Another look at Jonah 2

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the many past suggestions that the prayer of Jonah be excised from the book of Jonah as a later interpolation, this paper investigates the contribution that the prayer, and chapter 2 as a whole, makes to the book of Jonah. By considering both structural and thematic levels, and by referring to some inter- and extratextual relations of the book, it is argued that a thorough understanding of Jonah 2 contributes to the message of the book as a whole.

A INTRODUCTION

The prayer of Jonah has been the subject of much scholarly debate, and theories of the psalm being a late interpolation, abound. Regrettably, it has often been suggested that the prayer be excised from the larger context of the book on grounds of these diachronic theories. This paper will attempt to present the prayer of Jonah as a necessary part of the book Jonah as a whole. The hypothesis is that, with regard to both structure and theme, Jonah 2 is vital to the understanding of the book of Jonah. The argument will be developed by some references to the literary analysis of the psalm, which will be followed by a consideration of some intertextual and extratextual relations of both the prayer of Jonah and the book as a whole. By considering the structural and thematic features of Jonah\(^2\), chapter 2 will then be presented as crucial to the developing message of the book. With some reference made to genre, the results of the above exercises will be combined to consider the message of the book of Jonah as a whole. It is not the purpose of this paper to argue that the prayer of Jonah is an original part of the narrative, but rather to illustrate that it is functional in the final form of the book\(^3\).

\(^1\) This paper was written in completion of a research module for the Department of Ancient Languages, University of Pretoria, October 2002.

\(^2\) This methodology underlines the relationship between design and plot: ‘… form [design and structure] and content [plot] must converge for appropriate interpretation’ (Trible 1994:116), and ‘… appropriate articulation of form-content yields appropriate articulation of meaning’ (Trible 1994:160).

\(^3\) ‘… the author, while a skilful storyteller, is not simply retelling a story but is, by means of a story, trying to convey a message (perhaps more than one message) to his audience or readers. Discussion and disagreement over the integrity and
B LITERARY ANALYSIS OF JONAH 2

While a thorough literary analysis is indeed vital to a responsible investigation into the content of the book Jonah, the complete analysis is here only referred to. Works on the subject have been published (Potgieter 1991; Trible 1994), and this paper wishes to proceed from that point. What will be included is the segmentation of the prayer, followed by a detailed analysis and a final synthesis.

1 Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>1a</th>
<th>4h</th>
<th>I cried to YHWH from my affliction, and He answered me.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>4m</td>
<td>From the belly of Sheol I cried for help, and You heard my voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II</td>
<td>2a</td>
<td>You cast me deep into the heart of the seas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>A current surrounded me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c</td>
<td>All your breakers and your waves passed over me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>3a</td>
<td>I, I thought,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>‘I have been cast off from before your eyes;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4a</td>
<td>yet I will continue to look</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>on your holy temple.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>III</td>
<td>5a</td>
<td>The waters encompassed me to my neck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>The deep surrounded me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c</td>
<td>Weeds wrapped around my head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6a</td>
<td>I descended to the foundations of the mountains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>The underworld with its bars closed behind me forever.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>7a</td>
<td>You lifted my life from the pit, YHWH my God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>When my soul fainted in me,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c</td>
<td>I remembered YHWH.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8a</td>
<td></td>
<td>My prayer went up to You.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

provenance of the book does not preclude our investigating what this message might be’ (Salters 1994:51).

4 ‘When individuals are speaking to no one in particular, the verb 'āmar, “to say, to speak”, is best translated “to think, ponder”’ (Sasson 1990:178).
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### IV 9a

Those who regard the voidness of vanity

### IV 10a

I, I will sacrifice to You with a voice of thanksgiving.

### IV 10b

What I have vowed I will repay.

### IV 10c

Salvation is from YHWH.

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### 2 Detailed analysis

By considering the results obtained in the analyses of the different levels of the text, it becomes clear that the corresponding strophes of stanzas II and III are parallel, and consequently, so are the two stanzas. This can be schematised as follows (Potgieter 1991:22):

**Stanza I**  
(Strophe A)

**Stanza II**  
(Strophe B)  
(Strophe C)

**Stanza III**  
(Strophe D)  
(Strophe E)

**Stanza IV**  
(Strophe F)

The psalm itself is, however, sandwiched by a prose introduction and conclusion, which provide the context and background of the narrative against which the psalm should be interpreted.

**Prose introduction (2:1-3a)**

The scene opens with YHWH’s appointment of the fish, revealing him as Architect of the events to follow. This is especially meaningful when interpreted against the background of Ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the cosmos, which will be discussed later. The motif of three days and nights will also be further discussed, though it can be said here that it indicates more than a mere course of time. Verses 2-3a contain Jonah’s response to YHWH’s management of affairs: he prays. From the belly of the fish, he lifts his lament to his God. Syntactically, therefore, the psalm is the content of what Jonah said when he prayed inside the fish.

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[^5]: Although the pi’el of ḫm appears commonly in Scripture, it only has YHWH as subject in Jonah (2 and 4) and in Ps 21:8, where ‘constant mercy’ is the subject. ḫm is ‘… an act which generally needs a medium through which to be fulfilled. Applying this insight to Jonah 2:1, we can say that God is not so much keen to appoint a “big fish” (nor, for that matter, in bringing forth plants, worms, or hot winds) than to set the most appropriate conditions for teaching Jonah the desired lessons’ (Sasson 1990:149).
Stanza I

This stanza serves as the introduction to the lament, characterised by the call to God and the dependence on him for deliverance from distress. The words are general in their application: ‘Psalmists composed with a wide audience in mind.’ (Stuart 1987:475.) The phrase לִפְנֵי appears only here in the Old Testament, and stresses the seriousness of the situation. The (inside of the) fish has become the personification of (the belly of) Sheol, and the implication of Jonah’s death will be further developed in stanza III.

Stanza II

‘De verzen 3 en 4 (hebr. 4-5) bevatten derhalve zowel een schildering van de noodsituatie als een vermelding van de redding, tot uitdrukking komend in de woorden dat de dichter opnieuw Gods tempel aanschouwt.’ (Van der Woude 1978:36.)

Stanza II consists of two strophes, the first of which deals with Jonah’s lament. He addresses YHWH: ‘You have hurled me.’ He describes his distress: a current surrounded him, and YHWH’s waves and billows went over him. The concept of ‘deep’ is intensified and expanded through the metaphoric expression ‘the heart of the seas’ (2a) (Potgieter 1991:25), and further expanded in 2b/c with its use of keywords relating to water and streams. By the double repetition of ‘your’ in ‘all your breakers and your waves’, the psalmist assigns the responsibility for his plight to YHWH (Limburg 1993:67). Van der Woude’s (1978:35) excision of הַל רַע rests on metric and grammatical grounds rather than textually supported variants, and need not be considered here.

The second strophe is a declaration of trust. Jonah has been driven from YHWH’s sight (his presence), yet He will once again look upon the holy temple (i.e stand in YHWH’s presence). The assurance that YHWH will answer his prayer is conveyed in the perfect form of the verb, presenting this certainty as a

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6 Sasson (1990:176) is of the opinion that this verbal conjugation (also in 5b), conveys a protective rather than a threatening act, referring to Po’el conjugations in Dt 32:10 and Ps 32:10. In the contexts of strophes B and D, which are parallel to each other, however, and the subjects of the verbal conjugations, the distress that Jonah finds himself in seems apparent.

7 The biblical references cited by Sasson (1990:174), ‘… suggest that Jonah’s distress is not the result of the sailors’ action, nor is it caused by an engulfing sea, a powerful god in the Canaanite pantheon (Yam); rather, it expressly comes from God.’

8 ‘In poetry … these phrases convey an unfathomable and uncharitable expanse that can swallow mountains whole and even contain the congealed Deep (Ps 46:3; Ex 15:8)’ (Sasson 1990:175).

9 ‘In poetry, … nāhār may be attached to an article and thus can refer to a large body of (primordial) water that does not always flow on earth’ (Sasson 1990:175-176).
realised fact (Potgieter 1991:23). Many commentaries assume ûa to be read as ûja, which would result in a question (How will I look again on your holy temple?) instead of this asseverative statement. As this is not based on textually supported variants, and since the context does not object to ûa, this suggestion is not accepted here.

Stanza III

It has already been stated that stanza III is parallel to stanza II in both structure and content. The same keywords appear in strophe D that were found in strophe B, and once again this first strophe of the stanza elaborates on the distress of the psalmist. As was the case in strophe B, 5b/c intensifies and expands the picture of drowning that is presented in 5a. The water images are now also intensified and reaches a climax. No longer is it only ðhn or ðym, but it has now become ðwhû.10 Important to notice is that the motif of Jonah’s descent is also brought to a climax in this strophe. ‘Both his horizontal and his vertical distance from the Lord are at the maximum.’ (Limburg 1993:68.) He goes down (dry) to the foundations of the mountains, and, finally, the bars of the underworld close behind him for ever. The keywords referring to the underworld were begun in 1b (lwav ÷fb), and reach a conclusion here. The implication is that Jonah has died.

Parallel to strophe C, strophe E forms a contrast to strophe D’s focus on distress and descent, by stating how YHWH has lifted his life from the pit (here synonymous with Sheol). ‘Jona daalt af, weg van de aarde, het land der levenden; JHWH laat hem opstijgen uit de groeve, de wereld der doden.’ (Deurloo 1995:49) Strophe E thus specifies deliverance from the distress even more intensely than strophe C, by explicitly stating the saving action of YHWH (Potgieter 1991:27). As in strophe C, the perfect form of the verb should be understood not as describing a past event, but as expressing the surety of Jonah’s hope that his prayer will be answered. This statement of salvation is followed by references to prayers offered to YHWH when Jonah’s soul ‘fainted’ within him. In contrast to the netherworld, which represents the lowest point in the cosmos, the temple, situated on mount Zion, stands for the highest point, where the divine and human worlds meet (Barré 1991:245). From the lowest point, the psalmist’s prayer comes to YHWH in his holy temple, the highest point. This further stresses the contrast in vertical space11 between strophes D and E.

10 In Scripture, ðwhû serves as a poetic term for a (primordial) body of water (Sasson 1990:184).
Stanza IV

The translation of \( yl \ b| \) (from the noun \( l\ | \) ) as idols, is enlightened by parallels found in Jeremiah 8:19 ‘images’, and in Deuteronomy 32:21 ‘what is no god’. The apparent reference to idols is intensified by ‘worthless’ (Limburg 1993:69). \( dsj \) ‘(their) steadfast love’ is here personified to indicate YHWH. ‘Waarschijnlijk heeft hèsèd hier dezelfde betekenis als in Jes. 40:6 en Ps. 144:2 en wordt YHWH aangeduid als “hun Sterkte”’ (Van der Woude 1978:38).

10a/b forms a contrast between the psalmist, who will ‘sacrifice to YHWH in a voice of thanksgiving’, and ‘repay what he has vowed’, and those who regard ‘worthless idols’, so abandoning their ‘Source of steadfast love’. Clever irony is created when Jonah compares and contrasts himself favourably to those who consider idols – even those to whom he had been sent with YHWH’s divine message. The reader thinks back to the sailors who had sacrificed and made vows to YHWH. Later on, the people of Nineveh will also repent in sackcloth. At some point in the narrative, everyone repents\(^{12}\) (\( bw \)), whether it be idol worshippers (the sailors and the Ninevites) or YHWH, who relents (\( bw \)) from his intended evil in 3:10! The only character who becomes the exception, is Jonah, who feels himself worthy of comparison with ‘those who regard worthless idols’.

The psalm ends with a final statement of praise: ‘Salvation is from YHWH!’ (10c). This statement might capture the message of the book as a whole. Coming from Jonah, however, and especially after the irony created by the contrast referred to above, this final line ‘elevates the satiric tone’ (Trible 1994:172).

Prose conclusion

With the brief statements of 2:11, the narrative framework is completed, and the scene brought to a close. Structurally, YHWH encloses the episode as subject of both the prose introduction and conclusion, so that, on a theological level, the inclusio of verses 1 and 11 serves as a reminder of YHWH’s sovereignty. At a mere word by YHWH, the fish obeys and vomits Jonah onto dry land. ‘Wat YHWH gebiedt, geschiedt.’ (Van der Woude 1978:38.)

4 Synthesis

Two remarks should be made concerning Jonah 2.

- In the prayer of Jonah, the theme of distress and salvation is repeated by the parallelism between Stanzas II and III, which constitute the main part of the lament of the individual, according to Westermann’s model (Potgieter 1991:32-34). Interestingly, YHWH is the Originator of both these aspects.

\(^{12}\) The sailors in 1:13, the citizens of Nineveh in 3:8 and 10, and Yahweh in 3:9 (see also the use of \( mj \) \( n \) in 3:10).
• The prose context wherein the psalm is placed, serves to envelop the poem in the theme of the sovereignty of God, who merely speaks, and the fish (even chaos!) obeys.

By taking the above into consideration, we find that, via the structure of chapter 2, the theme of God’s sovereignty, even as agent of both distress and salvation, stands supreme.

An inter- and extratextual reading of the book of Jonah greatly aids not only the understanding of the fish episode and the prayer of Jonah, but also the role that these have to play in the context of the book of Jonah, and consequently also the understanding of the book of Jonah as a whole. The goal is not to be comprehensive or exhaustive, but to highlight those aspects without which the book of Jonah can hardly be understood.

C A SHORT NOTE ON INTERTEXTUAL RELATIONS

1 Biblical texts

Verse 1 states that the word of YHWH came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Except for the book of Jonah, the prophet is mentioned in the Old Testament only once, in 2 Kings 14:25, where his prophecy concerning the re-expansion of Israel under Jerobeam II (793-753) is said to have been fulfilled: ‘25 He (king Jeroboam of Israel) restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher.' It is impossible to understand the book of Jonah without this intertextual reading. In keeping the prophecy of the son of Amittai in mind, the story of the prophet Jonah who would rather die than to see YHWH bestow mercy on the enemies of Israel, takes on new meaning. This point will be elaborated on shortly.

The formula with which the book opens, (Al ha hw bD), is typical in the Deutoronomistic history, and the same expression is used in relation to Samuel, Nathan, Solomon, Shemaiah – ‘word of God’, the prophet, and Jehu (1 Ki 16:1) (Limburg 1993:37).

The literary analysis of Jonah 2 followed a synchronic approach, whereby the psalm (2:3-10) was studied as a literary unit within the context of verses 1 and 11, and the greater context of the book of Jonah. This approach was chosen above diachronic approaches that would dissect the psalm into the many ‘quotations’ from other psalms, which would then be considered to be the building blocks of the psalm. Some notes on intertextual relations with the psalms will now be made, but this does not suggest that the psalm should be

13 Gath Hepher falls in the tribal borders of Zebulun, about three miles northeast of Nazareth.
understood outside its narrative context. The following table is a summary of vocabulary duplicated in the psalm of Jonah:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jonah 2:3-10</th>
<th>Psalms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2:3 I called to the Lord from my distress, and He answered me.</td>
<td>120:2 In my distress I cried to the Lord, and He heard me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:4 All your breakers and your waves passed over me.</td>
<td>42:8 All Your waves and billows have gone over me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:5 And as for me, I said ‘I have been driven away from before Your eyes.’</td>
<td>31:23 For I said in my haste, ‘I am cut off from before Your eyes.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:6 Water encompassed me up to my neck.</td>
<td>69:2 Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:9 Those who regard worthless idols</td>
<td>31:7 I have hated those who regard useless idols; but I trust in the Lord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:10 But as for me, with a song of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to You.</td>
<td>116:18 I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I have vowed I will fulfil.</td>
<td>116:19 I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all His people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation is from YHWH.</td>
<td>3:9 Salvation belongs to the Lord.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worthy to note that, up to 2:6a in Jonah’s prayer, traditional biblical language has been used, and phrases from other psalms frequently drawn upon. From 2:6b to 2:7b, however, no such echoes are found, and the language is unique to Jonah. ‘Jonah’s descent from conventional experience is matched by a move beyond conventional language.’ (Limburg 1993:68.)

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14 The question arises as to why the Psalmist would place words and phrases in Jonah’s mouth which echo phrases from psalms known to the hearers of the narrative. This intertextual enquiry seeks to point at this phenomenon. ‘Hebrew poets operated within a tradition in which it was perfectly proper to appropriate specific ideas and imagery from other sources … In such cases, the wholesale importation of a line and its insertion in a different context may be intentional, for the poet may be ironic, mocking, pedagogic, or the like. It may, however, betray an impoverished poetic inspiration’ (Sasson 1990:164).

15 ‘… in constructing the “psalm”, the author has apparently taken, where possible, familiar phrases from his tradition. On occasion, he has amended them either to fit in better with keywords or ideas in the book as a whole, or because of the necessary
The book of Jonah shows some sharing of concepts with the books of Jeremiah and Joel, and the character of Jonah with the character of Job. These intertextual relations lie beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on the prayer of Jonah as such.

2 Non-biblical texts

Although incidents of being swallowed by fish are not unfamiliar to the ancient world, there are some differences between the general paradigm of the myth and the episode of the fish in Jonah (Nel 1999:222). According to Steffen (1963:31, in Nel 1999), the original myth was connected with the dying sun in the west, and its rise at dawn. When the hero is swallowed, he often resembles the sun god or his attributes, and the spitting out or the liberation of the hero (or the sun) from the fish, always resembles renewal. This does not correspond to Jonah, who shows no sign of transformation. He does not emerge as a renewed character, as chapter 4 clearly shows (Nel 1999:222).

The three days and nights motif

The expression ‘three days and three nights’, reminds of the ancient belief that death was final only after the body has shown no sign of life for three days (Van der Woude 1978:33). This view is reflected in many New Testament passages, such as John 11 (the resurrection of Lazarus after four days), as well as in non-biblical texts which show that this conception may very well go back to the beginning of the first millennium BC (Landes 1976:446). It is indeed possible that the conception may have been partially based on, or at least reflected in the notion that the journey between the land of the living and Sheol, took three full days (Stuart 1987:474). This notion is found in the Sumerian myth, The descent of Inanna to the Nether World (Deist 1981:31; Van der Woude 1978:33). In this myth, Inanna instructs her divine minister, Ninshubur, to set up a lament for her after she has departed for the underworld (Part II, lines 30-34), the purpose of which would be to enlist the aid of Enlil, Nanna, and Enki, should she fail to reappear within a certain time. The text then reads:

After three days (and) three nights had passed, her minister Ninshubur, her minister of favorable words, her knight of true words, sets up a lament for her by the ruins ... (Part II, lines 169-173) (Landes 1976:449).

According to Landes, the context indicates that the words ‘three days (and) three nights’ were not meant to cover the time Inanna spent in the underworld, or
to indicate that ‘the goddess was “raised from the dead” after three days and three nights.’ Rather, ‘when one compares the text of Inanna’s instructions to Ninshubur with the account of his execution of her commands, it seems clear that Ninshubur’s delay is to allow sufficient time for Inanna to arrive in the nether world. The ‘three days (and) three nights’ are intended to cover the time of travel to the chthonic depths’ (Landes 1976:449). If Landes’ interpretation is correct, and seen in light of the conception that death is only final after three days, the ‘three days and three nights’ in Jonah 2:1 seem to imply that Jonah has died and that he has reached the nether world. This theme is developed in the psalm that follows, and concluded in verse 7 when the ‘bars of the underworld’ close behind Jonah forever. It is then no wonder that Jonah’s stay in the fish and his subsequent ejection soon came to be interpreted (even in the ancient world) as an allegory of death and resurrection. In New Testament tradition, on the basis of the Matthean citation of Jonah 2:1 and its application to Jesus’ resurrection, the phrase seems to designate the time between Jesus’ death and his resurrection.

D A SHORT NOTE ON EXTRATEXTUAL RELATIONS

1 Ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the cosmos

Without an understanding of the ancient man’s conception of his world, much of Jonah 2, if not the most important aspects of it, remain unclear. That may very well be the reason why the book of Jonah, including chapter 2, was interpreted as a mere historical narrative in the past, robbing the book of so much of its content and meaning.

Ancient man understood the world to be a circular, flat disk which was surrounded by a circular band of ocean. The disk of the earth was also surrounded by islands, which formed the pillars or foundations that supported the vault of heaven. It was there that the gates of the sun, where the sun disappears in the evenings, and reappear at dawn, were to be found. The underworld, the realm of the dead, was located in the chaos water beneath the earth (Nel 1999:221). This nether world, Sheol, is the land of no return, and is also depicted as a monster with its mouth wide open (Is 5:14; Hab 2:5) to consume the living (Pr 1:12). Yet, according to 1 Samuel 6, YHWH has the might to bring one back from this realm. Much of this mythical language is used in Jonah 2. Jonah is surrounded by the chaos waters (µwht) (v 6), he descends to the foundations of the mountains, and the bars of the underworld close behind him forever. The psalm conveys to the reader that Jonah has died, but without an understanding of the ancient world view, the modern reader understands it as mere metaphoric language for distress.

Included in the above-mentioned worldview, was the concept of a chaos monster, which usually played a major part in creation myths. These monsters are referred to in many ways, among which Yam, Tiamat and Leviathan are
maybe the most common, and are kept at bay by the forces of order. This is a
common theme in the psalms, where YHWH’s superiority is shown over the
monster of chaos:

You divided the sea by your strength; you broke the heads of the sea
serpents in the waters. You broke the heads of Leviathan in pieces,
and gave him as food to the people inhabiting the wilderness.
(Ps 74:14)

Also,

In that day the Lord with his severe sword, great and strong, will
punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan that twisted serpent;
and he will slay the reptile that is in the sea. (Is 27:1)

The view held in this paper is not one where the fish is understood to be a
mere vehicle of transport back to dry land, as is argued by Deist (1981:28), and
as such as the instrument of YHWH’s deliverance (Stuart 1987:439). Rather, the
fish is to be understood as the personification of the chaos waters, and even the
chaos monster itself. In the words of Van der Woude:

Dat de ‘grote vis’ hier inderdaad het hellemonster is, wordt bevestigd
door de volgende psalm waarin de nood van de dichter beschreven is
als verblijf in de ‘buik van de šēēl (2:2b, hebr. 3b) en als een-
afgedaald-zijn in het dodenrijk (èrēṣ. 2:6, Hebr. 7) (Van der Woude
1978:32-33)

and also,

In 1:17 (2:1) is de grote vis (nog) niet instrument in Gods hand ter
redding van Jona, maar het monster dat de profeet in het dodenrijk
voert. Uit deze ‘hel’ wordt Jona op Gods bevel gered (2:10, hebr.
2:11) (Van der Woude 1978:31).

The Hebrew text ‘big fish’ is translated similarly in the Vulgate, but the
Greek translation uses the noun κῆφωσου", which can also be translated ‘great sea
monster’ (Limburg 1993:61). From a prayer by the priest Eleazar from the first
century BC, his impression of the creature is made clear: ‘And Jonah, wasting
away in the belly of a huge, sea-born monster, you, Father, watched over and
restored unharmed to all his family.’ (3 Macc 6:8.) Early Christianity, in their
interpretation of Jonah as a type of Christ, viewed the fish as the distress (v 3)
from which he cried to YHWH rather than God’s vehicle of divine redemption:
Cyrillus points out that, while in the fish, Jonah declared that he was in Hades,
and thus he was a type of Christ who would in future descend to the underworld
(Stoop 1972:58). Augustine holds that, just as Jonah went from the ship to the
fish, so also Jesus went from the cross to the depths of death (Stoop 1972:62).
While Hieronymus understands the reference to the sea creature to be literal, he
sees in God’s appointment of the ‘fish’ that God ‘gave death and Hades
command to consume the prophet’ (Stoop 1972:62-63). Ancient graphic depictions of Jonah and the ‘fish’, especially in the Christian sarcophagus in Rome dating from the fourth century AD, where the fish is portrayed as a ‘serpent like monster’, also reflect these interpretations of Jonah 2 (Limburg 1993:61). While these interpretations cannot indicate what the author originally wished to convey to his readers, they do shed some light on the understanding that (at least some) people from the ancient world had of the story – people who shared the ancient worldview referred to above. The point is that it would be highly unlikely for any ancient reader to understand the fish episode of Jonah 2 as a mere divine rescue operation, especially with the mention of ἀβυσσίνιον, the bars of the underworld, and the foundations of the mountains. This is the more so since the prayer which mentions these elements of distress and chaos are syntactically structured so as to be prayed by Jonah while in the fish. If this interpretation of the fish as the chaos monster is correct, it beautifully stresses the sovereignty of God, who does not merely control the monster of chaos, but even uses it for his divine purpose. The fish has become ‘inextricably linked with the protagonist of the whole tale’ (Sasson 1990:146).

2 Historical background to the book of Jonah

Excursions regarding the author and the time of writing would not fit into the scope of this paper and are consequently excluded. The generally accepted view that Jonah is a post-exilic book, written in the Persian period somewhere between the fifth and third centuries BC will be assumed here. If that is the case, it would seem that the author drew on historical aspects from Israel’s history from the eighth century BC to formulate a message that would be applicable to his audience, which also found itself in a certain historic setting. Both these historic backgrounds need to be understood if the book of Jonah is to make sense to its modern reader. Three issues need to be addressed:

- For whom? Among the Jews of the Babylonian exile, two views existed. The first group saw the exile as divine punishment, which would pass and once again lead to Judah’s restoration, at which time they would take revenge on the foreign nations. The other group, which included the prophets of the exile, saw the exile as the fulfilment of God’s plan, and as the opportunity to represent YHWH to foreign nations, and to bring them all to the worship of the one God (Deist 1981:9). Those who remained in Palestine felt differently and considered the ones who were exiled as the ones responsible for the suffering. They regarded themselves to be, however, the ‘remnant’ which the prophets had spoken about, and YHWH has now given them the land (Deist 1981:10). Where Israelites lived in the exile, they took special care to preserve their identity, and this soon developed into an over-emphasis of the law and circumcision. They became exclusive and nationalistic, their hopes fixed on the fulfilment of the judgements of Jeremiah and the blessings and restoration prophesied to Israel (Deist 1981:10). The book of Jonah is aimed
at these nationalistic and exclusively minded groupings, who is represented in
the narrative by Jonah as a prophet of YHWH – thus a member of the
establishment (Salters 1994:53).

- Why Nineveh? The birth of the New Assyrian Empire commenced with
  the kingship of Ashur-Dan II (934-912), although the real founder was
  Ashurnasirpal II (883-859), who extended and secured Assyria’s borders, and
  who received tribute from as far as Tyre. His son, Shalmaneser III (858-824),
  met strong opposition in a coalition of Syrian and Palestine kings when he
  tried to extend his influence to the south. From this point onwards, Assyria’s
  influence upon Palestine was to increase radically. A short period of
  confusion followed, characterised by the reign of weak kings. Jonah
  prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753), which would
  historically place him within this time of confusion, during which Nineveh
  was not yet the capital of the Assyrian Empire. More relevant than this,
  however, is the impression and recollection that the post-exilic Israelites
  were left with. To them, Assyria was the grave enemy which destroyed Samaria
  (722 BC) and humiliated them by scattering the ten northern tribes across
  Upper Mesopotamia and Media, where they ultimately were to vanish from
  the stage of world history (Bright 1972:247). Such a grave enemy of the post-
  exilic Israelites would be the ideal recipient of God’s mercy in a story which
  illustrates YHWH’s sovereignty in bestowing grace and inflicting
  punishment.

- Why Jonah? When considering the intertextual reading with 2 Kings 14:25
  (referred to above), it becomes clear why a nationalistic prophet, whose
  prophecy concerning the restoration of Israel had been fulfilled, was chosen
  as the prophetic character in the book. This prophet, chosen to represent the
  (probable) intended audience of the narrator, is to be taught a lesson in divine
  will and grace.

E JONAH 2 WITHIN THE BOOK JONAH

Based on many theories of the psalm being a late interpolation, it has often been
suggested that the prayer be excised from the greater context of the book. Such
suggestions are usually based on arguments such as the following (Stuart
1987:470-471):

- The psalm may by neatly excised from the book without lack of continuity\textsuperscript{16}. Stuart rightly states that an ability to excise does not equal a warrant to
excise. Nearly all literary works have room for abridgement, so what could

\textsuperscript{16} Sasson (1990:206) names the fact that Israel’s poetic imagination is rarely attracted
to themes and topics that require a chronological expansion as a major reason for
this.
be an interpolation need not necessarily be one. Moreover, the fact that a text is an interpolation does not mean that it has no function to fulfil in the text.

- The lack of correspondence of topics in the psalm to topics in the rest of the book. In Stuart’s words, psalms are generally pan-historical and pan-cultural, composed non-specifically and for all moments. Moreover, Jonah is thematically related to the rest of the book, as will be illustrated in a moment.

- The inappropriateness of a thanksgiving psalm in a context of misery. It has already been stated that the view held in this paper is that of Potgieter (1991:33), that the psalm is a lament of the individual, according to Westermann’s model, which fits into the context without difficulties. This is contrary to Stuart’s opinion of the psalm being a psalm of thanksgiving.

By now considering the overall structure of the book Jonah, as well as some thematic features which are continued in the prayer of Jonah, the function of chapter 2 may be better understood. It is the purpose of this paper to study the book of Jonah as a coherent piece of literature, and not to investigate its redactional history.

1 A structure of the book Jonah

Regarding the macrostructure of Jonah, the book can be divided into two parallel halves, which consist of chapters 1 and 2, and 3 and 4 respectively. In turn, each one of these halves can be divided into three pericopes. Potgieter schematised this as follows (Potgieter 1990:65):  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1: 1:1-3</td>
<td>Call 1</td>
<td>B1: 3:1-3a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2: 1:4-16</td>
<td>Distress at sea</td>
<td>B2: 3:3b-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the ship Confession 1:9</td>
<td>In the city Sermon 3:4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reaction gentiles</td>
<td>Reaction gentiles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3: 2:1-11</td>
<td>Outside the ship Fish miracle Prayer 2:3-10</td>
<td>B3: 4:1-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fish miracle</td>
<td>Prayer 2:3-10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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From this, it seems clear that the fish episode and the prayer of Jonah in chapter 2 form part of a skilfully designed parallelistic feature of the book Jonah, and as such form a structural unit to the book as a whole.

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17 As can be seen from the model, chapter 2 is parallel to chapter 4. These chapters are both endings to the two scenes of the narrative. These parallel units share verbs exclusive to them, that is, הַנְּמ (with God as the subject and elements of nature as the object in each case) and לְלִלּ (with Jonah as the subject and YHWH as the object) (Trible 1994:115).
2 Thematic correlation of Jonah 2 with the book of Jonah

Keywords from the narrative are picked up in the psalm, the most important of which is certainly the dry motif, which was begun in 1:3 and is now brought to a climax in 2:7, where it is further emphasised by the contrast with ḫl ‘lift up’. Additionally, the theme of distress and salvation in the psalm (both of which occur at YHWH’s initiative), and which is sandwiched in YHWH’s appointment of the fish, underline the sovereignty of God as the theme of the psalm. Magonet (1976:40-43) also notes a further stylistic feature (the ‘growing phrase’)\(^\text{18}\), as well as two common thematic ideas (the supreme role of God, and the self-willed individual who must submit his will to God’s) that are common to the psalm and the narrative parts of the book. This does not necessarily imply that the psalm was written by the author of the book, as he argues (1976:43), but it does show that the psalm forms a vital part of the final form of the book. There is indeed great thematic correlation between the prayer of Jonah and the book as a whole. Thus, in the words of Van der Woude (1978:38), ‘De psalm van Jona blijkt naar inhoud en vorm zo kunstzinnig verankerd te zijn met 1:17 (2:1) en 2:10 (11), dat hij een dieptedimensie toevoegt die wij niet gaarne zouden missen.’

3 The function of the psalm

On a linguistic level, the psalm serves as a classic example of a pause. Only 2:1-3a and 2:11 describe events, while the other eight verses of the poem enforce a pause in the flow of the prose. Delaying his journey to Nineveh, the lack of events in the poem results in a prolonged focus on the inner feelings and reflections of Jonah, which in turn reveals certain character traits to the reader (Potgieter 1990:64). Stuart (1987:427-428) highlights four aspects which would be lacking if the psalm were absent from the book.

- Jonah’s partial change of heart which caused him to obey the second command of YHWH, would be left unexpressed. The psalm holds the reason why Jonah obeyed the second call to go to Nineveh after having disregarded the first.
- The focus on Jonah’s lasting thankfulness at his rescue would be virtually eliminated.
- The nature of Jonah’s sojourn in the fish would be left unspecified. The psalm indicates that Jonah is thinking and praying.
- A major reflection of the theme of the book would fall away: YHWH is a merciful God who desires to forgive rather than to punish.

\(^{18}\) ‘A particular feature of “Jonah” is the use of “the growing phrase”, i.e., a phrase which is repeated with the addition of a further word or element to it’ (Magonet 1976:31). Cf pp 31-33 for his illustrations.
More important though, the psalm reveals Jonah’s joy at YHWH’s mercy – that is, when that mercy is shown to him. His ‘voice of thanksgiving’ is set against his fierce anger in chapter 4 in order to highlight the theme of the book, namely the sovereignty of God, also when it pertains to mercy and judgement. Jonah wants to control YHWH and sees himself fit to decide the fate of Nineveh. Without the prayer of Jonah, this powerful element created through the contrast of Jonah’s joy and anger, would have been lost.

F THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

1 The genre of Jonah

The genre of the book of Jonah has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Descriptions of the genre have ranged from a didactic prophetic narrative (Von Rad 1968:256), to a historical prophetic narrative (Stuart 1987:435), to an allegory, a parable, a didactic story (Limburg 1993:26 and Salters 1994:48), and a midrash. As stated by Van der Woude (1978:12), the focus on continuous action, combined with the degree of tension that binds the reader until the very end, calls for a novel. Potgieter, however, makes use of Humphrey’s guidelines for discernment between a short story and a novel in the Old Testament, thus arguing for a short story rather than a novel. The main reason is the length: Jonah, which can be read through in one session, is too short to be a novel. Another important reason is the number of characters, which are many more in a novel than in a short story (Potgieter 1991:106-107).

The didactic function of the narrative is indicated by the application of certain narrative techniques, among which the frequent use of questions, as well as by a number of statements that are compact, almost dogmatic in nature, each of which speaks about the Lord or God (Limburg 1993:26). These are found in 1:9; 2:2a, 7a, 9b; 2:8 and 4:2b. Judging from the strong didactic content of the book, Jonah should not be read as a historical account. ‘It deals with a man of God who – from the narrator’s standpoint – lived in times so remote as to be almost legendary, the time of Jeroboam II’ (Von Rad 1968:255). Any preoccupation with the historicity of the book is mistaken – whether it is to prove or to disprove the historical value thereof. The historicity is not important in order for the book to reach its aim. Thus, in this paper, the historicity as such is neither denied, nor defended. Rather, the importance of historicity is refuted.

2 The message of Jonah

The message of Jonah has been a source of as much discussion as the genre. There have been those who understand the theme of the book to be YHWH and his prophet (Van der Woude 1978:14), and others who understand the book to address the post-exilic problem of unfulfilled prophecies against the enemies of Israel has not been fulfilled (Breytenbach 1984:138). Some see the book as a criticism against exclusivist, nationalistic-minded Jews of the post-exilic
period, while some reduce the theme to divine justice versus divine mercy (cf Trible 1994:108). All these interpretations contain elements of truth. What should be the answer? Can the book of Jonah be said to have a central theme? Potgieter argues that all these views must be gathered under the central theme of the sovereignty of God, so that this central theme can be applied on three levels (Potgieter 1991:109, 110):

- The acknowledgement of the sovereignty of YHWH on national level means that his mercy reaches farther than Israel.
- On a second level, YHWH’s sovereignty is manifested in his control over his word. His prophet does not control the outcome of his words.
- On a third level, YHWH’s sovereignty is realised in his relationship with mankind. He goes through much trouble to bring Jonah to new insights (Potgieter 1991:110).

It has been argued that the structure of the psalm as enveloped in the prose introduction and conclusion support this theme, wherein God’s sovereignty, even as agent of both distress and salvation, stands supreme.

**G CONCLUSION**

In this paper, some suggestions were made regarding the function of the fish episode and the prayer of Jonah in chapter 2. Attention was also paid to the issue of the genre of Jonah. It is concluded that Jonah’s prayer plays a vital role in the story and helps to define the central theme of the book as the sovereignty of YHWH. This theme provides for three other popular interpretations that can be incorporated under its vault, namely that God has control over his word and does as He pleases.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


19 ‘YHWH who controls Jonah in the fish counters YHWH who seeks to persuade Jonah under the sun. but in striking contrast to the divine change, Jonah remains constant. As in the beginning, so in the end he holds fast to his own ideas. His last words confirm himself (4:9b). Yet, YHWH, not Jonah, has the last word in the story (4:10-11). It keeps the dialogue open.’ (Trible 1994:116).

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