

COLUMBIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**THE AUTHOR OF JONAH GOT THINGS RIGHT**

AN ACADEMIC PAPER  
FOR  
BI-505, EXEGESIS OF JONAH

SUBMITTED TO  
DR. ROGER DUKE

BY

JAMES REGGIE HOWARD

BUCKLY, WASHINGTON

JANUARY 19, 2009

# The Author of Jonah Got Things Right

## Contents

Introduction .....	2
Is Jonah good writing or poor writing? .....	2
What kind of writing is Jonah? .....	3
Nonfiction vs. Fiction .....	4
Creative Nonfiction .....	6
Contemporary vs. Ancient .....	7
Narrative vs. Prophetic.....	9
What is so special about Jonah? .....	12
Its Unique Structure .....	12
Its Changes of Pace.....	15
Its Plot Development .....	16
Its Economy of Words.....	18
Its Vocabulary and Grammar .....	21
What is its Prophetic Message? .....	24
What God wanted to get across to his people Israel.....	25
What lessons we should learn .....	28
The Poetic Prayer .....	30
The Unsettling Non-conclusion .....	31
Conclusion.....	32
Appendix A, A Case for the Historicity of the Jonah Narrative.....	35
Appendix B, Structure in the Poetic Prayer .....	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	39

# Introduction

This is not a typical academic paper. It is based on careful academic study, but it is molded as a teaching tool for use in the training of Christian writers.<sup>1</sup> Jonah is investigated for its exemplary literary features. These features are highlighted as a challenge to contemporary prophetic writers.

The author of the book of Jonah is unknown. As Futato says, "The book is anonymous, and there are no indicators elsewhere in Scripture to identify the author."<sup>2</sup> But we can analyze and ponder the handiwork of this anonymous writer and recognize his craftsmanship for what it is. There is much he can teach us about the techniques of writing.

## Is Jonah good writing or poor writing?

The book of Jonah is obviously different than any modern literature. It might fit into the category of "short story" but only because of its size; it is unlike literature being written today. So, when a question is asked about its quality, there are many wider questions to be considered: Audience, intent, effectiveness, timeliness and timelessness. These will be covered under the heading, What kind of writing is Jonah?

How should we judge the quality of a piece of writing?

A book's quality of writing needs to be judged first of all within the setting of its original communication context - Did it communicate well to its original audience?

Then, it can be evaluated for its esthetics.

Then, it can be evaluated for its long-term acceptance and effectiveness.

---

<sup>1</sup> The format of this paper differs in some ways from a typical academic paper. The motivation behind these differences is to provide clarity and easy access to the information. Some of the differences are as follows: The font used in the main text is a more "screen-friendly" font (Verdana). The first person is used in some contexts. Questions are used in some headings and in the text. There is a greater use of lists, both numbered and bulleted lists. Hyperlinks are inserted, both hyperlinks to other parts of the paper and to web links in references. Footnotes use the author/page style of note throughout rather than the use of "ibid."

<sup>2</sup> Mark Futato, *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1683. The person about whom the book is written is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, but nothing is said about authorship.

But before going into all this detail, let's ask for an expert opinion:  
How good is the book of Jonah?

Dr. Mark Futato<sup>3</sup> says the following:

The book of Jonah is *a literary masterpiece*.<sup>4</sup>

While the story line is so simple that children follow it readily, the story is marked by *as high a degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible*. The author employs structure, humor, hyperbole, irony, double entendre, and literary figures like merism<sup>5</sup> to communicate his message with great rhetorical power.<sup>6</sup>

So **yes**, Jonah is not just good writing, it is outstanding, exemplary writing. As you continue through this study you should be able to see many reasons for this claim.

## What kind of writing is Jonah?

This is a good question and it will take some effort to answer it properly. There are three angles or approaches that help put Jonah into proper perspective. Below is a list of the three headings with brief descriptions. Details will follow.

### **Nonfiction vs. Fiction**

As modern readers we have learned to divide all of literature into two distinct categories, fiction versus nonfiction. The question quickly arises then as to which category to place Jonah. There have been centuries of debate

---

<sup>3</sup> [Mark Futato](#) is (as of August 8, 2008) the Robert L. Maclellan Professor of Old Testament and Academic Dean at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, FL. Dr. Futato received his Ph.D. and M.A. in Semitic Languages from the Catholic University of America, and he is a minister in the PCA (Presbyterian Church of America). Dr. Futato contributed to the ESV Study Bible by providing the study notes for Jonah.

<sup>4</sup> Futato, 1685.

<sup>5</sup> "In rhetoric, a *merism* is a figure of speech by which a single thing is referred to by a conventional phrase that enumerates several of its parts, or which lists several synonyms for the same thing."  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merism> (accessed January 16, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Futato, 1685. Emphasis added.

over the issues involved. One's answer makes a difference not so much to the analysis of the text, but to how much impact readers will allow the text to have on them.

### **Contemporary vs. Ancient**

No one expects Homer to read like John Grisham. No one expects Josephus to read like James Michener. So, what expectations should we have when we read an ancient text like the book of Jonah? Do we need to take off our 21<sup>st</sup> century glasses and put on ancient ones, or do we just (as they used to say) "fly by the seat of our pants?" These are legitimate concerns, and the answers are essential as we evaluate what kind of writing Jonah is.

### **Narrative vs. Prophetic**

The text of Jonah presents us with two different genres, narrative and poetry. To appreciate Jonah it is important to understand the distinctive character of biblical narrative as well as biblical poetry. Once understood, the eclectic nature of the book harmonizes to make its prophetic pronouncement.

## **Nonfiction vs. Fiction**

Much of the best of today's writing is fiction. I am amazed, for instance, at the plot lines and plot development of a TV show like *24* - the writers keep audiences on edge, guessing, and being surprised time and time again. In fact, we seem to live in an age of unrealis, an age where peoples' interest and attention is often caught up with things not directly related to their lives - television, movies, fiction, following sports.<sup>7</sup> Media moguls in the last few years have created a new genre, "reality TV!" These shows merely put live people into contrived, fictional situations and call it "reality."

So, what is Jonah, fiction or nonfiction?

---

<sup>7</sup> I, for instance, occasionally interact on a sports blog about a team where none of the bloggers knows any of the players or coaches personally, yet the blog is active every day of the year!

It seems that the vast majority of modern scholarship places Jonah in the “fiction” camp. Reputable scholar, Brevard Childs says:

The attempt to interpret the book as a straightforward historical report met with resistance at a very early date. The search for alternative theories of interpretation led, on the one hand, to various allegorical and typological moves, and, on the other hand, to innumerable rationalistic ploys, e.g. that Jonah had dreamed the story, or that the ship which rescued him was named ‘the great fish’!<sup>8</sup>

But please read and carefully consider the discussion in [Appendix A: A Case for the Historicity of Jonah](#).

There is no reason to think that nonfiction equals boring. Nonfiction writing is a craft that can be learned. There is a great depth of real-life subject matter that is of great interest. But these stories are not always written in the most interesting manner. Journalists are taught to write in a certain way called an inverted pyramid, the most important and interesting information is placed at the start followed by details of lesser and lesser importance. This is done for pragmatic reasons for publication.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is an entirely different way of writing truth. The author is able to write interesting plots using real people and real events. This is referred to as creative nonfiction.<sup>10</sup> Jonah fits this category very well.

Nonfiction can have plot just as much as fiction. The author retains control of what information is revealed when, and thereby creates tension and anticipation just as effectively as with fiction. The author of Jonah did this with regard to the question of why (in such an uncharacteristic fashion

---

<sup>8</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> “The **inverted pyramid** is a metaphor used to illustrate how information should be arranged or presented within a text, in particular within a news story. The “pyramid” can also be drawn as a triangle. The triangle’s broad base at the top of the figure represents the most substantial, interesting, and important information the writer means to convey. The triangle’s orientation is meant to illustrate that this kind of material should head the article, while the tapered lower portion illustrates that other material should follow in order of diminishing importance. The format is valued because readers can leave the story at any point and understand it, even if they don’t have all the details. It also allows less important information to be more easily removed by editors so the article can fit a fixed size.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inverted\\_pyramid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inverted_pyramid) (accessed January 16, 2009). See also <http://mtsu32.mtsu.edu:11178/171/pyramid.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> “Nonfiction is in the facts. *Creative* nonfiction is in the *telling*. It goes far beyond reporting.” “Creative nonfiction reads like fiction, but stays loyal to the truth.” Philip Gerard. *Creative Nonfiction: Research and Crafting Stories of Real Life* (Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1996). Both quotations from the back cover.

for any prophet of the LORD)<sup>11</sup> Jonah disobeyed a Divine command and fled west. The “why” question cries for an answer, but the author wisely withheld it until near the end of the story.<sup>12</sup>

More will be said about the genre under the next heading.

## Creative Nonfiction

Creative nonfiction is a genre that is growing in popularity. Professor of writing, Philip Gerard, says, “These days creative nonfiction is enjoying an astonishing renaissance. Many of the finest writers in our literature, including eminent poets and novelists, are writing it. Even the National Endowment for the Arts recognizes the genre in its fellowship awards.”<sup>13</sup>

Gerard describes the merits of good creative nonfiction as follows:

Creative nonfiction . . . should tell a story accurately, deliver precise and crucial information, persuade the reader, move him to insight, tell him something important he doesn’t already know and make him understand how urgent it is that he know it, capture his imagination in a way that is very nearly literal—and do all of these things in a manner that adds up to a complete, whole, satisfying experience.<sup>14</sup>

The book of Jonah is an “A1” example of creative nonfiction. Gerard lists five characteristics of this genre<sup>15</sup> and Jonah meets them all:

1. Creative nonfiction has “an apparent subject and a deeper subject.”<sup>16</sup> The apparent subject of Jonah is the foibles of the man

---

<sup>11</sup> Throughout this paper, the practice of capitalizing LORD is used to indicate the personal or covenant name of God, sometimes written as Yahweh or YHWH.

<sup>12</sup> “To this point [Jonah 4:2] the reader has not been told that Jonah spoke a word in his homeland. The narrator uses the strategy of delaying information.” Phyllis Tribble. *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 200.

<sup>13</sup> Gerard, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Gerard, 156.

<sup>15</sup> Gerard, 7-11.

<sup>16</sup> Gerard, 7.

himself; the deeper subject is the lasting prophetic message of the book.

2. Creative nonfiction does not get outdated like journalism does; its message does not get antiquated. "Long after the apparent subject ceases to be topical, the deeper subject and the art that expresses it remain vital."<sup>17</sup>
3. "Creative nonfiction is narrative, it always tells a good story."<sup>18</sup>
4. "Creative nonfiction contains a sense of *reflection* on the part of the author. The underlying subject has been percolating through the writer's imagination for some time, waiting for the right outlet. It is *finished* thought."<sup>19</sup>
5. Creative nonfiction "Shows serious attention to the craft of writing. It goes far beyond the journalistic "inverted pyramid" style-with interesting turns of phrase, fresh metaphors, lively and often scenic presentation, a shunning of clichés and obvious endings, a sense of control over nuance, accurate use of words, and a governing aesthetic sensibility."<sup>20</sup>

Details of plot, structure, changes of pace, vocabulary, grammar, and the economy of words in Jonah will be considered in detail under the heading, [What is so special about Jonah?](#)

## Contemporary vs. Ancient

There is a difference between literature written in modern times and literature written centuries ago. Some of the differences seem to be surface matters, but they affect the way ancient texts should be read. Two of these are as follows:

1. The medium of writing is dramatically different. In ancient times writing had to be done on papyrus (woven water-reeds) or parchment (dried animal skins). Copies could only be made by hand.

---

<sup>17</sup> Gerard, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Gerard, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Gerard, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Gerard, 11.



2. Literacy rates were very low. Very few people ever learned to read and write.

These factors had a number of ramifications. The production of literature back then was extremely rare as compared to today. It took resources and knowledge that the common person could never obtain. People did not have books in their homes. The vast majority of the population never read a book in their lives. Their exposure to literature was always at a public event, where someone read to them. Therefore, the understanding and interpretations of those texts were much more a *community event* than an individual free-for-all.<sup>21</sup> People heard the reading together, *as they left the event they discussed and explored the significance and applications of what they heard.*

The message of the book of Jonah would have been transmitted this way, orally, to groups of people.<sup>22</sup> The overall impression Jonah had on its audiences was far more lasting and significant than any of its individual statements. Jonah was always read as a whole, not atomized and principlized. Therefore, as the bits and pieces of Jonah are studied it is important to see how the individual parts enhance the message of the whole book.

To answer the question posed earlier,<sup>23</sup> “Do we need to take off our 21<sup>st</sup> century glasses and put on ancient ones, or do we just (as they used to say) ‘fly by the seat of our pants?’” The answer is **neither**.

As this study continues to investigate the book of Jonah, it will be relying on modern approaches and categories to analyze this ancient text. But part of the modern approach is to understand the assumptions, beliefs

---

<sup>21</sup> For examples, see Joshua 8:34-35; 2 Kings 23:1-3; Nehemiah 8:1-6.

<sup>22</sup> And this is still being done today all over the world, as Rabbi Michael Shire states: “Why do we read the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur? It is the only book of the Tanach that we read in its entirety during a service. It has been said that it is not so much a book but rather a sermon to be delivered. It’s quite an achievement to have your sermon immortalized for thousands of years to be read every Yom Kippur in every synagogue!” Rabbi Michael Shire, [http:// www.lbc.ac.uk/content/view/813/142/](http://www.lbc.ac.uk/content/view/813/142/) (accessed January 16, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Page 5.

and world view of the original audience of Jonah.<sup>24</sup> The “original audience” being not Nineveh, to whom Jonah spoke audibly, but Israel, to whom the author of Jonah wrote.

## Narrative vs. Prophetic

The book of Jonah consists primarily of narrative material. It comes across as an action adventure, relating a fast-moving, vivid story with two major episodes. But from a very early time it was grouped with eleven other books and they were known as the “twelve prophets.”<sup>25</sup> What kind of a book is Jonah?

It is important to bear in mind the unique character of Old Testament Narrative. There is a book that everyone who wants to study biblical literature should own; its title is *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*.<sup>26</sup> The authors explain the three literary genres contained in the book of Jonah: **narrative**, **poetry**, and **prophetic**.

### Old Testament Narrative

Stuart explains the unique character of Old Testament narrative, that it needs to be understood on three levels.<sup>27</sup> There are three tiers in biblical narrative texts.

The *bottom level* consists of “all the hundreds of *individual* narratives that make up the other two levels.”<sup>28</sup> Jonah is one of these hundreds of stories, interesting and useful on its own, but part of a macro story.

The *middle level* is the macro story of God’s dealings with his covenant people, Israel. Most of the individual stories of the Old Testament combine together to create this macro story.

---

<sup>24</sup> “To me, discourse analysis is nothing else *but* tracing the hearer’s part in understanding utterances, and I claim that any other approach either yields uninteresting statements of statistical frequency, or is like going on a journey without a destination in mind.” R. Blass. *Relevance Relations in Discourse: A Study with Special Reference to Sissala* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990).

<sup>25</sup> “*Sirach* 49:10 (from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.) refers to the “twelve prophets” (namely, the 12 Minor Prophets, of which Jonah is the fifth).” Futato, 1683.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>27</sup> Fee and Stuart, 74.

<sup>28</sup> Fee and Stuart, 74.

The *top level* is actually the meta-narrative of “the whole universal plan of God worked out through His creation.”<sup>29</sup>

When the Jonah narrative is read with this understanding of its three-tiered nature, things begin to make more sense. Jonah is not just a strange but interesting story; it is part of the bigger story of how God dealt with his people, Israel. This in turn is part of the meta-narrative of God’s purposes for all of creation. There is much more to learn.

### **Hebrew Poetry**

Strangely enough, Jonah does not just consist of narrative; it has a very significant poem in chapter two, verses two through nine.<sup>30</sup> The story of Jonah and the message of the book would be markedly incomplete without this poem.<sup>31</sup> It serves as the only direct window into the heart and mind of this strange man named Jonah. This poetic prayer is deserving of detailed study.

Hebrew poetry is very different than modern poetry. There was no interest in rhyme, and though meter may be present, it is not a primary consideration. The major feature of Hebrew poetry is the expression of thoughts in parallel; a statement is made, followed by a restatement or two that are either synonymous, contrasting or complimentary. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says, “Parallelism may be described as the recurring of symmetrically constructed sentences, the several members of which usually correspond to one another.”<sup>32</sup>

Poetry had a practical value for the Hebrew people. Its parallel thought patterns as well as its rhythm served a mnemonic purpose. As Stuart says,

In ancient Israel poetry was widely appreciated as a means of learning. Many things that were important enough to be remembered were considered appropriate for composition in poetry . . . Making good use of this helpful phenomenon in an age where reading and writing were rare skills and where the private ownership of books was

---

<sup>29</sup> Fee and Stuart, 74.

<sup>30</sup> There are some differences in the verse numbering in different texts and translations of Jonah. The Hebrew texts (including the English version by the Jewish Publication Society, the Tanakh) include the last verse of chapter 1 (1:17) as the start of chapter two, this alters the verse numbers in chapter two by addition of one. There are good reasons for following the Hebrew text divisions, but since this paper is in English, the English text divisions will be followed.

<sup>31</sup> More will be said latter under the heading, *What is its prophetic message?*

<sup>32</sup> ISBE under Hebrew Poetry

virtually unknown, God spoke through His prophets largely by poems. People were used to poetry, and could remember those prophecies; they would ring their ears.<sup>33</sup>

Of all the passages in the book of Jonah, the poetic prayer in chapter two was what the original readers where best trained to remember and meditate on. This poem is a significant part of the message of Jonah.

### **Biblical Prophecy**

This might at first seem like a strange formula, but in the case of Jonah it is true: Narrative + Poetry = Prophecy. The book of Jonah is just as much a prophetic book as Isaiah, or Ezekiel, or any of the other prophets. The prophetic message is spoken through the narrative and poetic prayer, and when one understands the nature of biblical prophecy the message begins to become clear.

Stuart lists three roles or functions of the Old Testament prophets which need to be understood:

1. *"The Prophets were covenant enforcement mediators."*<sup>34</sup> They refer back to the covenants God made with his people, to Abraham and especially through Moses. They most often prophesied against the Lord's people as they failed to keep the conditions of the covenant.
2. *"The Prophets' message was not their own, but God's."*<sup>35</sup> They were expected to pronounce God's message regardless of how popular or unpopular it might be. They were not in any position to tamper with the Divine message.
3. *"The Prophets' message is unoriginal. The prophets were inspired by God to present the essential content of the covenant's warnings and promises."*<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, whoever wants to understand the prophetic message of Jonah needs to study the covenant God made earlier with his people. The message of the book of Jonah should restate and enforce some parts of that covenant. The message need not be popular but it should clearly be from God.

---

<sup>33</sup> Fee and Stuart, 161-162.

<sup>34</sup> Fee and Stuart, 151.

<sup>35</sup> Fee and Stuart 153.

<sup>36</sup> Fee and Stuart, 154.

# What is so special about Jonah?

The truth is, there are many things that make the Book of Jonah special. The following discussion will highlight things in five different categories as follows:

1. Its Unique Structure
2. Its Changes of Pace
3. Its Plot Development
4. Its Economy of Words
5. Its Vocabulary and Grammar

## Its Unique Structure

Writers have many options about how they can structure their piece. It can be entirely chronological or full of flashbacks (analepsis) and flash-forwards (prolepsis). It can be thematic or episodic. The effectiveness of a piece of literature stands or falls based on its structure. As Gerard says, "Structure is the arrangement of the parts and all the techniques you use to hold the parts together and make it *do* what it is intended to do."<sup>37</sup>

There are a set number of common literary structures that guide people's writing; but these are tools to be used, patterns that are recognized, not directives that must be slavishly followed. Gerard turns to Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address as an example of stretching the parameters of a structure:

Like every successful writer of creative nonfiction, Lincoln invents a structure to serve his piece. He doesn't invent it from scratch; part of such success is always that the structure is familiar enough to reassure the reader but new enough to recalibrate his expectations.<sup>38</sup>

Lincoln doesn't start with the battle. He goes back "four score and seven years" to the founding of the United States, then works the chronology—not of the battle, or even of the war, but of the national experience.

---

<sup>37</sup> Gerard, 156. Emphasis his.

<sup>38</sup> Gerard, 163.

. . . He takes the underlying *memorial* structure further and deeper than it is usually conceived. What he wants to make his listeners remember is much more than they had expected to be reminded of, much more than the specific occasion of the battle or even the particular men who fought it.<sup>39</sup>

The very structure of his speech invites each person who hears it to meditate on the past and take responsibility for the future, filling in his or her own experience.<sup>40</sup>

The author of Jonah did much the same thing. He took a structure of prophetic narrative<sup>41</sup> and stretched it in at least two ways:

1. The prayer in chapter 2 is poetry, similar to other prophetic writings and the Psalms. It occurs right in the mix of narrative. However, it is placed into the narrative not as a diversion or distraction, it supplies essential information to the narrative.<sup>42</sup> Namely, that Jonah had a change of heart when the physical panic of drowning overwhelmed him. This “repentance” affects how the rest of the narrative is to be read.
2. The most unique part of the structure of Jonah is chapter four. Futato sees chapters 1 and 2 as consisting of three episodes which are followed by three more episodes in chapter 3 through 4:4. This leaves 4:5-11 as a stand-alone episode. He says,

The first three episodes are paralleled by the second three. By this paralleling the author invites the reader to make a number of comparisons and contrasts . . . The final episode is unparalleled and thus stands out as the climax of the story, ending with the penetrating question, “And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which

---

<sup>39</sup> Gerard, 163.

<sup>40</sup> Gerard, 165.

<sup>41</sup> “The Heb: *Nebhi'im* embraced (a) the four so-called Former Prophets, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, counted as one book, 1 and 2 Kings, also counted as one book; and (b) the four so-called Latter Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets, counted as one book; a total of 8 books.” ISBE, Canon of the Old Testament.

<sup>42</sup> For more information on this, please refer to the section below under the heading, “Its Plot Development.”

there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"<sup>43</sup>

The author of Jonah had a burning message to communicate. He wanted his people to be shaken up, to see things differently, to actually think differently as a result of his writing. Simple narrative would not do it, simple prophetic poetry would not do it, he needed a combination of these followed by *an unsettling non-conclusion*.

At this point it will pay to quote Phyllis Tribble at length.<sup>44</sup> She gives an outstanding analysis of the structure of the book of Jonah in her literary overview. I quote in full:

Literary Overview: Structure, Characters, and Plot

Even a first reading of Jonah in English can detect the basic structure, identify the characters, and trace the plot. In the NRSV chapter 1:1 opens, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying." Chapter 3:1 repeats all but the appositive and then adds a telling phrase: "The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying." The repetition plus the addition "a second time" signifies that the narrative falls into two major parts (or scenes). At the beginning the two major characters are named: the deity Yhwh and the man Jonah. They contend throughout as protagonist and antagonist. The other human characters are unnamed. They come in groups, each with a leader, and they divide between the scenes. In the first appear sailors and their captain; in the second, Ninevites and their king. Phenomena of nature also play major roles: in scene one, wind, storm, sea, dry land, and fish; in scene two, flocks and herds, plant, worm, sun and wind. The plot thrives on divine activity; human and natural responses mark the turning points. In scene one the words and actions of Yhwh elicit from diverse characters disobedience, fear, confession, sacrifice, and piety. At the close some issues have found resolution, but not the command (1:1) that initiated the plot. Instead a stalemate results. In scene two the plot continues by beginning a second time. The words and actions of Yhwh elicit from diverse characters capitulation, proclamation, repentance, anger, and

---

<sup>43</sup> Futato, 1686.

<sup>44</sup> Phyllis Tribble. *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).

disputation. At the close some issues have found resolution, but the final question leaves the plot open-ended.<sup>45</sup>

Trible has captured well the elements of structure that intertwine throughout the text: formal structure, character interaction, and plot development. The author of Jonah did things right.

## Its Changes of Pace

Literature has the characteristic of progression. The reading process is a linear one, it involves time and progress. Authors have control over the flow and release of information. The term "pace" has to do with the speed and density with which new information is presented.<sup>46</sup> In narrative, this can be applied to the amount of coverage given to the various elements of the story. Sometimes the story races ahead, sometimes it can slow to a snail's pace. This phenomenon is described by Pastor Tim Bulkeley as follows: "**Narrative speed** - telling can take place "faster" or "slower", a lengthy description can cause the events of the story to crawl by with seconds of action taking minutes to read, or a summary may cause years to dissolve in seconds."<sup>47</sup>

This is one of the controls of the story teller. Bulkeley applies the concept of narrative speed to the book of Jonah:

In biblical narrative the speed of telling is seldom uniform. In Jonah it varies widely.

In tracts of speech repeated apparently verbatim the narrative moves at a one-to-one ratio with the plot. These range from mere snippets (the king of Nineveh's proclamation (3:7b-9) through extended conversations (1:6b-14) to Jonah's prayer in 2:2-9).

While on the other hand the arrival of the storm, and the mariners frantic attempts to save the vessel are told in 2 verses (1:4-5), and -

---

<sup>45</sup> Tribble, 109.

<sup>46</sup> "Briefly, the structure of the syntactic surface has a direct impact on the activity of reading - it may hold the reader up as he progresses left-to-right through a text, or advance his progress smoothly; or alternate these effects, 'punctuating' the text and directing the reader's attention more to some parts of the meaning, less to others. Marked tendencies to repeat the same syntactic types (short or long sentences, sentences with coordinated rather than subordinated clauses, verb-less sentences, etc.) give rise to a variety of stylistic impressions: we call a writer's language 'terse', or 'flowing', 'convoluted', 'staccato', 'ponderous' and so on." Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977), 9-10.

<sup>47</sup> Tim Bulkeley, 2008, <http://www.bible.gen.nz/0/poetics.htm#plots> (accessed January 19, 2009).



excepting the prayer - Jonah's three days and nights in the fish pass in a few words.

Not only does the speed of telling vary, Jonah also makes use of temporal dislocation, with flashback (1:5 "Jonah meanwhile..."; 1:10 "because he had told..."; 1:17 one presumes the fish arrived in less time than it takes to offer a good sacrifice; 4:5, Jonah is still unaware of "what would become of the city" despite his conversation with God in 4:2-4) and flash forward (1:17b the end of Jonah's time in the fish is mentioned before the prayer or the spewing up).<sup>48</sup>

Fast pace in Jonah takes place especially in the first chapter. Things happen quite fast in the third chapter as well. The slower, more thought provoking passages are chapters two and four.

## It's Plot Development

Literary plots are developed through conflict and tension. There is often a protagonist (the good guy) who uses wit, strength, or skill to overcome the antagonist (the bad guy). The ebb and flow of the interaction of these two characters forms the plot line.

Plot in the book of Jonah is a little more complex. Jonah himself, as a prophet of the LORD, is expected to be the protagonist. The sailors and especially the wicked Ninevites are expected to be the antagonists. God is supposed to be up above somewhere helping the protagonist to succeed.

The first two verses start out OK, with the LORD commissioning Jonah to speak against the wickedness of Nineveh. "The LORD said to Jonah son of Amittai, 'Go immediately to Nineveh, that large capital city, and announce judgment against its people because their wickedness has come to my attention.'" <sup>49</sup>

But all expectations are shattered in 1:3, "Instead, Jonah immediately headed off to Tarshish [going by sea to the extreme west rather than east by land] to escape from the commission of the LORD." Such intentional,

---

<sup>48</sup> Tim Bulkeley, 2008, <http://www.bible.gen.nz/jonah/speed.htm> (accessed January 19, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations are from the NET Bible® copyright ©1996-2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

direct disobedience by a prophet of the LORD is unheard of in Biblical times.<sup>50</sup> This is vivid drama.

The conflict began with the judgment of God against wicked Nineveh, but suddenly the spotlight shines on Jonah as being in conflict with the LORD himself. The spotlight stays on Jonah as he finds himself the cause of great distress for the sailors<sup>51</sup> and great loss for some cargo owners.<sup>52</sup> Jonah admits his wrongdoing, but remains unrepentant<sup>53</sup>, forcing the panicked sailors to throw him to his death. The conflict seems to reach a climax as the panic of drowning overwhelmed his senses. This conversion is not mentioned in the narrative but is clearly stated in his prayer in 2:3-7:

Water engulfed me up to my neck; the deep ocean surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. I went down to the very bottoms of the mountains; the gates of the netherworld barred me in forever . . . When my life was ebbing away, I called out to the LORD, and my prayer came to your holy temple.

Jonah ends his prayer with a commitment, "I promise to offer a sacrifice to you with a public declaration of praise" 2:9. And when Jonah landed on the beach he no doubt was determined to go to the one place he could offer such a sacrifice, Jerusalem.<sup>54</sup> But the LORD interrupted his plans and sent him "a second time" to wicked Nineveh.<sup>55</sup>

Jonah goes and performs his duty, and, in what should be the resounding climax of the story, the whole city dramatically demonstrates repentance and the LORD retracts the impending doom. "When God saw

---

<sup>50</sup> Balaam comes to mind as comparable to Jonah, but the contrasts are greater than the similarities. He was a foreigner hired by a foreigner to prophesy against the Israelites (Num. 22:1-7; Deut. 23:4).

<sup>51</sup> Highlighted by his seeming unconcern, "Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold below deck, had lain down, and was sound asleep." (1:5).

<sup>52</sup> There is no way to know what the cargo was, how much it was worth, and who owned it, but it is clear that Jonah was the cause of significant financial loss for someone.

<sup>53</sup> It is important to notice not only what Jonah did, but what he did not do. He did not fall prostrate before the LORD. He did not confess his sins and repent. He preferred death by drowning over submission to Yahweh.

<sup>54</sup> This was incontrovertible law, see Lev. 17:1-9 and Deut. 12:1-14.

<sup>55</sup> An example of what Jesus later taught, "If you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift." Mat 5:23-24.

their actions– they turned from their evil way of living!– God relented concerning the judgment he had threatened them with and he did not destroy them.” 3:10. This should be the happy ending, a cause for celebration, but the prophet was far from pleased. “This displeased Jonah terribly and he became very angry.” 4:1. The fact that the story continues through a final 10 verses of dialogue shows that the author’s interest and purpose was not primarily the salvation of Nineveh. The major prophetic message must be tied up with God’s dealings with Jonah. The book ends with the conflict unresolved. The curtain of the book is brought down suddenly with the last two words left strangely dangling, “. . . many animals.”<sup>56</sup>

## It’s Economy of Words

Linguist Robert Longacre points out some of the options and choices every author makes in the process of writing, these include how many words are given for each assertion.

I indicate the composer's role . . . He has options on the clause level . . . He has certain options on the sentence level . . . *He likewise has the frequent option of whether he will encode something as a sentence or as a paragraph.* All these stylistic decisions have a lot to do with the effectiveness of the overall discourse and all reflect the viewpoint of the composer.<sup>57</sup>

An outstanding feature of the book of Jonah is the control and editing the author used. There is no excess, no redundancy, no superfluous words or sentences or paragraphs. He tells an amazing story, he says a host of interesting things in very limited time and space<sup>58</sup>. This adds intensity and weight to the message and creates a beauty in literature rarely seen.

This feature was stated by Rabbi M. Avrum Ehrlich using different terminology, “It is a remarkable work; short, concise, pregnant with a distinct theme from a Biblical writer who has a clear message to relay.”<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> These are the last two words in the Hebrew text as well.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Longacre. *The Grammar of Discourse* (New York NY: Plenum Press, 1983), 19. Emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> The Hebrew text consists of 689 words. Sasson, 319.

<sup>59</sup> M. Avrum Ehrlich at <http://www.avrumehrich.net/jonah.htm> (accessed January 16, 2009).

This distinctive character, the economy of words, is a great help in discerning the intended message of the author. When the narrative speeds by and gives only barebones information, the author is interested more in effect than message. When the pace slows and extra words are used, the author is signaling a key component of his message.

Linguist Michael Hoey points out the significance of signaling:

When a relation is signaled, a message is being communicated about the way in which the discourse should be interpreted: the writer/speaker is telling his or her reader/auditor to interpret the juxtaposition of the parts of his or her discourse in a particular way.<sup>60</sup>

So where in Jonah are extra words used?

Here is list of expansions with brief comment:

In 1:8, the sailors question Jonah with a rifle of questions. The first question is the main one, then "three additional short interrogative clauses follow in staccato fashion."<sup>61</sup> "The sailors pile questions upon Jonah; they press him for an answer. Their words speak their panic."<sup>62</sup>

In 1:9, Jonah, rather than cowering in fear, provides an assertive answer. He states his answer poetically and assertively. *Young's Literal Translation*<sup>63</sup> states it well: "A Hebrew I am, and Jehovah, God of the heavens, I am reverencing, who made the sea and the dry land." He speaks as one proud of his heritage. Tucker states: "Jonah's ethnic identity was fronted in the first clause, and the identity of Jonah's deity is fronted in the second."<sup>64</sup> The statement of reverence is ironic given Jonah's personal state of affairs,<sup>65</sup> but he speaks proudly of his God.

---

<sup>60</sup> Michael Hoey. *On the Surface of Discourse* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 178.

<sup>61</sup> W. Dennis Tucker Jr.. *Jonah: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 30.

<sup>62</sup> Tribble, 140.

<sup>63</sup> *Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, 1898, by J. N. Young. (ASCII version Copyright © 1988-1997 by the Online Bible Foundation and Woodside Fellowship of Ontario, Canada).

<sup>64</sup> Tucker, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Here is someone in active rebellion speaking such words about the one opposing him.

In 1:12, Jonah concludes his instruction with an admission of guilt. The reason for this would seem to be to ease the sailors' task. It reverberates in their subsequent prayer in 1:14.

In 2:1-9, Jonah's prayer creates the lengthiest episode in the book. It is peripheral to the narrative in the sense that the narrative flows naturally without it, but its inclusion shows the real interest of the author in Jonah's internal battle, a battle of perception and will.

In 3:5-9, Nineveh's response of belief and repentance is given in more detail than necessary. The people's repentance is stated first and the wording emphasizes the all-inclusiveness of the response. After giving details of the text, Tribble summarizes as follows, "Most emphatically; the entire population believes in God, calls a fast, and puts on sackcloth. They ask no questions; they seek no explanation."<sup>66</sup> The summary statement in 3:5 is then followed by a detailed description of the king's involvement in it all. If Jonah was written during a time in Israel's history when a king was on the throne, verses 6-8 would have had powerful innuendo toward the sitting king of Israel.<sup>67</sup>

In 4:2, Jonah's complaint includes a list of Divine attributes stated in "four rhythmic phrases."<sup>68</sup> Jonah states these attributes as the reason he refused to go to Nineveh, but in his own expression the list presents a stark contrast to his demand for God to end his life. The author is emphasizing a sub point that to be out-of-sync with God is certain movement toward insanity. The question begging an answer here is, "If God is so good and kind, Jonah, shouldn't you be able to find joy and great reward in life by simply aligning yourself with him?"

In 4:6-11, details are given to show God's patience and kindness toward his sulking prophet. The amount of text dedicated to this shows its

---

<sup>66</sup> Tribble, 182.

<sup>67</sup> "If a heathen king was willing to lead his wicked people in national repentance, then how about you?"

<sup>68</sup> Tribble, 200.

importance to the author. Also, this passage begins with the author's only use of the divine double-name, "The LORD God".

In 4:10, the author states God's words to Jonah as follows, "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight."<sup>69</sup> The four statements about the plant come across as overstatement, with the effect of belittling the addressee.

In 4:11, God describes Nineveh, a city that Jonah is now very familiar with. The population figure, statement of innocence, and especially the mention of cattle at the end serves as an annoyance to Jonah and a call to introspection for all readers. Tribble states this well, "In the irresolute ending, Yhwh shapes a different rhetoric . . . Through 'artful words' Yhwh seeks to persuade the hearers (or readers) about the rightness of what the deity does and will do."<sup>70</sup>

## Its Vocabulary and Grammar

Jonah was written in the Hebrew language, and some of the rhythm and beauty and vividness of expression will always be lost in translation.

To quote Futado again,

The book of Jonah is *a literary masterpiece* . . . the story is marked by *as high a degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible*. The author employs structure, humor, hyperbole, irony, double entendre, and literary figures like merism to communicate his message with great rhetorical power.<sup>71</sup>

The rhetorical features of a text are more than just embellishments. They serve definite communicative functions. As linguist David Black explains,

Rhetorical language makes several contributions to a text. The very unusualness of the language adds impact and therefore highlights

---

<sup>69</sup> The TANAKH, a new translation (into contemporary English) of The Holy Scriptures according to the traditional Hebrew text (Masoretic). Copyright © 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society.

<sup>70</sup> Tribble, 224.

<sup>71</sup> Futato, 1685. Emphasis added.

and emphasizes the significance of the theme. Rhetoric also makes a text more aesthetically attractive by providing a high degree of emotive impact with the accompanying "hitting" (impact) and "drawing" (appeal).<sup>72</sup>

For insights on the Hebrew text I defer to someone who knows much more than I, W. Dennis Tucker Jr., who wrote the book, *Jonah: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*.<sup>73</sup>

The use of vocabulary in Jonah is broad and deliberate. Tucker refers to the author's "penchant for synonyms throughout the text."<sup>74</sup> He was able to draw on a wide range of nouns and verbs to enrich the narrative, but when he had a point to make *he used repetition*. He used the same verb "went down" twice in 1:3 and once more in 1:5 to show the steps of descent away from righteousness and into rebellion.<sup>75</sup> Other verbs could have been used, but the author lets the repetition signal his point. The same is done with the verb "to hurl" in 1:4, 5, 12, 15 and "to call" in 1:2, 6, 14; 2:3; 3:2, 4, 5, 8.

Tucker points out the author's use of three literary devices used in the final phrase in 1:4, "the ship thought it would break up:"<sup>76</sup>

1. Prosopopoeia, attributing human activity to an inanimate object, is used as the ship "thinks" it will break up.<sup>77</sup> (The device is also used in 1:15 in saying that the sea had been "angry").<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> David Alan Black. *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 132.

<sup>73</sup> W. Dennis Tucker Jr.. *Jonah: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006).

<sup>74</sup> Tucker, 22.

<sup>75</sup> As Ehrlich says, "*The term "to descend" is used on several occasions here in the context of his escape. "He descends into the ship" . . . When a storm comes, Jonah "descends into sleep". The term "descend" is used a few more times in the context of Jonah's escape, to indicate that escaping from God's intentions is a descent.*" . The third and last use in Jonah is at 2:6, serving to show the depths to which Jonah's rebellion led him. "I went down to the very bottoms of the mountains; the gates of the netherworld barred me in forever."  
<http://www.avrumehrllich.net/jonah.htm> (accessed January 19, 2009).

<sup>76</sup> Tucker's own translation, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Tucker, 19.

<sup>78</sup> Tucker, 45.

2. Onomatopoeia, the use of words that imitate the sound of something, is used in this same phrase. "The phrase . . . operates onomatopoeically, attempting to capture 'the sound of the planks cracking when tortured by the raging waters' (Sasson, 97)."<sup>79</sup>
3. Assonance (the "repetition of vowel sounds to create internal rhyming within phrases or sentences")<sup>80</sup> is also used here. "Further, assonance links these two words emphasizing both the sound and significance of the event."<sup>81</sup>

Tucker explains the sailors' question in 1:10 - "What is this you have done?" - this way, "The exclamatory statement stands between two irreconcilable elements of the narrative."<sup>82</sup> It operates like an interjection, adding vividness and a "real-time" effect to the dialogue.

Tucker points out the use of differing length of clauses in 1:5 that have an intentional effect.

Note also the structure of verse 5, the movement of the sailors begins with simple clauses and builds to a longer clause suggesting great activity. The three clauses devoted to Jonah suggest just the opposite-a long clause suggesting activity, culminating with two shorter clauses suggesting inactivity.<sup>83</sup>

Tucker also points out a stylistic touch in 2:3 where the author uses a specific word order so that three straight words begin with the same Hebrew letters, producing alliteration.<sup>84</sup>

The poetic prayer of chapter 2 is full of its own unique grammar and vocabulary. Some of these will be mentioned in a later heading, The Poetic Prayer.

---

<sup>79</sup> Tucker, 19, Quoting Jack Sasson, *Jonah. Anchor Bible 24B*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.

<sup>80</sup> Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assonance> (accessed January 19, 2009).

<sup>81</sup> Tucker, 19, 20.

<sup>82</sup> Tucker, 34.

<sup>83</sup> Tucker, 23.

<sup>84</sup> Tucker, 51.



# What is its Prophetic Message?

In the world of biblical scholarship there is a wide divergence of opinion regarding the nature and message of the book of Jonah. As Sasson seeks to close his 350 page commentary he gives three full pages of quotations by scholars who hold widely contrary and incompatible opinions about this little, four-chapter, biblical book.<sup>85</sup> He ends the commentary with words that seem cynical and disappointing.

I make no claim that my present contributions deserve to endure longer than the proposals I have just criticized; accordingly, as I take leave of Jonah, I offer my best wishes to the next person who would pick up the many challenges of this occasionally irksome, but always provocative and tantalizing, little book.<sup>86</sup>

Is the prophetic message of Jonah obscure beyond discovery? Is it possible with any degree of certainty to identify the intentional, enduring message of the book of Jonah? If the author of Jonah was a competent communicator then the answer to the first question must be “no,” the answer to the second question must be “yes.” The important clues to uncovering the prophetic message have already been presented in this paper.

The key elements in interpreting Jonah are to understand the genres of biblical narrative and biblical prophecy and then to note the author’s intentional craftsmanship particularly in the areas of plot and the economy of words. A good author is able to signal his or her desired message; the author of Jonah has clearly done this. There is no excuse for missing his message.

## Three levels

Important things were mentioned above under the heading, Narrative vs. Prophetic, regarding the genre of biblical narrative. Old Testament narrative communicates on three levels:

1. Jonah is an individual story with great interest in and of itself.
2. But it also works on a macro level as a part of God’s dealings with his covenant people, Israel. The story may seem to be about one

---

<sup>85</sup> Sasson, 323-325.

<sup>86</sup> Sasson, 352.

individual taking a message to a foreign land, but the covenant people, the nation of *Israel*, is always in view. The book of Jonah is a prophetic message directly to the people of Israel.

3. Biblical narrative also works on a third level, presenting the “meta-narrative” of God’s universal plan worked in and through creation.

Interpreters that have a difficult time, like Sasson, may concentrate on the first level and not recognize the essential connections to the second and third levels. The discussion below zeros in on the second level, then the third level.

## What God wanted to get across to his people, Israel

It is important to understand what Israel expected to hear from their prophets. Mentioned above, under the heading Narrative vs. Prophetic, is the role and function of Old Testament prophets. Stuart says it succinctly, “*The Prophets were covenant enforcement mediators.*”<sup>87</sup> The prophetic messages they gave were *always rooted in the covenant and the law* contained in the first five books of the Bible. Therefore, the message of the book of Jonah is not floating out there elusively somewhere for the winds to blow it any which way, it is rooted, it is anchored in the covenant that God made with his people Israel. The book of Jonah enforces that covenant; it identifies Israel’s failure to keep their side of the agreement and seeks to arouse them to repentance and recommitment to obeying their covenant with God. It functions exactly like the other prophetic books.

What part of the covenant does Jonah deal with?

If the answer to this question is not obvious, the fault lies not with the author of Jonah, it lies in our lack of knowledge of the covenant itself. The covenant that God made with his people, Israel, was designed from the beginning as an evangelistic tool to reach the whole world. God never limited his benevolence and availability to one group of people. Never. The people of Israel were always expected to love and welcome foreigners into their covenant relationship with God. This will be shown in the paragraphs below.

---

<sup>87</sup> Fee and Stuart, 151.

## The evangelistic covenant

The LORD began the covenant by calling forth one man, Abram, to step away from any and all allegiance to land and family and align himself entirely with God (Gen. 12:1-3). God states an unequivocal commitment to provide for and protect Abram and his offspring, and concludes with a promise that is universal in scope, "and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Gen. 12:3 (ESV). This promise is stated in the passive form because it is not Abram and his offspring that are not the source of the blessing. They are the conduit, God is the source. This promise with universal scope was meant to undergird the purpose and function of the people of Israel.

The two great events that formed Israel as a nation were the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. The Passover became an ordinance that was to be carefully reenacted every year, and provision was made to include non-Israelites in this celebration. "All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land." Exod. 12:47-48 (ESV), see also Num. 9:14.

Indeed, when the people of Israel left Egypt and headed to the Red Sea (and the Promised Land beyond) they were accompanied by many non-Jews. "And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. A mixed multitude also went up with them . . ." Exod. 12:37-38. Moses did not turn them away.

In God's covenant instructions to Israel he shows his benevolence toward non-Jews and his availability to them. The Israelites were to imitate the LORD in having benevolence toward all foreigners. "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself." Lev. 19:34. God goes so far as to say that he himself "loves" the sojourners (Deut. 10:18).

The Israelites were given specific instructions at harvest time to leave good food behind for needy people, including foreigners (Lev. 23:22). This included the fields, the olive groves, and the grapevines (Deut. 24:19-21).

The cities of refuge were set aside to assist foreigners just as much as native Israelites (Num. 35:15).

And remarkably, the tithes given to the LORD were to be used to feed the Levites and also foreigners (Deut. 14:28-29). Specific instructions were

given for the offering of first fruits so that it involved worship before God and fellowship with the Levites and the foreigners. "Then you must set it down before the LORD your God and worship before him. You will celebrate all the good things that the LORD your God has given you and your family, along with the Levites and the resident foreigners among you." Deut. 26:10-11.

Beyond all these things mentioned above, God shows his heart of acceptance toward foreigners by welcoming them to the Temple to offer animal sacrifices to him.

If a resident foreigner is living with you– or whoever is among you in future generations– and prepares an offering made by fire as a pleasing aroma to the LORD, he must do it the same way you are to do it. One statute must apply to you who belong to the congregation and to the resident foreigner who is living among you, as a permanent statute for your future generations. *You and the resident foreigner will be alike before the LORD.* Num. 15:14-15.<sup>88</sup>

God accepted the believing foreigner just as freely as an Israelite.

### Turf Wars

God made his intentions and purposes for Israel and the covenant very clear. However, the first beneficiaries of the covenant continually violated both the spirit and the letter of the law. They sought to exclude Gentiles and carried on a turf war. They wanted their national boundary to also act as a spiritual boundary and to keep foreigners out.<sup>89</sup> They added their own laws to God's law to restrict access to non-Jews and any unnecessary interaction with them. This became so entrenched in Judaism that the Apostle Peter upon entering the house of an outstanding, God-fearing foreigner, Cornelius, said, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation" Acts 10:28 (ESV). This instruction comes not from the Torah, but from the oral teachings, the Talmud.<sup>90</sup> Judaism never embraced God's purposes. Those gentiles who came to the Lord, like

---

<sup>88</sup> NET, emphasis added. No wonder Isaiah and Jesus felt free to call the temple, "a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:7, Mark 11:17).

<sup>89</sup> Edersheim, *Sketches*, 3. In summarizing the importance of the land to Judaism, he says, "There is no religion so strictly local as that of Israel."

<sup>90</sup> See Edersheim, *Life and Times*, pp. 90-92 for a catalogue of some of the excessive laws and treatment against gentiles.

Rahab and Ruth, were exceptions who overcame contrary elements. Far more were rejected before they could even peer through the door.

### The Defiant Message of Jonah

In the face of this anti-gentile agenda, the *Book of Jonah* stands in stark, defiant contrast. The LORD God of Israel sends a prophet outside the boundaries of Israel to a large city of heathens. God's message is one of judgment, but the prophet wants nothing to do with it and escapes to sea as fast as he can. The LORD will have nothing to do with such belligerence and shows his presence beyond Israel's borders by sending a violent storm and getting Jonah into the panic of drowning at which time he repents. A side affect of all of this, in one of many ironies in the book, is that a ship load of heathen sailors devote themselves to the LORD. After 72 hours to think things over, Jonah finally goes to the heathen city and gives a bare-minimum proclamation. Then the heathen city demonstrates total repentance and Jonah's worst fear is realized, Nineveh is spared the judgment by Israel's compassionate God.

The message of the book of Jonah is that the LORD God of Israel is unyieldingly evangelical. He is irrepressibly benevolent toward all peoples. Israel is acting at cross-purposes with him whenever they refuse to "Love the sojourner." Deut. 10:19 (ESV). Jonah acted with belligerence, but the LORD even more so. He "bullied" Jonah into doing his bidding, and he has all the right in the world to do the same with his "stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears"<sup>91</sup> The *Book of Jonah* presents an extremely unsettling message to the people of Israel. The LORD is incredibly benevolent and gracious, but as those in covenant with him, Israel, have obligations that need to be fulfilled "or else!"

## What lessons we should learn

For modern day audiences, probably the most important item to note is the primacy given to the LORD God throughout the book. It is God who initiates the whole chain of events (1:1). He uses extreme measures to get his rebellious prophet to obey his command (1:4-17; 2:3-7, 10; 3:1). His actions and his message have profound impact on the heathen sailors and

---

<sup>91</sup> The words of Stephen in Acts 7:51, ESV.

the whole city of wicked Ninevites (1:14, 16 and 3:5-9). And it is he who works patiently and personally to help Jonah gain a correct perspective on things (4:4-11).

The primacy given to God in this story can be seen by looking at the actions and events attributed to him. Below are two lists, first, the actions directly attributed to him, second, other actions performed by him. Note the frequency and intensity of the LORD's involvement.

Actions directly attributed to the LORD:<sup>92</sup>

- The LORD **said** to Jonah (1:1).
- But the LORD **hurled** a powerful wind (1:4).
- The LORD **sent** a huge fish to swallow Jonah (1:17).
- Then the LORD **commanded** the fish (2:10) and it disgorged Jonah on dry land.
- The LORD **said** to Jonah a second time (3:1).
- God **saw** their actions (3:10).
- God **relented** concerning the judgment he had threatened them with (3:10).
- He **did not destroy** them (3:10).
- The LORD **said** . . . (4:4).
- The LORD God **appointed** a little plant and **caused it to grow** (4:6).
- God **sent** a worm at dawn (4:7).
- God **sent** a hot east wind (4:8).
- God **said** to Jonah . . . (4:9).
- The LORD **said** . . . (4:10).

Other Actions performed by the LORD:

- He caused the lot to fall on Jonah (1:7).
- He held the ship together long after it should have broken apart (1:4 with the next two points below).
- He intensified the storm (1:11).
- He repeatedly intensified the storm (1:14), forcing the sailors to toss Jonah.
- He stopped the storm (1:15).
- He had the fish in the right place at the right time (1:17, 2:10).
- He preserved Jonah in the stomach of the fish (1:17).

---

<sup>92</sup> The following phrases are verbatim from the NET with the verbs highlighted.

The author of Jonah was convinced of both the transcendence and the immanence<sup>93</sup> of the LORD God and weaves a powerful portrayal of this from the beginning to the end of the book. Many other individual lessons are discernable from the text, but every human being in our modern age will do well to learn from this insight into God's nature as transcendent yet ever immanent.

## The Poetic Prayer

The poetic prayer in Jonah 2:2-9 makes the fish incident the largest single episode of the book. Surely the author considered this passage a priority.

The poem is very intentionally constructed, and it needs to be viewed as a whole before its individual parts can be understood correctly. Verse two seems out of place until we see it as a summary preview. In it, Jonah makes two parallel statements which summarize the traumatic underwater incident. He purposely uses a picture of the underworld, "the belly of Sheol," because he knew his life was all but over.

Verse three might seem impertinent to our modern sensibilities, Jonah blames God for what is surely his own fault, "You threw me into the deep waters . . . the mighty waves you sent swept over me." But Jonah is stating honestly his feelings and perceptions from down under. He entered the water still in a state of defiance and in such a state he would naturally blame the one who "bullied" him into this.

In verse four he elucidates his internal thought processes. He had reached the end of his life and finds himself separated from God.

Verse five and the first part of verse six describe the panic of drowning. "Seaweed was wrapped around my head" shows the depth to which he was unable to control is destiny, his life was reaching its unwelcome end and there was nothing he could physically do to help himself.

The depth of his despair is encapsulated in the phrase, "the gates of the netherworld barred me in forever." This is poetic expression, not literal

---

<sup>93</sup> "Belief in the immanence of the transcendent God is a distinguishing characteristic of both Christianity and Judaism. It is common for both Jews and Christians to refer to God as "My God," a phraseology seen as inappropriate by Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanence> (accessed January 16, 2009).

fact. It is an accurate (and powerful) statement of what he understood to be true at that point in time.

The end of verse six is another summary preview, it previews God's rescue mission detailed in verses 7-9.

Jonah goes on from ultimate despair to a decision to call on the LORD for mercy. "When my life was ebbing away, I called out to the LORD, and my prayer came to your holy temple." Mention of the temple in this context is natural for a Jew. The temple is where the LORD has chosen to dwell, it is where his presence is made known. It was more natural for Jonah to perceive that his "cry" made it to the temple than that the LORD was hanging around in the depths of the Mediterranean Sea.

Verse eight is the odd verse, and must surely be of prime significance in the poem.<sup>94</sup> Jonah amazingly steps outside the traumatic situation to state a universal application of what he has learned, "Those who worship worthless idols forfeit the mercy that could be theirs." The "worthless idols" are contrasted with the living God whom his cry reached in the temple in Jerusalem. Jonah himself had been "forfeiting" the mercy up to the point in which he repented.

Now that Jonah is reconciled to God, he desires to offer a sin sacrifice and make a public declaration to the mercy and goodness of the LORD. He has learned the greatest of lessons – "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" This exclamation does not just mean that he is able to grant salvation, but that giving salvation is his M.O., his way of doing things. The poem starts with blame and enmity, and concludes with submission and triumph. Truly the LORD is good!

## The Unsettling Non-conclusion

Sasson points out some very interesting data regarding the ending paragraphs of Jonah. He counted the words of the direct quotes used in chapter four and found a very interesting fact. He provides the following table:

4:2-3	Jonah's monologue	39 words
4:4	God's query (unanswered)	3 words
4:8	Jonah's query (sotto voce)	3 words

---

<sup>94</sup> To see how this is physically set apart as a monocolon see [Appendix B, Structure in the Poetic Prayer](#).



4:9	dialogue: God	5 words
	Dialogue: Jonah	5 words
4:10-11	God's monologue	39 words <sup>95</sup>

And regarding this table he says, "This symmetry in apportioning words is much too developed and obvious to be accidental."<sup>96</sup>

Trible makes note of Sasson's discovery and interprets the data this way:

The impressive symmetry suggests that Jonah and Yhwh are evenly matched and that each emulates the other. Initiator and respondent interchange roles to produce the irresolute ending of the book. Yhwh seemingly has the last word, but because it is a question, Jonah has the power of an answer. So the last question moves the story beyond its confines. There is no closure.<sup>97</sup>

The lack of closure is as intentional and as effective as anything else in the text of Jonah. Any thinking person is left wondering "what's next?" Does Jonah relent from his pride and self-centeredness or does he die of thirst in the desert?

## Conclusion

The study of the book of Jonah is by no means complete, but this paper needs to come to an end.<sup>98</sup> The goal of this paper has been to highlight some of the features that make Jonah an example of exemplary prophetic writing. It is time to restate these in summary form. Some of these will be written as guidelines for contemporary writers to follow.

- Jonah, as a piece of creative nonfiction, has stood the test of time. Over two millennia have passed since Jonah was written,

---

<sup>95</sup> Sasson, 317.

<sup>96</sup> Sasson, 318.

<sup>97</sup> Trible, 224.

<sup>98</sup> One interesting study which has been totally neglected is the use of Divine names. They vary in different parts of the book and the choices seem intentional and part of the book's message is contained therein.

yet it lives on as a fascinating, intriguing story, being read and studied and commented on as much today as ever.

- An author must be aware of their audiences' expectations regarding literary structure, genre, rhetorical features, and language use, but the parameters can be adapted and stretched to suit a particular need or purpose. The author of Jonah has done this admirably.
- Surface structure, including plot and climax, should be crafted in a way to reveal the deeper message. There are two extremes to avoid: 1, stating the message so plainly that it comes across as dull and uninteresting. 2, cloaking the message in such a way that it remains obscure and indiscernible. This paper has sought to demonstrate that the author of Jonah hit the nail on the head.
- It is important to provide variety in order to keep readers interested; changes of pace, settings, varieties of sentence length, broad vocabulary usage that stretches one's audience at least a little, while not leaving them in the dust, these are all parts of good writing.
- Plots are enhanced by purposely concealing information until the time is right. The author of Jonah did this in a very effective and acceptable way.
- There is always a difficult line to follow between saying too little and saying too much. Certain connections need to be spelled out directly; others are best left for the reader to discover for themselves. Jonah includes a string of surprises, but the irony and innuendo is left for the intelligent reader to discern. The author of Jonah used a great economy of words.
- The final litmus test for the quality of a piece of literature is the test of the relevance of its message. Flowery, feel-good language may sell a book or two, but truly great writing touches human conditions right where it matters. Often people don't realize their deepest needs; sometimes the thing that needs to be addressed first is "felt needs," these are dealt with as a means of leading readers to the deeper needs. This takes place in the book of Jonah. An Israelite is naturally sympathetic towards Jonah given the dilemma the LORD put him in with a command to go to Nineveh. The readers might be less supportive as Jonah uses the divine name and the heathen sailors take up its usage. But the

empathy is perhaps reinforced as Jonah is angered over Nineveh's repentance. However, the author leaves Jonah and the readers in an uncomfortable position of having been asked a pointed question by God that they do not want to answer. This is superb writing. The deepest need is left stubbornly in the forefront.

## Appendix A, A Case for the Historicity of the Jonah Narrative

This subject is large enough and important enough to be a thesis in and of itself. The factors involved are too extensive to give fair treatment here. However, rather than ignore the issue I thought it proper to at least express my perspective (bias?) so that the treatment of Jonah in this paper can be understood accordingly. I present three different reasons for holding to the historicity of the Jonah narrative: the nature of God, the book's unequivocal acceptance by Israel, and Jesus' use of Jonah in his polemic against the religious leaders of the day. These three points are covered below.

The Creator-God is not only an absolute genius,<sup>99</sup> the resources he has at his disposal are innumerable and vast beyond our comprehension. There is no reason to spin a fictional yarn when he can so easily orchestrate actual events. The narrative itself presents the LORD as the primary cause and controller of events<sup>100</sup>. The one thing he did not control is the human participants; they made their own decisions and bore their own consequences. But the LORD knew these people well enough<sup>101</sup> to correctly predict what they would do and this is how he could orchestrate the events.

---

<sup>99</sup> The quality and quantity of his genius is available for everyone to observe. The vast universe, our living, colorful world, the bodies and the minds we possess, and even the minutest pieces of matter show a complexity, a variety, an interconnectedness that shows the presence of an absolute genius. An excellent source for specifics in these areas is a book written and published by Grant R. Jeffrey, *Creation: Remarkable Evidence of God's Design* (Toronto, ON: Frontier Research Publications, 2003). See especially pages 35-80.

<sup>100</sup> He gave the command that was repulsive and unacceptable to Jonah (1:1). He hurled the powerful wind (1:4) that impeded Jonah's progress. He sent the huge fish to rescue Jonah from drowning (1:17). He commanded the fish and it spit up Jonah on dry land (2:10). He repeated his command to Jonah (3:1). He saw the Ninivites response and he relented from destroying them (3:10) and consequently upset Jonah again (4:1). He asked Jonah a pointed question about his behavior (4:4). He caused a shade plant to grow overnight (4:6). He sent a worm that attacked the plant (4:7). He sent a hot east wind (4:8). He interviewed Jonah again (4:9-11).

<sup>101</sup> He knew, for instance, that Jonah's conversion did not take place on the ship, did not take place in the belly of the great fish, it took place in the water when he was sure his future was over. The LORD however kept silent for three more days and nights before he spoke to the fish first, then to Jonah. The LORD knew that in spite of Jonah's conversion he would still be reticent to go to Nineveh. The 72 hours of miserable chastisement were what it took to banish that reticence.

There are strong reasons for the Israelite authorities to reject this narrative as from their God. These strong objections (listed below) could only have been overcome by its own integrity and truthfulness as a genuine prophetic message from God:<sup>102</sup>

1. The Book of Jonah focuses on the salvation of a foreign country, not Israel. That country was a super power of the time<sup>103</sup>, Israel's enemy, and in conflict with its ideology and its national interests.
2. Another theme is the questionable fidelity to the Divine will of a certain Hebrew prophet. It does not point towards the righteousness of God's chosen messenger, but his continuing waywardness.
3. The story's end is bitter for the Hebrew protagonist and happy for the Gentile nation that was lucky to encounter him.
4. The book of Jonah puts the Gentiles as the central concern of God. The only Israelite involved is the sinning, escaping and suffering messenger to them.
5. The book does not reconcile Israel to God, but keeps them in conflict. It seems highly inappropriate to read the book on the Day of Atonement, even offensive to Jewish sensibilities. Yet this is what is done.<sup>104</sup>

The only thing that could overcome these obstacles to acceptance is the integrity of both the author and his text. Jonah was accepted into the select group of prophetic writings well before the time of Christ. "Sirach 49:10 (from the 2nd century B.C.) refers to the "twelve prophets" (namely, the 12 Minor Prophets, of which Jonah is the fifth)."<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Its acceptance is so complete that it is included in the public readings of Israel's most holy day, the day of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Rabbi Michael Shire *Yom Kippur 2008*. [www.lbc.ac.uk/content/view/813/142/](http://www.lbc.ac.uk/content/view/813/142/) (accessed January 19, 2009).

<sup>103</sup> Actually, there is no sure way to date the book of Jonah. If it was written by Jonah or near to the time, the population mentioned of 120,000 shows that Nineveh must have been a major power. If it was written much later, Assyria became even more of an arch enemy over time, plundering and exiling the covenant people (2 Kings 15:29).

<sup>104</sup> These five points are borrowed from Rabbi Ehrlich, M. Avrum, *The Book of Jonah and Escaping Hebrew Destiny*. Shandong University, China. <http://www.avrumehrllich.net/jonah.htm> (accessed January 16, 2009).

<sup>105</sup> Futato, 1683.

The Lord Jesus Christ refers to Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh in a context that requires their historicity for Jesus' statement to carry any weight. He compares, unfavorably, the stubbornness of Jews of his day with the submission of the Ninevites of Jonah's day. "The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented when Jonah preached to them— and now, something greater than Jonah is here!" Matt. 12:41.

# Appendix B, Structure in the Poetic Prayer

## Young's Literal Translation

<sup>2</sup> I called, because of my distress, to Jehovah,  
And He doth answer me,  
From the belly of sheol I have cried,  
Thou hast heard my voice.

<sup>3</sup> When Thou dost cast me *into* the deep,  
Into the heart of the seas,  
Then the flood doth compass me,  
All Thy breakers and Thy billows have  
passed over me.

<sup>4</sup> And I -- I said: I have been cast out  
from before Thine eyes,  
(Yet I add to look  
unto Thy holy temple!)

<sup>5</sup> Compassed me have waters unto the soul,  
The deep doth compass me,  
The weed is bound to my head.  
<sup>6</sup> To the cuttings of mountains

I have come down, The earth,  
her bars *are* behind me to the age.  
And Thou bringest up from the pit my life,  
O Jehovah my God.

<sup>7</sup> In the feebleness within me of my soul  
Jehovah I have remembered,  
And come in unto Thee doth my prayer,  
Unto Thy holy temple.

<sup>8</sup> Those observing lying vanities  
their own mercy forsake.

<sup>9</sup> And I -- with a voice of thanksgiving --  
I sacrifice to Thee,  
That which I have vowed I complete,  
Salvation *is* of Jehovah.

## Its mechanical structure

The poem uses balanced, two-line strophes in verses 2, 3, 4, 7, 9. This is normal Hebrew poetry.

Verses 5 and 6 are off-balance and translations struggle to compensate. It is caused by a poetic feature that Tucker labels "enjambment" (Tucker, 57). But they are also two-line strophes.

Verse 8 stands out for two reasons: 1, It is the only line without a parallel statement to balance it out. 2, It addresses a 3<sup>rd</sup> party as an axiomatic statement. Jonah, in the belly of the fish saying, "I've learned this lesson the hard way, help yourselves out by learning it vicariously through me."

## Its thought progression

The first strophe serves as a summary preview (verse 2).

The story line begins with misery (verse 3).

Continues on to panic (verse 5).

Regresses into hopeless despair (verse 6a).

Discovers a source of help (verses 6b-7).

Pauses to state an axiom (verse 8).

Concludes in gratitude and triumph (verse 9).

### The importance of verse 8

Tucker identifies verse 8 as given primacy. He refers to it as a monocolon. "The monocolon may serve a variety of functions, but the monocolon in verse [8] functions as a climactic monocolon, highlighting the contrast" between idolaters and himself.

### The message of verse 8

They who cling to empty folly Forsake their own welfare. <sup>Tanakh</sup>

Those who worship worthless idols forfeit the mercy that could be theirs. <sup>NET</sup>

If Jonah only learned his lesson and listened to his own axiom, he could have avoided the heartbreaks of chapter 4.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BibleWorks™ Copyright © 1992-2005 BibleWorks, LLC, Norfolk, VA.  
Black, David Alan. *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988.
- Bulkeley, Tim. *Study Notes on Jonah (including Hebrew narrative)*. Taranaki, NZ, 2005. <http://www.bible.gen.nz/jonah/index.htm>.
- Calvin, John, *Commentary on Jonah*. Institute of Practical Bible Education: The Electronic Public Library, John Calvin  
<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/ipb-e/epl-cvjonah.html>.
- Cyril of Alexandria. *Commentary of the Twelve Prophets, vol 2*. Translated by Robert C. Hill. Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press, 2008.
- Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971 (Original publication, 1886).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994 (Original publication, 1876).
- Ehrlich, M. Avrum. *The Book of Jonah and Escaping Hebrew Destiny*. He is professor of Jewish Civilization, Language and Thought at the Department of Philosophy at Shandong University, China.  
<http://www.avrumehrlich.net/jonah.htm>
- Fowler, Roger. *Linguistics and the Novel*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977.
- Futato, Mark, Contributor. *ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008.
- Gerard, Philip. *Creative Nonfiction: Research and Crafting Stories of Real Life*. Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1996.
- Hoey, Michael. *On the Surface of Discourse*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983.
- ISBE - The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1915, 1st Edition, from Dr. Stanley Morris, (Revision published in 1939 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.). Electronic version provided with BibleWorks.
- Isbouts, Jean-Pierre. *The Biblical World: An Illustrated Atlas*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2007.
- C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Minor Prophets*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 2006. Reprinted from



the English edition originally published by T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1866 – 91).

Longacre, Robert E. *The Grammar of Discourse* (New York, NY: Plenum Press, 1983).

Niccacci, Alviero. *Syntactic Analysis of Jonah*.

<http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/sbf/Books/LA46/46009AN.pdf> (accessed January 5, 2009).

Sasson, Jack. *Jonah*. Anchor Bible 24B. New York: Doubleday, 1990.

Shire, Michael. *Yom Kippur 2008* (Leo Baek College, London, October 10, 2008) [www.lbc.ac.uk/content/view/813/142/](http://www.lbc.ac.uk/content/view/813/142/) (accessed January 19, 2009).

Trible, Phyllis. *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994.

Tucker Jr., W. Dennis. *Jonah: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006.

Wikipedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reusing\\_Wikipedia\\_content](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reusing_Wikipedia_content)

## Bibles

ESV - *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Wheaton, IL 60187.

NET Bible® copyright ©1996-2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

The TANAKH, a new translation (into contemporary English) of The Holy Scriptures according to the traditional Hebrew text (Masoretic). Copyright © 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society.

*Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, 1898, by J. N. Young. ASCII version Copyright © 1988-1997 by the Online Bible Foundation and Woodside Fellowship of Ontario, Canada.