

7. The Prayer of Jonah in Jonah 2— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) and the Introduction to the [Embedded Poetry](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the "[Key to the charts](#)".

Jonah 2:1-11 in its Literary Context

- The great majority of scholars regard the Prayer of Jonah as an inset poem, arguing that a prayer of thanksgiving is totally inappropriate on the lips of Jonah who is still in the belly of the fish. However, they fail to realize that when Jonah finds himself in the 'belly of the fish', he has actually just been saved from the 'belly of Sheol' (2:3), and that Yahweh has 'brought him up alive from the deep' (2:7). In the story, the 'great fish' clearly functions as a life-boat used by Yahweh to rescue Jonah from the waters of death. The 'belly of the fish' is the safe haven Jonah finds himself in after he had been rescued from drowning by Yahweh. That Jonah offers a prayer of thanksgiving from there is perfectly in place.¹

Others assert that the disobedient and recalcitrant Jonah we encounter in Chapters 1 and 4 cannot be the humble and thankful person we meet in Chapter 2, and that there is no trace of the prophet's confession of guilt or his praying for forgiveness. But why should his conversion and rehabilitation be a prerequisite for Yahweh to free him from the belly of the fish? What matters is that Yahweh has already saved him from drowning and will now also free him to let him fulfil his commission.

Such objections used as arguments to buttress the preconceived idea that the prayer was secondarily inserted into the narrative simply cannot hold water against an unbiased interpretation of the story.² Moreover, the rhetorical and logotechnical evidence confirms its firm embedding in the narrative, not only in its immediate context in Chapter 2, but also in its wider context in the book as a whole. The evidence strongly suggests that the prayer was not selected because it more or less suited the context, but rather points to its being specifically composed to suit the context with which it forms a structural unity. Or, in case it was an existent poem, it was heavily reworked and adapted to play the role in its literary context for which it was employed.

In terms of the flow of thought in the narrative, the poem has clearly been designed to function as a prayer of thanksgiving. Having found a temporary refuge in the belly of the fish, the prophet offers Yahweh praises for his escape from the sea. At the same time, he anticipates Yahweh's next saving act: to free him from the belly of the fish, which is an indispensable element in the story, otherwise it simply cannot continue. The author expressly left out of consideration the disobedient prophet's supposed confession of guilt, forgiveness and rehabilitation as totally irrelevant.

The prayer is an essential component for the flow of thought in the story. Without it, the story of Jonah's stay of three days and three nights would hang in the air as a piece of casual information, which it is not. From a rhetorical point of view, it is an indispensable

¹ Scholars who raise objections against the suitability of the prayer in its context, are obviously influenced by the interpretation of the story of Jonah ascribed to Jesus in Matthew 12:40. There, the Old Testament image of the 'belly of Sheol' (representing *the sea*) and the image of the 'belly of *the fish*' (relating to *the fish* as the safe haven), are not differentiated but understood as one and the same: 'the sea monster's belly', "*Just as Jonah was in the sea monster's belly for three days and three nights, the Son of Man shall be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*". The story of Jonah should be interpreted from its own perspective, not from that of the New Testament writers, who had their own way of interpreting Old Testament texts.

² A few scholars dispute the prevalent view and assert that the author of Jonah was responsible for the prayer: G.H. Cohn (1969), O. Kaiser (1973), J. Magonet (1976/1992), and D.L. Christensen (1998).

element to fill in this significant period, showing that the embedded prayer and its immediate context in Chapter 2 constitute a compositional literary unity.

- The unity of Chapter 2 is additionally demonstrated by the **7** occurrences of the name YHWH, with **3** instances in the immediate surrounding narrative and **4** in the prayer.

As for the wider context, I shall show below that the **19** occurrences of the name YHWH in the surrounding narrative (Chapters 1 and 3-4) physically encompass Jonah in the fish. The total number of **26** occurrences in the book as a whole symbolically signifies Yahweh's presence surrounding Jonah outside and in the belly of the fish, and at the same time attests to the structural unity of the book.

We may therefore conclude that the book of Jonah as a whole, as it came from the hand of the author, is a coherent literary unity and that there is no question of the prayer being a secondary insertion.

Special Features of Jonah's Prayer in its Context

- In comparison with other embedded hymns, such as the Song at the Reed Sea, the Song of Moses, and the Song of Hannah, which are specimens of high grade numerical compositions, the Prayer of Jonah may, logotechnically speaking, appear rather mediocre at first sight. However, it exhibits some significant numerical features showing that it is a jewel of numerical composition in its own way.

Its **14** (2 x 7) verselines is in accordance with the use of the number of fullness to be found in the **7** occurrences of the name YHWH in Chapter 2. Moreover, the **14** verselines correspond to the **14** cola on either side of the arithmetic centre; see Observation 1.

What may also be regarded as significant is the striking occurrence of **11**, the number of fulfilment, and its multiples in vs. 1-2 (**22** words), Jonah's words in v. 3 without the introductory formula (**11** words), v. 4 (**11** words), v. 5. (**11** words), and vs. 6-8 (**33** words).

Strophic Structure of the Prayer - Canto Boundary: ||

The 112 words of the entire text in Chapter 2 divide into two precisely equal parts:

vs. 1-5 56 words
vs. 6-11 56 words.

The poem divides into 2 cantos, 4 strophes, **14** verselines, 29 cola (3, 4-5 || 6-8, 9-10):

Strophe 1 Jonah looks back on his near death situation in the sea
Strophe 2 He describes his feelings when he was thrown into the sea.

Strophe 3 He describes the plight from which Yahweh had rescued him
Strophe 4 When his senses failed, he had prayed to God, who saved him.

Strophe 4, the conclusion, is in two stages, showing that v. 10d stands apart. The sudden switch from the 2nd person in v. 10c to 3rd person in 10d (Column d), is a sure indication that we have to do with a coda:

vs. 9-10c Contrary to the idolators, Jonah offers praises and fulfilment of his vows
v. 10d **Coda** Deliverance belongs to Yahweh!

For the coda as a device for conclusion, see the [General Introduction](#), p. 12.

A Numerical chiasmus links Canto I and II closely together to reinforce their unity:

Canto I	v. 3-5	34 = 18 + 16
Canto II	v. 6-10	48 = 30 + 18
		82 = 48 + 34 .

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words addressed to God; **d**: words spoken about God.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	וּיִמְנַן יְהוָה דָּג גָּדוֹל לְבַלַּע אֶת־יוֹנָה ^א	7	7		7	
	וַיְהִי יוֹנָה בְּמַעַי תְּדָג	4		4	4	
	שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים וּשְׁלֹשָׁה לַיְלוֹת:	4		4	4	
2	וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל יוֹנָה אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו ^א	5	5		5	
	מִמַּעַי תִּדְבָּרָה: (5+4+3+5 = 17) הַדְּבָרָה	2		2	2	
	Introduction, v. 1-2	22	= 12	+ 10	= 22	
3	וַיֹּאמֶר קְרָאתִי מִצָּרָה לִי	4	4			4
	אֶל־יְהוָה וַיַּעֲנֵנִי ^א	3	3			3
	מִבֶּטֶן שְׂאוֹל שׁוּעָתִי	3		3	3	
	שָׁמַעְתָּ קוֹלִי:	2		2	2	
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 3	12	= 7	+ 5	= 5	+ 7
	Total excluding וַיֹּאמֶר, v. 3	11	= 6	+ 5	= 4	+ 7
4	וַתִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִצּוֹלָה בְּלִבְבַי יָמִים	3	4		4	
	וַנִּהְרַר יִסְבַּבְנִי ^א	2	2		2	
	כָּל־מִשְׁבְּרֵיךָ וַגִּלְיָהּ	4	3		3	
	עָלֵי עֲבָרוֹ:	2		2	2	
	v. 4	11	= 6	+ 5	= 11	+ 0
5	וַאֲנִי אָמַרְתִּי	5	2		2	
	נִגְרַשְׁתִּי מִנֶּגֶד עֵינֶיךָ ^א	3	3		3	
	אֵךְ אוֹסִיף לְחַבֵּיט	6	3		3	
	אֶל־הֵיכַל קְדֹשְׁךָ:	3		3	3	
	v. 5	11	= 5	+ 6	= 11	+ 0
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 4-5	22	= 11	+ 11	= 22	+ 0
	Canto I Total, v. 3-5	34	= 18	+ 16	= 27	+ 7
	Total excluding וַיֹּאמֶר, v. 3-5	33	= 17	+ 16	= 26	= 7
	Total, v. 1-5	56	= 30	+ 26	= 48	+ 8
	Arithmetic middle of the chapter on word level: 112 = 56 + 56					
6	אֶפְפוּנֵי מַיִם עַד־נֶפֶשׁ	7	4	4		4
	תְּהוֹם יִסְבַּבְנִי ^א	2	2		2	
	סוּף חֲבוּשׁ לְרֹאשִׁי:	3		3	3	
	81=39+3+39					
	Middle colon: 29=14+1+14					
	v. 6	9	= 6	+ 3	= 9	+ 0
7	לְקַצְבֵי הָרִים יִרְדְּתִי הָאָרֶץ	8	4	4		4
	בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ בְּעָרִי לְעוֹלָם ^א	3	3		3	
	וַתַּעַל מִשְׁחַת תַּיִ	9	3		3	
	יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי:	2		2	2	
8	בְּהִתְעַטֵּף עָלַי נֶפְשִׁי	10	3	3		3
	אֶת־יְהוָה זָכַרְתִּי ^א	3	3			3
	וַתְּבוֹא אֵלַיךָ תִּפְלֹתִי	11	3		3	
	אֶל־הֵיכַל קְדֹשְׁךָ:	3		3	3	

	Strophe 3 Total, v. 6-8		33	=	19	+	14	=	27	+	6
9	מְשֹׁמְרִים תְּבַלֵּי-שָׂוֵאֹ֑	12	3		3				3		
	חֲסָדָם יַעֲזֹבוּ׃		2				2		2		
10	וְאַנִּי בְּקֶזֶל תּוֹדֶהָ׃	13	3		3				3		
	אֲזַבְּחָהּ-לְךָ׃		2		2				2		
	אֲשֶׁר נִדְרָתִי אֲשַׁלְּמָהָ׃	14	3		3				3		
	Coda יִשְׁעֶתָּה לְיְהוָה׃ ס		2				2		2		
	Strophe 4 Total, v. 9-10		<u>15</u>	=	11	+	4	=	13	+	2
	Canto II Total, v. 6-10		<u>48</u>	=	30	+	18	=	40	+	8
	Cantos I-II Total, v. 3-10		<u>82</u>	=	48	+	34	=	67	+	15
	Total, v. 1-10		104	=	60	+	44	=	89	+	15
11	וַיֹּאמֶר לְיְהוָה לִדְגִי׃		3		3						
	וַיִּקָּא אֶת-יִזְוֵהָ אֶל-הַיַּבְשָׁה׃ פ		5				5		5		
	Conclusion, v. 11		8	=	3	+	5				
	Note the multiples of 7 in v. 1-11 Total, v. 6-11		<u>56</u>	=	33	+	23				
	Nineveh = 49 (14+10+14+6+5) Total, v. 1-11		112	=	63	+	49				

Observations

- In terms of the 81 words in the Hebrew text, the arithmetic centre of the prayer is constituted by the 3 words in v. 6c, with 39 words on either side (81 = 39 + 3 + 39).

סוף חבוש לראשי Seaweed is wrapped about my head!

This vivid description of Jonah's state during his sinking to the bottom of the sea offers a most eloquent depiction of his near death situation, with his head already swathed in bandages as that of a corpse. Therefore, I regard these words as the consciously designed meaningful centre, containing the gist of the poem.

Note the correspondence of the surrounding 39 words to the 39 words spoken by Yahweh in 4:10-11 and the 39 words spoken by Jonah in 4:2-4.

The arithmetic centre on word level coincides precisely with the middle colon in terms of the poetic structure, which undergirds its pivotal position. It is flanked by 14 cola on either side (29 = 14 + 1 + 14). Note the conspicuous correspondence between the surrounding cola and the 14 verselines.

All this shows that the prayer is a meticulously designed poem embedded in a painstakingly composed story.

- The divine name numbers appear in the following instances:

vs. 3-5 (Canto I) **34** (2 x 17) words in total

vs. 3-5, the prayer **33** words in total, with 17 before the *atnach*, and 26 addressed to God, with 7 spoken about him (Column d)

vs. 3-10 (Cantos I-II) **34** (2 x 17) words after the *atnach*

vs. 1-10 **104** (4 x 26) words in total.

- A tally of the words in the speeches gives the following striking picture:

Words spoken by Jonah in the prayer: **81**

Words spoken by him in the narrative: **81** (29 in Chapter 1, and 52 [2 x 26] in Chapters 3-4 [5 in 3:4b, 39 in 4:2-4, 3 in 4:8b, and 5 in 4:9b]).

The book contains altogether 73 words phrased as spoken by God:

1:2-3 12 words

3:2 **14** words, altogether **26** words

4:4 **3** words (together **17** words)

4:9 5 words, altogether **8** words

4:10-11 **39** words, corresponding to the **39** words spoken by Jonah in 4:2-4,

} **34** (2 x 17) words

and to the **39** words on either side of the arithmetic centre on word level.

Words spoken by the sailors in Chapter 1: **49** ($7 \times 7 = 13 + 8 + 3 + 6 + 19$), which happens to be the numerical value of **Nineveh** ($14 + 10 + 14 + 6 + 5 = 49$).

Words in the proclamation of the king of Nineveh: **43** (**17** in 3:7 and **26** in 3:8-9).

4. In Jonah 2, יהוה occurs 7x: **3x** in the narrative and **4x** in the prayer (1a, 2a, 3b, 7d, 8b, 10d, 11a). The middle instance (7d) is significantly followed by אֱלֹהֵי, 'my God', which highlights its pivotal position. The **7** instances may be explained as in accordance with the deliberate use of the number **7** to express the idea of fullness, which we often encounter in the Book of Psalms. Compare also the **14** references to God in Isaiah 38. In this case, however, the number **7** may also have been determined by the numerical value of the word דָּג, 'fish' in v. 1 ($4 + 3 = 7$), which is another typical feature to be found many times in the Book of Psalms. See the [General Introduction](#), pp. 13f.

In the narrative surrounding Chapter 2, the name יהוה appears **19** times, namely **11x** in Chapter 1 (1, 3a, 3b, 4a, 9b, 10b, 14a (2x), 14b, 16a, 16b), **2x** in Chapter 3 (1a and 3a), and **6x** in Chapter 4 (2a [2x], 3a, 4a, 6a, and 10a).

To achieve **19** instances, the author used the word ELOHIM, or ha-ELOHIM, 'God', in three cases (3:8a, 10a, and 10b), which is of course what is to be expected, viewed from the perspective of the people of Nineveh. In Chapter 4, however, the author refrained from using the name YHWH in another three instances, substituting it with ha-ELOHIM (4:7a) and ELOHIM (vs. 8a and 9a). In these three cases, he could just as well have used the divine name, but he consciously didn't, in order to achieve exactly **26** occurrences in the book as a whole ($7 + 19$). Compare the **17** occurrences of the name YHWH in Exodus 15:1-26, and the **34** (2×17) in the Song of Moses and its Framework in Deuteronomy!

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