

An Analysis of the Book of Jonah

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The Book of Jonah not only has a rhetorically complex, tripartite structure (despite my initial observations that the author used a quadrapartite organizational structure), but also has for the audience wise, spiritual lessons on keeping thy covenant with the Lord, told in enchanting stories. Jonah is the antagonist throughout. This is a device which permits the audience, which includes sinners, to associate themselves with the other characters, be they God, sailors or kings. For my study I have used The Layman's Parallel Bible (Grand Rapids: Zonderman Corporation, 1973), which contains side-by-side four translations, The King James, The Modern Language, The Living Bible, and the Revised Standard versions of the Old and New Testaments. I have primarily used the King James version in my quotations, finding its language the most beautiful.

The Book of Jonah is presented in four chapters, linearly arranged, in the modern translations. Upon closer inspection I determined that the book is not linearly arranged, but instead could more accurately be described as a spiral. Rather than four main sections, there are three, in length each progressively smaller than the one before. The final section is just one verse long. The different sections follow an A B A b a b A ^{rhym} ~~rythem~~, not only in length and organization, but also in literature type and point of view:

A prose God	b poetic Jonah	
B prayer-poem Jonah	a prose God	A prose God
A prose God	b poetic Jonah	

This pattern starts and finishes with God speaking in prose, neatly containing the entire story.

In my study I also noted similarities between the organization and meaning of chapters one and three, which flank the second chapter--although related to chapters one and three it is especial. Similarly, chapter four is divided into three sections: the first and third flank the special, center description. Finally, I have placed the last verse in a category by itself; not only is it the conclusion to the entire work, but it is also the pinnacle of the overall spiral arrangement.

Chapter one is divided into three parts: God's commandment to Jonah, Jonah's fleeing the commandment, and the consequences of Jonah's rejection. Jonah's journey at sea, the second part of the chapter, is described in triplets of information. Further, the first two triplets of information end in referrals to Jonah, while the last three to the sailors. This emphasizes the sailors' appropriate behavior of throwing Jonah into the sea over the impropriety of Jonah's fleeing the Lord's command. This chapter ends in Jonah's unfavorable consequences. Although not divided into three subsets of information as I would expect, instead the text says: "And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (1:17)" This shows the author's intent to respect the tripartite systemology, but here instead using the number three in the content of the narrative.

Like chapter one, chapter three is divided into three basic parts: God's second commandment to Jonah, Jonah's acceptance of his duty to God, and the consequences of Jonah's behavior. Again the center is the longest. The verses are arranged in two-groups-of-three and then in three-groups-of-two. As in chapter one where the center indicated the propriety of the sailors, here in chapter three the Ninevehians and especially their king display the proper, ideal way of responding

to the word of the Lord. According to professor Kikawada, the purpose of the Prophetic books was to remind the elite of the proper way of Keeping the Lord's covenant (N.E.S. 52 lecture notes, May 27, 1983). If so, then this could be a non-threatening propagandistic way of teaching a king the proper way to behave. The king's proclamation, the three-groups-of-two, also define the proper way to repent to the lord.

The favorable consequences fir⁺ into a tripartite arrangement systematically: for the Lord saw the works of the city, saw the repentance, and did not destroy the Ninevehians (3:10).

Chapter two is a beautiful, symmetrical poem flanked by two other chapters that are similiar to each other, making the poem especially important. The poem is symmetrically arranged:

- ☐ Introduction
- ☐ {
- ☐ Declensions
- ☐ {
- ☐ Water ☐
- ☐ ☐
- ☐ The Pits ☐
- ☐ ☐
- ☐ {
- ☐ Tripartite Realizations
- ☐ {
- ☐ Conclusion

The introduction places Jonah in the body of the fish, and states that this is a prayer. This is balanced by the conclusion which delivers Jonah upon dry land. The "declensions" refer to a tripartite way in which Jonah prays to the lord:

He Heard Me	(3rd. Person Singular)	
Thou Cast Me into the Deep	(2nd. Person Singular)	
I Will Look Again Toward Thy Holy Temple	(1st. Person Singular)	(2:3-4)

This triplet is balanced by three realizations which occur just before the conclusion (2:7-9)..

It is the center of the poem that is important, for it is here that Jonah undergoes his transformation, his spiritual acceptance of the Lord, a fundamental aspect of his existence:

"The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.

I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption,
O Lord my God. (2:5-6)

These two verses appear not only at the center of the chapter, the center of the first three chapters, but also at the center of the spiral. Jonah is saying that when he had degenerated to the lowest place possible, he discovered the salvation of the Lord. After the moment, the very split second, of this simple acceptance of the Lord, Jonah is able to realize great things. Again as elsewhere these ideas are expressed in triplets:

Water Encompasses Me
The Depths Surround Me
Weeds Wrap about My Head

At the Very Bottom
The Earth Emprisoned Me
You, Lord Have Saved My Life From Corruption (2:5-6)

The essence of the prayer-poem to me is this moment of transformation that is in the center. I will discuss the overall meanings and realizations later in the paper.

The conclusion of the poem is Jonah's deliverance from the unfavorable consequences incurred in the third part of the first chapter, namely Jonah's deliverance from the belly of the fish. It not only balances the introduction, but also refers to the conclusions of chapters one and three, insuring that the audience realizes these three chapters are a triplet, with the noted importance at the center. The conclusion fortells the end of chapter three, the deliverance of Nineveh from the wrath of the Lord, as the format is so similiar.

The fourth chapter is divided into three main sections. These sections generally follow the pattern of the first three chapters, just reduced in length, and reversed in style. Instead of a prayer-poem flanked by two similiar stories, chapter four is a story flanked by two similiar poetic parts. In the first part Jonah, who is angry at being made the fool upon Nineveh's salvation, prays to the Lord to take away his life: he described the virtues of God while he himself is angry. "Doest thou well to be angry?," The Lord responded. The final part of chapter four reverses the pattern of the beginning, starting out with the question, "Doest thou well to be angry for the ~~for the~~ gourd?" Jonah answers affirmatively: "I do well to be angry, even unto death!" After this the Lord lectures Jonah on the gourd, or vine. The patterns are:

A Jonah talks to the Lord	
B Jonah's Offer of Death	(1st. part)
C Lord's Query	
C Lord's Query	
B Jonah's Offer of Death	(3rd. part)
A Lord Talks to Jonah	

The center of chapter four predictably is divided into three parts, the first where Jonah prepares to view Nineveh's fate from outside the city in the desert.

In the second part the Lord gives and takes away a vine for shade, and in the and finally the consequences. It is an example of how the Lord giveth and taketh away; the inevitable pattern of life's existence on earth. Like the moment of transformation in chapter two, this existential fact occurs in the center of the spiral and is essential to a person's spiritual awareness.

It is interesting that the third major division of the Book of Jonah is the last verse. It asks the question whether God should spare Nineveh. I ask you: is this not the basic question of the entire book? The verse is divided into three parts (of course!):

1. And should I not spare Nineveh, that great city
2. Wherein are more than six score thousand persons (i.e. 120,000) that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand;
3. and also much cattle?

The center of this verse contains the important information again. Like the other two centers it deals with a fundamental aspect of human spiritual existence: are not men ignorant?

This has been a discussion about the spirally arranged tripartite divisions of the Book of Jonah. I would like now to turn to the deeper meaning of the Book of Jonah.

As with other Prophetic writings the overall theme of the book is "Keep Thy Covenant with the Lord." Unlike the other books, however, Jonah is not as concerned with its prophecy of doom as it is in its instructions of repentance. It is light-hearted, fantasmagorical and delightful.

There are three lessons illustrated in Jonah, I discuss them in their order of appearance. The first is the Folly of Denying God's Commandments. The author illustrated this in chapter one by having God threaten the ship while Jonah was fleeing to Tarshish to avoid God's commandment. When Jonah was discovered as the cause of the peril, he was found to leave the ship to spare the innocent sailors. This awful punishment for refusing his duty Jonah recieved from God; yet the author foretold Jonah's salvation (and therefore our own?) by placing him in the fish for three days and three nights before the end of the first chapter.

The second lesson, by far the lengthiest, is encompassed in the second and third chapters. This is the Wisdom of Accepting God's Commandments. This is taught in chapter two in a highly personal manner. In its very beautiful poetry this chapter takes the reader to the belly of Sheol, the very dungeon of despair, wherein lies the very moment, the very split second in time when the mind suddenly switches from one side of its dichotomy of understanding to the other. This is the moment of salvation. It is after one stops resisting the Lord, after one gets off it, that one can realize what it is that he needs to realize. Jonah at this stage had (of course) three realizations. These can be viewed as the author importing proper, devout lessons to his audience. The first was that he remembered the the Lord, and realized he could pray to the Lord: "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came unto thee, into thine holy temple." (2:7). This recall of the Lord, and the power of prayer to the Lord could not have occurred until after the split-second shift.

The second realization was "They that have lying vanities forsake their own mercy." (King James 2:8) This is an intriguing passage, for each version of

the bible I referred to translated it differently. I interpret it to mean that Jonah realized those who use futile lies and empty gestures to escape God's commandments will risk his own salvation. This interpretation fits into the overall context of the Book, which in itself describes Jonah's flight from the Lord's commandment. The Living Bible paranthetically transcribes this passage:

"Those who worship false gods have turned their backs on all the mercies waiting for them from the Lord!

To me this interpretation is out of context: nowhere else in the Book of Jonah is there a referral to the worship of false gods. The Living Bible implies that Jonah must have been worshipping false gods when he refused the Lord's command to warn the Ninevehians. Instead I see it as Jonah being afraid of God as he himself states in 1:9.:

"I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of Heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land."

Clearly Jonah always respected the unitary divinity of the Lord, God. Futher, this passage occurs in a triplet, and the other two items in the triplet are realizations Jonah had after traversing the pits of despair. Surely the author intended the passage to relate to Jonah's particular situation, and not as a paranthetical referrant to the worship of false gods, as the inaccurate Living Bible would have us believe.

The third realization Jonah had while in the belly of the fish was that for his own salvation he must personally, gladly, accept his duty to carry out the Lord's Command:

"But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord."

This also acts as a good conclusion to this or any other prayer. "Salvation is

of the Lord" sounds very much like our "Amen" at the end of prayers. Like the Lord's Prayer, this is an example of the proper way to pray to our Lord God.

The author emphasizes the Wisdom of Accepting God's Commandment in the repentance of Nineveh. This is not a retelling of a personal lesson as described above, but instead at a social group level. Rather than presenting again the consequences of bad behavior, the author presents the ideal, proper way of obeying the Lord. This is done through the actions of a king: again we must recognize that the book was written with the purpose of reminding the elite about the proper way of keeping the Lord's covenant.

The third lesson taught by the Book of Jonah is the Folly of Being Angry with the Lord. After all Jonah suffered in chapter two in understanding himself and his relationship with the Lord, he yet did not understand completely the nature of the Lord, God. The message of the fourth chapter is that the Lord is omnipotent and man is helpless to his mercy. Although the Lord is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, loving repentent of evil, he nevertheless taketh away what he gives. He is the most wisest, and makes no mistakes. Thus, it is folly to be angry at him.

The meaning of the final verse becomes clear after all of this: Yes, the Lord did spare Nineveh because He is what He is, and He must.

The Book of Jonah acts as a prototype of Prophetic Call Narratives as analyzed by Habel. Jonah is an exaggerated form, and the entire book can be analyzed this way. (N.E.S. 52 lecture notes, May 27, 1983) The purpose of this paper was to gain an understanding of the content and organization of just this one Book of the Bible.

Its relationship to other books in the bible, as projected by Hebel's studies, was beyond the scope of this work. The meaning of Jonah is "Keep Thy Commandments with the Lord", organized in a spiraling, tripartite arrangement.