

# LITERARY ANALYSIS OF JONAH

Chiasmus in Jonah has been noted by numerous biblical scholars. However, to my knowledge this is the first attempt to present an overall literary analysis of the book as a whole. The following structure is based on a careful analysis of the content of Jonah in the Hebrew text.

From a structural point of view, Jonah displays five parts rather than four, a situation somewhat different from the four-chapter division of the Masoretic tradition. As will be demonstrated later, each of these five divisions of Jonah displays a concentric nature themselves.

The literary unity of Jonah may be outlined as follows:

- A Jonah's commission (1:1-2)
- B Jonah vs. the LORD: Jonah's flight and the LORD's storm ("anger") (1:3-4)
- C Dialogue between sailors and Jonah: "fear" motif (1:5-13)
- D The sailors' prayer (1:14a)
- E The LORD's sovereign freedom (1:14b)
- F The sea ceased its raging ("anger") (1:15)
- G The men feared the LORD with a great fear (1:16)
- H The LORD appointed a great fish to change Jonah's mind (2:1-2)
- I Song of Jonah (2:3-10)
- J Jonah's deliverance (2:11)
- X JONAH'S COMMISSION RENEWED (3:1-4)**
- J' Nineveh's repentance (3:5-7a)
- I' Decree of king of Nineveh (3:7b-9)
- H' God changed His mind (3:10)
- G' A great evil came to Jonah (4:1a)
- F' Jonah became angry (4:1b)
- E' The LORD's sovereign freedom (4:2)
- D' Jonah's prayer (4:3)
- C' Dialogue between the LORD and Jonah (4:4-9)
- B' The LORD vs. Jonah: the LORD's justification of His compassion (4:10-11)
- A' Jonah/Israel's response needed (implied)

Figure 1

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Jonah may be subdivided further into two literary "halves" (chapters 1—2 and 3—4) that divide the story into parallel "movements" (Figures 2 and 3).

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## Literary Unity of Jonah 1—2

- A The LORD told Jonah to enter Nineveh (“House of the Fish”) (1:1-2)
- B Jonah fled from the LORD (instead of “fearing” Him) (1:3)
- C The LORD hurled a great wind to(ward) the sea (1:4)
  - D Sailors prayer to their gods (1:5a)
  - E The sailors hurled the cargo into the sea, Jonah asleep (1:5b)
  - F The captain ordered Jonah to pray for salvation (1:6)
  - G Jonah is found out by lot (1:7)
  - H Sailors question: “Who are you?” (1:8)
  - X JONAH AND SAILORS FEAR THE LORD** (1:9-10a)
  - H’ Sailors question: “What have you done?” (1:10b)
  - G’ Jonah’s flight is revealed (1:10c)
  - F’ The sailors asked Jonah what they must do (1:11-12a)
  - E’ Jonah hurled into the sea, and sailors rowed for shore (1:12b-13)
  - D’ Sailors prayer to the LORD (1:14-15a)
  - C’ Sailors hurl Jonah to(ward) the sea (1:15b)
  - B’ Sailors feared the LORD with a great fear (1:16)
- A’ The LORD appointed a great fish to house Jonah (2:1-11)

**Figure 2**

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The two major movements as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3 highlight the concept of “fear” on the one hand (Figure 2), and the meaning of “repentance” on the other (Figure 3). It is Jonah who confesses that he fears the LORD (1:9). However, it is the sailors who fear the “great fear” (1:10), which eventually is expressed in worship (1:16). The structure explores the transformation of fear from “terror” (1:5) to “awe” (1:16). At all points Jonah demonstrates in his actions that he does not truly “fear” the LORD. Ironically, it is the pagan sailors who “fear” the LORD.

The structure of the second movement (Figure 3) focuses on the decree of the king of Nineveh, who in fact has taken the place of the prophet Jonah. At the level of literary pun the pagan king delivers the “word” of salvation to Jonah himself in the command to turn from evil. The meaning of this evil is explored in Figure 4.

The literary structured displayed in Figure 4 focuses on the mysterious plant, a plant “which came up in a night a perished in a night” (4:11). The Hebrew term may be a pun that contains the name of Jonah. The “plant” may also be a riddle designed, in part, to explain the meaning of the greatness of the city of Nineveh, which was “a great city to God, a journey of three days” (3:3).

Jonah began his mission “by going into the city, a journey of one day” (3:4). He then went east of the city where “he built for himself a booth” (4:5) and went to sleep. God caused the “plant” to grow up during that night, and Jonah’s “second day” was one of great joy (4:6). However, the plant “perished in a night” (4:11), such that Jonah’s “third day” was one of great anguish (4:8-9). Jonah ends before the “third night” so that the reader does not know whether Jonah overcame his anger, which is the central theme of the second movement in the work.

### Literary Unity of Jonah 3—4

- A The LORD renewed Jonah’s commission to enter Nineveh (3:1-2)
- B Jonah’s repentance: He proclaimed a message of doom (3:3-4)
- C Nineveh’s repentance (3:5-6a)
- D The repentance of the King of Nineveh (3:6b-7a)
- X DECREE OF THE KING: “TURN FROM EVIL” (3:7b-8)**
- D’ King of Nineveh’s hope (that God may repent) (3:9)
- C’ God’s repentance (3:10)
- B’ Jonah’s great evil (his anger vs. the LORD’s compassion) (4:1-11)
- A’ Jonah/Israel’s response needed (implied)

Figure 3

The meaning of the “plant” may also be found in relation to the first “movement” of Jonah (Figure 2). The prayer of the sailors, before they hurled Jonah overboard in 1:14, ended as follows: “Do not put to our account **innocent**

### Literary Unity of Jonah 4

- A A great evil came upon Jonah (his anger) (4:1-2b)
- B The LORD’s compassion (reported by Jonah) (4:2c-d)
- C Jonah’s response: “I am better off dead” (4:3)
- D The LORD’s question: “Do you do well to be angry?” (4:4)
- E Jonah built a booth to wait for God’s anger (4:5)
- X THE GROWTH AND DESTRUCTION OF PLANT (4:6-7)**
- E’ God appointed the scorching east wind which brought anguish (4:8)
- D’ God’s question: “Do you do well to be angry?” (4:9a)
- C’ Jonah’s response: “I do well to be angry—unto death” (4:9b)
- B’ Jonah’s compassion (reported by the LORD) (4:10)
- A’ The LORD justifies His compassion for Nineveh (4:11)

Figure 4

**blood.** The apparent misspelling of the Hebrew term “innocent” is usually explained as an Aramaism since the expression would normally be rendered without the Hebrew letter *aleph*. It seems more likely that the presence of the *aleph* is to call attention to the term in Jonah 2:10, where the great fish vomited out Jonah.

The riddle may point to a specific moment in time when Israel was enjoying the “booth” she had built (i.e., the Temple) from which she was looking for the imminent judgment of God on Nineveh’s wickedness. God then raised up “a protective plant” of His own, perhaps in King Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 18:1), who was a source of great joy. However, what God raised up in a night perished in a night, and the probationary exemption from punishment due came to an end. The resultant anger on the part of Jonah/Israel is the primary concern of the second movement in the Jonah! Though Jonah is convinced that his anger is just and fitting, that very anger unchecked will destroy him. His survival is dependent on his sharing God’s compassion for wicked Nineveh.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 each display interesting chiasmic structures of their own (Figures 5-7).

## LITERARY UNITY OF JONAH 1:1-16

PROLOGUE: (1:1-3)

- A Narrative: the sailors are afraid; the sea rages (1:4-5a)
- B Prayer: sailors cry to their gods (1:5b)
- C Narrative: attempts to save the ship (1:5c-6a)
- D Jonah is exhorted to help (1:6b)
- E Sailors ask the cause of their plight (1:7a)
- G Jonah is asked to explain (1:8)
- X PROCLAMATION BY JONAH (1:9-10a)**
- G’ Jonah is asked to explain (1:10b)
- E’ Sailors ask Jonah the remedy to their plight (1:11)
- D’ Jonah gives instructions that will help (1:12)
- C’ Narrative: attempts to save the ship are in vain (1:13)
- B’ Prayer: sailors cry to the LORD (1:14)
- A’ Narrative: sea ceased from its raging; sailors feared the LORD (1:15-16)\*

\*Verse 17 in the English versions is actually verse 1 in chapter 2 in the Hebrew text, which is part of the next structure

Figure 5

The above literary structure indicates certain interesting parallels to be seen more clearly. For example:

1. The structure indicates the beginning and end of the storm. The wind is hurled onto the sea and Jonah is hurled into the sea (A//A').
2. The structure indicates the sailors' prayers which were first directed toward their gods, but then finally to the LORD (B//B').
3. The structure indicates the parallel attempts of the sailors to save themselves through sea-faring methods (C//C').
4. The structure set in parallel the speeches of the captain and of Jonah. However, formal parallelism breaks down, though a relationship of Jonah to the captain is suggested, similar to the relationship of Jonah and the king of Nineveh (D//D').
5. The structure indicates the two sets of statements of the sailors (E//E' and G//G'). In relationship to this in A//A' and X contain the three places where the growing phase of the fear of the sailors appears.

### Literary Unity of Jonah 2:1-10[11]

- A The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah (1:17—2:1)
- B Jonah's prayer from Sheol: a lament (2:2)
- C Jonah's descent from the LORD's presence (2:3-4)  
[Jonah continued to look to the LORD's holy Temple]
- X JONAH'S FINAL DESCENT** (2:5-6a)
- C' Jonah's ascent "from the pit" (2:6b-7)  
[Jonah continued to look to the LORD's holy Temple]
- B' Jonah's prayer in the LORD's Temple: a thanksgiving (2:8-9)
- A' The LORD commanded the fish to vomit Jonah (2:10)

Figure 6

In Figure 6 the structure begins with the LORD appointing "a great fish" to swallow Jonah (A, 2:1) and concludes with the LORD commanded the fish to vomit Jonah onto the dry ground (A', 2:10), a most fitting inclusion. If Jonah did not wish to obey the LORD and go to Nineveh ("House of the Great Fish"), then he would be swallowed by a "great fish".

The C//C' panels of the chiasmus in Jonah 2 focuses on the repetition of the phrase "to your holy Temple". However, they are to be understood differently. On the one hand (C), Jonah is wistfully looking to a specific Temple as he experiences the absence of the LORD; for the Temple is the symbol of God's presence (2:4). However, in the second instance, the LORD Himself has

just appeared and the “house of the fish” has thus become a surrogate “Temple” of the LORD (2:7). This is why the prayer of lament out of distress (B, 2:2) becomes a prayer of thanksgiving (B’, 2:8-9).

## Literary Unity of Jonah 3:1-10

Prologue: Jonah’s commission renewed (3:1-2)

A Jonah “repented” (3:3-4)

B Nineveh’s repentance (3:5)

C The King of Nineveh repents (3:6)

**X THE KING’S DECREE: “DO NOT DO EVIL” (3:7-8)**

C’ The King’s hope that God may repent (3:9a)

B’ The King’s hope: God may turn (“repent”) from His anger (3:9b)

A’ God’s repentance: He did not do the “evil” He had intended (3:10)

Figure 7

Strikingly, the center of Jonah 3:1-10 involves a pun that has great significance from a structural point of view. The actual decree of the King of Nineveh is itself a carefully structured chiasmus (3:7-8):

a both men and beasts

b cattle and sheep—they shall not taste anything

**x they shall not graze/be evil**

b’ water they shall not drink; and they shall be covered sackcloth

a’ both men and beasts

It is when this larger structural pattern is observed that the true significance of the King’s enigmatic command becomes evident. The very command to the animals “not to graze” takes on a startling twist when applied to human beings. For here, another meaning of the same Hebrew consonants is to be understood. Human beings do not graze, but they do commit evil. The Hebrew verbal root “to be evil” is used six times in the space of four verses as our author moves from the center of his chiasmic structure to a new topic, the great evil that came upon Jonah, namely his anger (4:1)!

Whereas the literary structure of Jonah 4 has already been presented in Figure 4, the following structure (Figure 8) highlights the alternation between Jonah and God.

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## Literary Unity of Jonah 4:2-11

Prologue: Jonah becomes angry (4:1)

- A Speech of Jonah (4:2-3)
- B Speech of God (4:4)
- C Act of Jonah (4:5)
- D Act of God (4:6a-b)
- E Jonah happy (4:6c)
- X ACT OF GOD (4:7-8a)**
- E' Jonah "unhappy" (4:8b)
- D' Speech of Jonah (4:8c)
- C' Speech of God (4:9a)
- B' Speech of Jonah (4:9b)
- A' Speech of God (4:10-11)

Figure 8

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Figure 8 illustrates an interesting balance between words and deeds. Jonah chooses the "weapons" for his duel with God (4:19). In A he speaks, in B God speaks; in C Jonah acts, in D God acts. In D' Jonah speaks, and the two speak alternately until the end.

The formality of the symmetry can be shown from the striking detail that Jonah's first speech consists of thirty-nine words in the Hebrew text; God's closing speech also consists of thirty-nine words (A//A'). In B God replies with three words, in B' Jonah's closing remarks consist only of three words. Also in B God asks the question: "Is it well for you to be angry?", whereas in B' Jonah retorts: "It is well for me to be angry even to death".

In conclusion, the author of Jonah seems to be developing linear structures within concentric ones. Few works of art can be reduced to a single structural pattern. The concentric structure of any one of the four chapters of Jonah is similar to the structure of each half of the work, which in turn is but a smaller version of the structure of the whole.

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