive.³³

Among the writings that Conostas does not mention, there is one ultimately close to the quoted excerpt of Maximus the Confessor. It is the commentary to Psalms *in catenae* ascribed to Origen, which contains a fragment, exploring Ps. 21:6 (or 21:7 in LXX) and connecting the image of a worm with Jesus Christ, and his flesh as a lure for the devil, threaded on the fishhook of his divinity: “καλῶς ὁ Χριστὸς ὀνομάζεται σκώληξ ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις ξύλοις γενόμενος. Ἀλλὰ καὶ ὡς σκώληξ δέλεαρ γέγονε τῷ διαβόλῳ καὶ τοῖς ἀγγέλοις αὐτοῦ.”³⁴

The text of the *Selecta in Psalmos* is a synopsis that gives just a list of major exegetic approaches related to the examined passage of the Scripture; thus it is difficult to date these *Selecta* and to assess their relationship with authentic Origen’s writings. However, a similar idea is expressed by Romanos the Melodist, precisely in a manner as referring to something widely known.³⁵ Therefore, the exegesis in the *Response to Thalassios* is not an original device of St Maximus, but an adaptation of a centuries-known motif. What St Maximus contributed personally is transferring this exegetic approach from Psalm 21³⁶ to Jonah 4. Moreover, as far as we know, he is the first commentator of Jonah, who paid attention not to the gourd only, but also to the worm that smote the plant (Jon. 4:7).

The idea of the “divine deception” probably was not entirely accepted by St Maximus. Some pages later, he notes:

But someone might perhaps bring forward the following difficulty: How is God being truthful when He gives the order for the destruction of the city but then does not destroy it? To this person we respond by saying that God in truth both destroys and saves the same city: the former, by making it desist from its error; the latter, by bringing about its acquisition of true knowledge.

(*Quaest. ad Thal.* 64.28, lines 685–689 (Laga & Steel 1990; Conostas 2018: 509)

In other words, St Maximus can hardly tolerate the idea of God breaking his own promises. Or better to say, every situation where God looks like breaking promises, actually needs a “spiritual explanation” that will finally reveal the immutable truthfulness of the Lord. The “fishhook pattern,” however, does not depart from the notion of God’s deceit, and surprisingly it does not meet any anagogic interpretation in the *ad Thalassium* 64. The use of a paradoxical exegetic pattern appears to be introduced in a paradoxical mode also.

The contrast between St Maximus’ confidence in God’s truthfulness and the motif of deceptive God may be a consequence of the adoption of the “fishhook pattern.” His own interest is focused on the gourd as a symbol of “corporal service” (σωματική λατρεία) inherent to the Old Testament law or the bodily pleasures — these explanations appear three more times in the *Response* 64.³⁷ However, the link between Ps. 21 and *Jonah* 4, i.e. of the gourd, the worm, and

³³ For instance, the *Response to Thalassios* 64 is omitted by N. Conostas, as long as another passage by Maximus Confessor (Conostas 2018: 504, note 65). A similar connotation of Christ, fishhook and lure is mentioned in one of Greek Ephrem sermons: *In sanctam parasceuen, et in latronem et crucem* (Frantzolas 1998: 53.9–14).

³⁴ *Selecta in Psalmos*, PG 12, col. 1253 BC.

³⁵ Romanus Melodus, *Κονδάκιον τῶν ἀγιῶν ἀποστόλων* (Matons 1981, hymn 47, sect. 7, ll. 7-9): ...τῷ σκώληκι ἐδελέαζες, τῇ σαρκί μου θηρᾶν παραγγέλλω σοι // ὁ μόνος γινώσκων τὰ ἐγκάρδια.

³⁶ The interpretation of the worm in Ps. 21:6 (7) as Christ was well known centuries before St Maxim. An important emendation to this exegetic pattern was made in the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, where the worm was included in the list of ‘dissimilar similarities’ (*De coelesti hierarchia* 2.5; Heil & Ritter 2012: 15); on the Areopagitic symbolism of Biblical ‘incongruities,’ see also the dedicated monograph of Paul Rorem (Rorem 1984: 84-96).

³⁷ These three instances are as follows:

the Saviour is mentioned briefly by St Maximus in the *Quaestiones et dubia* 184 (Declerck 1982). However, it can be hardly understood without the text of the *Response* 64, or other relevant patristic writings, on which the response is based.

4.4. Other patristic writers

Among the writings we have studied, there are a few commentaries to *Jonah* 4, which seem to provide no new insights. These are mere paraphrases of the original text without any interpretative discussion, and commentaries exposing just the moral content of the episode.³⁸ However, taking into account their number and verbosity one can better assess the popularity of *Jonah* commentaries in early Byzantine patristics. There are also some Latin commentaries on *Jonah* (Ferreiro 2003: 128–148), among which a verbose discussion of the whole text was given by Jerome of Stridon. However, it covers primarily philological, historical, and moral subjects (PL 25, coll. 1117-1152).

1) *ad Thal.* 64.24, ll. 600–611. St Maximus compares the gourd with ‘the unbelievers,’ which in this context are ‘the Jewish people,’ who ‘did not believe in Christ’ (64.23, ll. 564–565). These ‘unbelievers’ pertained to “their carnal laws” and “their ritual observance of the law in the shadows, which was abolished, and which was both created and destroyed at night, since it was limited solely to the enigmas and figures of symbols, and so did not possess any intelligible light capable of illuminating the mind” (64.24, ll. 604–608; Constan 2018: 507). Here St Maximus reproduces the previously well-known opinion that the Old Testament regulations given to Moses by God on the peak of Sinai were symbolic representations of the intelligible truth. However, the Israelites after the years spent in Egypt had lost their piety and were unable to perceive the intelligible. Instead, they received just material objects and rules related to it as symbols of the imperceptible. After the incarnation of Logos, the ability to perceive the intelligible directly was restored among the New Israel, i.e. the Christians, and therefore the old material symbols were no more necessary. One of the first verbose descriptions of this pattern is as old as writings of Eusebius of Caesarea (*Demonstratio Evangelica* 1.6.35.1–5; 1.10.14.1–10; 4.15.11.1–4; 4.15.44.1–45.8; 9.5.8.1–9, etc. in: Heikel 1913). St Maximus just adds here that the gourd, which grew up and then faded, symbolises the Old Testament law, which was given and then was abolished. Naturally, the abolition of Old Testament material symbols does not eliminate any symbols at all, because the majority of St Maximus’s commentaries are precisely explanations of symbols. The symbolic understanding of Eucharist was also accepted both by Eusebius and Maximus; moreover, according to Eusebius, the New Testament Eucharistic symbols supersede the Old Testament symbolism (*Demonstratio Evangelica* 1.10.28.5–8 et 8.1.80.1–3; *Quaest. ad Thal.* 35);

2) *ad Thal.* 64.36, ll. 813–819. Here the gourd is compared with “the fleeting pleasures of the body,” which a person may attend in the same way as “Jonah cherished his tent” (Constas 2018: 513). In the following lines, St Maximus ascribes appropriate meanings to the worm, wind, and drying of the plant;

3) *ad Thal.* 64.37, ll. 834–837. Again, the gourd means the human flesh “and the pleasure of the flesh” (Constas 2018: 514). This is the final paragraph of the *Response*.

All four mentions of the gourd have the following common ground: *κολοκύντη* symbolizes things pertaining to the material realm, i.e. those which have a beginning and an end of their earthly existence, and which perish quickly if compared to the eternal intelligible realm. However, only once is the gourd related to a ‘provocative’ or ‘inappropriate’ image of God as a worm, while three other instances employ well expected and generally ‘appropriate’ readings.

³⁸ Ps.-Basilus Caesariensis, *Homilia de paenitentia* PG 31, col. 1477B; Asterius Amasenus, *Homilia* 13, 6.7 (Datema 1970); Basilus Seleuciensis, *Sermo* XLI, PG 85, coll. 168C–169B; Romanus Melodus, *Hymn* 52, sect. 14–16 (Maas & Trypanis 1963); Theodoretus Cyrrhensis, *Interpretatio in XII prophetas minores*, PG 81, coll. 1737–1740; Theodor of Mopsuestia, *Comm. in Jonae*, PG 66, 341C–345A. For the abovementioned Greek sermon in Abraham and Isaac of Ephrem the Syrian, see note 19 above.

5. Conclusion

As we could see, none of the discussed authors considered the episode with Jonah and the gourd explicitly humorous. Moreover, the extreme emotions of Jonah, who was ready to die because of a fainting plant, are not called exaggerated by anyone except Cyril of Alexandria. In other words, what we call hyperbolic and humorous today was not called such by the early Byzantine authors. However, all of the texts discussed above have one important common feature: each of them provides some kind of semantic incongruity or paradox related to the commented Biblical passage.

One can notice that the sense of paradox gradually increases from the earlier to the later commentators. Those who lived in the 2nd–3rd centuries CE, just reproduced the paradoxical language of *Jonah* 4 in their writings, as Justin the Martyr did, or evaded its interpretation like Origen. Later, in the 4th century, Ephrem the Syrian introduced bold metaphors that seem to echo the exaggerated emotions of Jonah.

Since John Chrysostom, the paradoxical Jonah narrative receives more profound interpretations. All of them are related more to God, than to the gourd, Jonah, or his emotions related to it. John Chrysostom uses the “gourd episode” to show how God can apologize for His decisions to His prophet. Cyril of Alexandria speaks of God, who plays with the prophet like with a child. Maximus the Confessor exploits the motif of God using a ruse, due to which the devil deceives himself. These three images of God: apologizing to a human being, playing with him, and deceiving the devil — all of them pertain to quite rare exegetic patterns, which make a sharp contrast to usual, ‘scholastic’ theological hermeneutics taking God as omnipotent, omniscient, majestic, and truthful. Of course, such an image of God can easily be referred to another well-known pattern: God imitates a human in some of his qualities, in order to better show him his faults.³⁹ However, such an “adaptation” of God⁴⁰ to human nature appears as another paradox also.

All these kinds of paradoxes have a typical structure: the reader has a preliminary idea of God’s qualities, and the beginning of the narrative refers to this common background. However, somewhere in the middle, it ascribes to God some unexpected quality, which falls out of common knowledge. For instance, it could be the idea of God’s omnipotence, majesty, and power, which is followed by an image of God apologizing to just a mortal being. This inconsistency effects as a paradox from the standpoint of Bible hermeneutics, or makes a sense of paradoxical or ironical incongruity from the modern science standpoint (Yee 1988: 565-569; Band 1990: 179-180; Attardo 2007). In other words, such later writers as John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and Maximus the Confessor provide their exegetic patterns in the same structural form, which is present in the text of *Jonah* 4 itself. Modern Bible scholars consider it

³⁹ Such kind of God’s imitation of or adaptation to human nature is known among Byzantine writers. See, e. g. *Responses to Thalassios* 44 by Maximus the Confessor: when in Gen. 3:22 God says: “Behold, Adam has become like one of us,” then according to St Maximus, God uses the plural ‘us’ (instead of expected singular) in order to portray Adam’s state after transgression: “Inasmuch as the devil had, together with his counsel, taught Adam polytheism, ... it is with some dissimulation, and, we could say, with a measure of irony and reproach (διὰ τοῦτο μεθ’ ὑποκρίσεως καὶ οἷον εἰπεῖν εἰρωνευτικὴν τε καὶ ὀνειδιστικὴν) in order to censure man who had obeyed the devil, that God uses the plural ... corresponding to the notion of divinity that the serpent slipped in and used to deceive Adam” (*ad Thal.* 44.2, ll. 19-37, Laga & Steel 1990; Conostas 2018: 249-250).

⁴⁰ Another kind of God’s ‘adaptation,’ however without any irony or dissimulation, is proposed by the Areopagite: God, being infinite and unlimited by nature, limits himself when reveals to minds capable to perceive him. This limiting is not related to God’s nature but only to the nature of a perceiving mind. Thus, Ps.-Dionysius calls such self-limiting the ‘salvational justice’ (σωστικὴ δικαιοσύνη τῶν ἐν μέτρῳ τὴν ἀμετρίαν) – *De divinis nominibus* 1.1 (Suchla 1990: 109.2-6).

parodical, while the Byzantine exegetes do not use any particular qualifier, but just add their interpretation in the same ‘incongruous’ form.

In our opinion, such an imitation of the structure of Biblical text by an exegete cannot be done unconsciously or accidentally. Therefore, they perfectly well felt its strange, even whimsical mode of narration, and reproduced it in their texts. The earlier writers did it quite straightforwardly: at the level of word choice, omission, or allegory. Later interpreters did it in a more sophisticated manner, reproducing the semantic incongruities of the Biblical text in the hermeneutic patterns of their own. From the standpoint of traditional patristic exegesis, all these writings treat the “gourd episode” in a paradoxical way, thus assuming that the episode itself contains something paradoxical. None of these authors tried to explicate or explain the “strangeness” of *Jonah* 4. From the modern reader’s point of view, they did not speak about the humour in the Bible; they just laughed together with the author of *Jonah*’s story.

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