

Jonah's Rescue: What Are the Implications for Today? (Jonah 1:17-2:10)

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

The book of Jonah is a straightforward narrative. The central piece of the story, however, could be the poetry of Jonah's prayer in chapter two. The nature of the book is unlike any of the other prophetic books found in the Old Testament (hereafter, OT). It is more of an account of Jonah's experiences rather than a collection of prophetic messages. But what is it about this book that evangelicals seek to critique and defend its historicity (historical analysis), offer different structural layouts (structural analysis), raise alternative interpretations (theological analysis), and propose various genre classifications (literary analysis)? Typically, what is at the center of the majority of these arguments is Jonah's psalm found in chapter 2; thus an examination of Jonah 1:17-2:10 is all the more important.

The purpose of this article is to examine Jonah's prayer. There are four sections to the article. Part one deals with the introductory issues: history, literary, theology, and genre. Part two discusses the identification of the prayer; that is, should it be classified as a lament psalm or declarative praise psalm? The psalm's identification is crucial. Due to its interpretive implications and therefore significant present-day application, part three analyzes the psalm's role within the context of the whole book. Is the psalm out of place? An exegetical and contextual analysis is also presented. Part four provides the significance of the psalm for today.

It is important to discuss these introductory issues, though not exhaustively, in order to provide a proper background for the study of Jonah 2. Different views and perspectives are presented; however, the writer of this paper offers a traditional, conservative position regarding the historical, structural, theological, and literary issues surrounding this psalm.

Historical Analysis

Traditionally, the book of Jonah has been understood as a historical account of episodes found in the life of a prophet. Some modern scholars, however, reject the historicity of the book and understand the book as legendary, allegorical, or parabolic.¹ Feinberg claims that modern scholars are in disbelief and have attacked this book probably more than any other in the Bible.² There is a tendency to view the book as fiction, but why is this?

Although there are several peripheral reasons, the book of Jonah is typically viewed as fiction for two reasons.³ The first is the exaggerated way in which the book is written, especially the use of the Hebrew adjective "great." It is used fourteen times in the book. It is used to describe several things (i.e., the size of the storm, the size of the fish, and the population of Nineveh), of which the size of the fish is the most commonly discussed reason. This is due to the housing of a prophet for three days and three nights. Can a fish really do this? The claim is Jonah's use of hyperbole is unrealistic and fanciful, thus supporting the book's classification as fiction. The second reason is the many

¹ For more thorough presentations against the book's historicity, see the following: Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 175-81; Terence E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 61-72.

² Charles L. Feinberg, *Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 133.

³ For a thorough discussion regarding the peripheral reasons, see T. Desmond Alexander, *Jonah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 23a (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 70-77; Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 438-42.

occurrences of the miraculous (i.e., the storm, the selection of Jonah by lot as guilty, preservation of Jonah in the fish, the gourd, the worm, etc.), of which the swallowing of Jonah by the fish and his preservation by it, being the most common occurrence discussed (1:17-2:10). The claim is that these events did not really happen. They are merely contrived events that develop some type of moral in view.

Despite modern scholarly consensus, many evangelicals support the historicity of the book.⁴ If for no other reason, divine inspiration and supernaturalism demand such a view. Feinberg states, "If we exclude the miraculous from our Bibles, how much of it do we have left? And more important, what kind of a God do we have left?"⁵

The book's historicity is defended on two fronts. First, Jonah's portrayal of things as larger than life, therefore classifying the book as fiction, is questionable at best.⁶ Alexander claims that the author actually plays down the miraculous and extraordinary nature of the events.⁷ Second, due to divine intervention, the

⁴ T. Desmond Alexander, "Jonah and Genre," *TynBul* 36 (1986): 35-59; C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 44-48; Robert B. Chisholm Jr. *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 406-09; James Hardee Kennedy, *Studies in the Book of Jonah* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1956), 29-41; George M. Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah," *Interpretation* 21 (1967): 3-31; Jonathan D. Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in the Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Sheffield: Almond P, 1983), 39-54; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 440-42.

⁵ Feinberg, *Minor Prophets*, 134.

⁶ John D. Hannah has done extensive research and discusses the possibility that the "great fish" was possibly a sperm whale or whale shark. Sperm whales are known to have swallowed large objects, including a 15-foot shark. See his discussion ("Jonah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Old Testament: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor, 1985], 1462-63).

⁷ Alexander, *Introduction and Commentary*, 73.

miraculous is all the more plausible.⁸ To suggest a doubt as to the book's historicity based on improbable events is really not adequate. One is rejecting the miraculous based only on a bias that assumes the supernatural is not possible. But what does one do with other miraculous events in the Bible? To suggest that those potentially are exempt, yet the events of Jonah are not, is again, to single out Jonah without due cause.⁹

This article therefore, supports the historicity of the book of Jonah. Jonah's message derives from actual historical events. It is important to understand that only recently have scholars considered the book of Jonah as fiction. This is significant due to the fact that the traditional understanding has long been in favor of Jonah's historicity. This speaks to modern scholars' potential critical presuppositions regarding the book's style and supernatural occurrences.

Structural Analysis

The structure of Jonah is typically seen as a book with parallel halves; chapters one and two approximately parallel chapters three and four. Although Jonah's approximate parallel structure is commonly recognized by most scholars, the structure is

⁸ John R. Kohlenberger III states, "The miraculous frequently plays a part in prophetic narrative (as in the Elijah and Elisha stories mentioned earlier), and serves in Jonah to highlight Yahweh's intense involvement with His creation: 1. the stilling of the storm . . . 2. the great fish saves Jonah from drowning . . . 3. the mass repentance of Nineveh . . . 4. the plant, the worm, and the wind" (*Jonah and Nahum*, Everyman's Bible Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1984], 18).

⁹ Jesus assumed the book of Jonah as authentic. He spoke of Jonah's stay in the belly of the fish and contrasted the repentant Ninevites with the unbelieving people of his own day (Matt 12:39-42; Luke 11:29-32). See the discussion of the book of Jonah regarding its historicity in relationship to Jesus' use of chapter two of Jonah (Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. and exp. ed. [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 348-49).

typically viewed in two different formats.¹⁰ The consensus, however, is that the halves illustrate the following parallel concepts: (1) a call from God and a response from Jonah, 1:1-3 and 3:1-3; (2) pagans consider and respond to Jonah's God, 1:4-16 and 3:4-10; (3) Jonah prays, 2:2-3 and 4:2-3; (4) Jonah reacts to God's gracious act, 2:5-11 and 4:5-10.

The unity of Jonah, however, has been questioned. The psalm in Jonah 1:17-2:10 is the only part of the book that is seriously considered by scholars as a late addition. In other words, chapter two does not seem to fit the structure of the book. There are two reasons for this. First, there is a sharp contrast between chapters two and four. Chapter two illustrates Jonah's thankfulness to God for delivering him, whereas chapter four illustrates Jonah's objection to God for delivering the Ninevites.¹¹ This demonstrates the incongruity of the book; thus scholars view chapter two as a later addition. Second, the psalm conveys a picture of Jonah that is out of character with the rest of the book. For example, the prophet is rebellious toward God and his calling (1:3); the prophet is unappreciative of God and his character (4:1-2); and the prophet is angry with God (4:3, 8). Therefore, to view Jonah as praising God for his deliverance (2:3-9) seems out of place.

Even though the evidence may suggest to excise or view chapter two as a later addition by some redactor, many find that

¹⁰ Some understand Jonah as having parallel halves. They are Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, eds., *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 394; Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, eds., *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 500. Yet there are others who view Jonah as having parallel halves that formulate into a chiasmus. They are Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 64-68; Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 55; Kohlenberger III, *Jonah and Nahum*, 25; Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets*, 409.

¹¹ Alexander states that some scholars suggest the book's structure would be restored if chapter two were excised. See *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 65 n. 3, 4.

the above arguments are not convincing.¹² Chapter two is an integral part of the book for two reasons. First, the structure of the book is actually enhanced with chapter two. Kohlenberger places chapter two at the center of his chiasmic outline, thus claiming that Yahweh is both the center of the chiasm and book as a whole.¹³ The parallelism between the chapters cannot be denied. Magonet claims that the psalm in chapter two finds its counterpart in 4:1-3.¹⁴ Therefore, whether one claims that the structure is chiasmatically oriented or that the structure is a reversal of concepts, parallelism is evident. Chapter two is a necessary part of the book.

Second, chapter two complements the theology of the book quite nicely. The psalm sets the stage for discussing the compassion and grace of God, the theological theme of the book.

¹² For a comprehensive list of scholars who question the above arguments, see Duane L. Christensen, "The Song of Jonah: A Metrical Analysis," JBL 104, no. 2 (1985): 217, n. 3.

¹³ The chiasmic structure that Kohlenberger (*Jonah and Nahum*, 25) presents is as follows:

A. Yahweh's longsuffering toward Jonah, 1:1-2:10

B. Jonah's unexplained disobedience, 1:1-3

C. Yahweh saves the sailors, 1:4-16

D. Yahweh saves Jonah, 1:17-2:10

C' Yahweh saves Nineveh, 3:1-10

B' Jonah's disobedience explained and challenged, 4:1-11

A' Yahweh's longsuffering toward Nineveh, 3:1-4:11

See also Christensen's metrical analysis. He claims that the psalm's metrical structure (Hebrew meter focuses on patterns of word stress within given poetic lines) fits nicely with the parallels in chapter three ("Song of Jonah," 229-31).

¹⁴ Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 55-63. George Cruz likewise claims that there is a reversal to the parallelism between chapters. He states, "The first set being that of the disobedience, obedience contrast between chapters one and three, and the second that praise/thanksgiving and the displeasure found in chapters two and four" ("Jonah Chapter 2: A Brief Pastoral Exegetical View," *Apuntes* 21, no. 3 [Fall 2001]: 94).

Jonah's change in character highlights this theme. Chisholm states, "The prayer actually contributes to the story's irony and the author's characterization of Jonah."¹⁵ Jonah is not a flat character, rather a complex one. Due to his spiritual ups and downs, he acts like a real person, thus providing readers with a number of opportunities to potentially see their character and conduct as similar to Jonah. The important point here is not just for readers to see that they relate to a biblical character, but to see how God will relate to them in the ebb and flow of life.

In sum, the structural analysis supports the inclusion of chapter two as original to Jonah. It is not a later addition nor should it be removed. Chapter two serves both structural and theological roles that find their way into the overall meaning of the book. There is no doubt that the book illustrates a symmetrical design where chapters one and two parallel chapters three and four. Jonah's character also serves to illustrate the compassion and grace of God while also demonstrating that he is just like one of his readers, a complex character undeserving of God's grace and at times disobedient against God and his calling.

Theological Analysis

Scholars present many theological ideas related to the book but none that require refutation per se; and it is not the purpose of this article to engage in such a discussion.¹⁶ This author

¹⁵ Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 412. Hill and Walton agree. They write, "The prayer serves as an important function of showing the reader that Jonah fully recognized himself as an undeserving recipient of God's grace" (*Survey of the Old Testament*, 501). Steve Schrader also claims that the psalm's ironic thrust both within itself and in relation to the whole book is important and valuable in understanding the book as a whole (course notes for OTBL 731, Hebrew Exegesis and Reading, Baptist Bible Graduate School of Theology, Springfield, MO, fall 1999, 2).

¹⁶ A small representation of the different theological messages include the following: (1) Terence E. Fretheim, *Message of Jonah*, 18-19; he claims that Jonah is more of a problem between God and Jonah rather

suggests that Kohlenberger's chiastic structure lends itself to the correct theological message. The chiastic form of Jonah provides the reader with the thrust of the book; that is, it reveals God as the one who delights in performing acts of compassion on whom he wishes and when he deems appropriate.¹⁷ The narrative actually speaks of God as the main character, not Jonah nor the Ninevites.

Whether one wishes to place the emphasis on a particular chapter or character, the theological message is clear; the book of Jonah is about God. This analysis will become important later in the article, specifically in part four, where the significance of the book for today is addressed. It seems appropriate to conclude that this brief account of a prophet's life is really about a sovereign, compassionate God and his dealings with the prophet, sailors, and a pagan nation.

than to single out one of these characters as the main idea; (2) John Walton, *Jonah*, Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 73; he claims that Jonah focuses on the changes brought about by classical prophecy; (3) Brevard S. Childs, "The Canonical Shape of the Book of Jonah," in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor*, ed. Gary A. Tuttle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 122-23; he presents two options (unfulfilled prophecy and salvation to the Gentiles), though he does not agree with them.

¹⁷ Robert Chisholm provides the proper attitude regarding the theological message. He states, "God exerted His sovereign power toward a particular goal—the reclamation of sinful men. Even though the Ninevites deserved to be punished for their sinful deeds, God in His grace decided to give them an opportunity to repent. In so doing He demonstrated the truth of Jonah's confession, recorded in Jonah 4:2: 'you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity;'" ("A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck [Chicago: Moody, 1991], 432). A brief listing of other scholars with a similar theological message include Ronald E. Clements, "The Purpose of the Book of Jonah," in *Congress Volume: Edinburgh 1974* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 16-18; Gerhard F. Hasel, *Jonah: Messenger of the Eleventh Hour* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific P, 1976), 7-8; Kohlenberger, *Jonah and Nahum*, 23-25; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 434-35.

Literary Analysis

The genre classification of Jonah is not an easy task. One can consider the numerous options proposed by many scholars and be left wondering which is correct. However the reader understands the genre of Jonah is of great importance for the interpretation of the text. Alexander provides a survey of the options in his article.¹⁸ They include history, allegory, Midrash, parable, legend, and satire, to name just a few.¹⁹

Didactic Historical Narrative

Without providing an exhaustive discussion regarding genre, this author agrees with scholars that the book of Jonah is a didactic historical narrative, which is the cataloguing of actual historical events that teach the readers by the means of a theological message.²⁰ It is important to keep the didactic and

¹⁸ See his article for a list of references (T. Desmond Alexander, "Jonah and Genre," 36-37).

¹⁹ Genre analysis is closely tied to the historicity issue; thus a full discussion concerning the different kinds of genre is not necessary here. The author of this article holds to the historicity of Jonah and therefore dismisses the other kinds of genre such as fiction, parable, allegory, etc. See Branson L. Woodard and his discussion as to the book of Jonah and its classification as satire and tragedy ("Jonah," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 348-57; and Michael Orth, who views Jonah as a satire and parody, ("Genre in Jonah: The Effects of Parody in the Book of Jonah," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies, vol. 8, ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly [Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990], 257-78). See also R. K. Harrison and his discussion regarding the different genre possibilities (*Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], 905-14).

²⁰ For further discussion see Alexander, "Jonah and Genre," 53-59; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 435-37. Fretheim goes so far to say that Jonah was never intended to be read as history. He writes, "The pervasiveness of

historical characteristics in balance. One should be aware of both Jonah's didactic nature, the fact that the book teaches and challenges the reader concerning God's sovereign compassion, and historical nature; the events of Jonah are placed within a historical setting.²¹

Now that a genre perspective of the book as a whole has been espoused, an examination of chapter two is important. An overall understanding as to the two possible genre classifications for chapter two (lament or praise) is the goal here. However, part two of this paper further analyzes Jonah's prayer as a declarative praise psalm and indicates why this is significant.

the didactic element in the book suggests a similar conclusion (i.e. a non-historical intention on the author's part). Virtually every phrase in the book is intended to teach. The kerygmatic and theological possibilities in every verse far exceed that which is to be found in other historical narratives in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Kings). The abrupt ending, which makes an appeal to the reader rather than informing us about Jonah, betrays this central concern of the author" (*Message of Jonah*, 66). Stuart writes, "All biblical narratives are didactic to some degree; but in the case of the book of Jonah, the narrator has carefully shaped the story by sensitivity, summarization, and even minor chronological rearrangement for an obviously didactic purpose" (*Hosea-Jonah*, 435).

²¹ Millar Burrows states, "Jonah ben Ammitai was a real prophet, who predicted the territorial expansion of Israel under Jeroboam II as recorded in II Kings 14:25. Gath-hepher, from which he came, was a real town (Josh. 19:13); Joppa and Nineveh were real cities; and Tarshish, wherever it may have been, was a real place or area. If some of the events recounted in the book are not such as one might expect to find in a sober historical chronicle, that is true also of much that is included in the historical books of the Old Testament" ("The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May*, ed. Harry Thomas Frank and William L. Reed [Nashville: Abingdon, 1970], 81).

Lament

A lament differs from a declarative praise psalm; in fact, they are opposites. Lament is a reaction to an event with disappointment and grief. It is typically a poetic form of speech found in the Psalms (cf. Pss 69, 77). The structure of a lament psalm follows a distinctive pattern. The five elements that occur in a typical lament psalm are address (introductory cry for help), lament (describing his lamentable state), confession of trust (frequently contrasted to the lament by the *ṽ*, *waw* adversative), petition (for God to be favorable and intervene), and either a vow of praise (offers a vow if God will answer) or praise to God (offers confidence that God will answer his prayer).²² The unique twist that accompanies lament psalms is their expressions of trust or praise in God.²³ The lament psalm is primarily toward God.

²² Steve Schrader, course notes for OTEB 622, Old Testament Introduction, Baptist Bible Graduate School of Theology, Springfield, MO, spring 2004, 224-25). See also Allen P. Ross, "Psalms," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 785. See also Tremper Longman III, "Lament," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese Jr. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 199-200. As David Leiter notes, these elements do not always follow this general pattern ("The Rhetoric of Praise in the Lament Psalm," *Brethren Life and Thought* 40 [Winter, 1995]: 48, n. 3).

Other notable sources include: Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1991), 130-31; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 212; and Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 182-83.

²³ This is the point of the article by Leiter ("Rhetoric of Praise in the Lament Psalm," 44-48).

Praise

A praise psalm is primarily a narrating of the attributes of God (descriptive praise) or the acts of God (declarative praise). The descriptive praise psalm “focuses on the attributes of God—who he is and what he is like.”²⁴ The typical descriptive praise psalm possesses three main parts. They are introduction (a call to praise), main section (the cause for praise), and recapitulation (the conclusion to praise).²⁵ Psalm 33 is a good example.²⁶

The declarative praise psalm focuses on thanksgiving for what God has done. The “psalmist was praising God by publicly declaring his mighty deeds. The emphasis was on the acts of God.”²⁷ The declarative praise psalm also typically possesses three main parts. They are introduction (the worshiper announces his intention to give thanks to God), main section (the psalmist speaks of his distress, his cry for help, and his deliverance), and conclusion (the worshiper speaks to the Lord’s gracious act of deliverance).²⁸

This author claims that Jonah 1:17-2:10 is an example of a declarative praise psalm. The structure of Jonah 2 seems to follow the declarative praise psalm structure, especially given Jonah’s situation of distress and deliverance. More analysis as to the reasons for this claim takes place in part two of this article.

²⁴ Kenneth L. Barker, “Praise,” in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese Jr. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 219. See also Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 130-31. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 212; and Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 182-83.

²⁵ Typically the descriptive praise psalm focuses on God as creator and as active in history, usually in regards to Israel.

²⁶ Barker, “Praise,” 221.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁸ See Ross, “Psalms,” 785.

Summary

To this point, the introduction has addressed four issues. The analysis of these introductory issues—historical, structural, theological, and literary—asserts traditional, conservative conclusions. These conclusions are important for two reasons. These two reasons pose far-reaching hermeneutical implications. They are the inspiration of Scripture and authorial intention. First, the historical, structural, and genre issues are important because of their connection with inspiration and the supernatural. The inspiration of Scripture does not include *just* the words but also the *structure* of the words and *events* involved in the narrative. To discard the book of Jonah as fiction or to claim that chapter two is a later addition to the book suggests “then the decision is based on an *a priori* conclusion contrary to the biblical position.”²⁹ How one understands the historicity and literary structure or genre of the text, ultimately determines how he will interpret the text.

Second, the theological issue is also important due to its impact on the author’s intention. The author’s intention is all-important. It speaks to the main intent of the book and provides the reader with a challenge to action. The author’s intention is discovered through the grammatical, historical, and literal method.³⁰ To interpret the author’s message subjectively or even

²⁹ William Sanford La Sor, David Allan Hubbard and Frederick William Bush, eds. *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 353.

³⁰ There are two principles that help to discover the author’s intended meaning. They are: essential meaning and exegesis. “Essential meaning refers to the fundamental interpretation of *the whole book as a whole as to its genre*. It is concerned with the interpretation of the book as a whole. It focuses on the discovery and development of the *theme of the book*. . . . Exegesis is the interpretation of a *passage within a book*. The purpose of exegesis is to ‘bring out’ the meaning of the text. It necessarily follows and comes from the essential meaning” (William Arp, course notes for NT1, Seminar in New Testament Hermeneutics and Exegetical Method, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA, summer 2002, 16).

haphazardly places one at the risk of handling God's word with an improper exegetical methodology, thus providing an improper interpretation. This becomes all the more evident upon one's decision as to the book's historicity and structure, especially if the exegete claims the book is fiction or that it is not structurally coherent.

PART TWO: THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE PSALM OF JONAH

Part two of this article delineates two proposals regarding the identification of Jonah's psalm. Given the prophet's situation in the belly of a fish, one would expect a lament psalm. However, others propose that due to God's character and the prophet's situation, one might also expect a thankful prophet for his deliverance. Which proposal makes best contextual sense? The article proposes Jonah's psalm found in 1:17-2:10 as a declarative praise psalm, not a lament psalm. Arguments for the identification of the psalm as lament and declarative praise are presented. This discussion then leads into part three, an analysis of the psalm and how it complements the theological context of the book as a whole.

Lament Psalm

For those reading the book of Jonah it is not hard to see that Jonah is in a difficult situation. Sauter asks the right question. He writes, "Buried alive, should Jonah have prayed like this? Is this prayer fitting for a stiff-necked prophet who wanted to flee from God?"³¹ One would expect a lament psalm for three reasons. First, Jonah's character provides the reader with a sketch outlining both his beliefs and behavior. Jonah understood whom he served, the God of the sea and the dry land (1:9). But this belief did not necessarily translate into obedience. Jonah progressively went

³¹ Gerhard Sauter, "Jonah 2: A Prayer Out of the Deep," in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 148.

away from God and his call (1:3-6).³² Jonah continues his disobedient attitude against God with a displeased disposition (4:1-2), to the point that he wished to die (4:3-4, 8-9). With this sketch of Jonah's character, a lament psalm seems appropriate. Therefore, given this brief explanation, how could Jonah express thanksgiving to God? It seems out of place for Jonah. Alexander explains,

Jonah's character as revealed in the psalm is at odds with the author's portrayal of him elsewhere in the book. For example, the picture of Jonah gratefully praising God is hardly in keeping with the prose section, which portrays him as rebellious, sullen and unappreciative. Similarly, whereas in 1:12 he apparently greets the prospect of dying with little apprehension, his words in 2:2 reveal tremendous anxiety in the face of imminent death.³³

Second, Jonah's situation seems to favor the classification of a lament psalm. Some scholars understand the role of the great fish in Jonah (1:17f.) in this way. Typically they see Jonah as the prophet who prays for deliverance *from* the fish rather than one who praises Yahweh for the deliverance *by* the fish. Alexander comments, "Given his [Jonah] incarceration within the belly of the great fish, Jonah, it is suggested, is hardly likely to have expressed gratitude to God."³⁴ Because that lament psalms have an element of trust or praise in God, it seems that Jonah's plea for

³² Walter C. Kaiser Jr. states, "The prophet Jonah was well aware of the fact that disobedience to God's commands often results in divine punishment" (*I Will Lift My Eyes unto the Hills: Learning from the Great Prayers of the Old Testament* [Wooster, OH: Weaver Book, 2015], 89).

³³ Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64. This is the view of Bernhard W. Anderson. He states, "The psalm is obviously out of place in its present context. In the belly of a fish a cry for help (that is, lament) would be appropriate, but not a thanksgiving for deliverance already experienced!" (*Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974], 84).

deliverance is indeed this element of trust that God will deliver his prophet from his distress/cry for help.

Third, the psalm's structure seems to favor the identification as a lament psalm. It is apparent that Jonah typifies one who would find himself lamenting over his situation. Jonah's introductory cry to God occurs in 2:1-2. He is crying out to God due to his situation of distress ("prayed . . . out of the fish's belly," "out of the belly of *sheol* cried I,"). Jonah's lament is offered in 2:3-6. It is here that Jonah finds himself in a helpless situation ("you had cast me into the sea; thus the ocean currents surrounded me," "the waters compassed me unto my throat; the seaweeds were wrapped about my head"), thus motivating him to prayer. The third structural clue is what appears to be Jonah's confession of trust in Yahweh (2:4, 7). Last, Jonah vows to praise God ("But I with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you," [2:9]). His lament therefore, turns to praise, a typical conclusion of lament psalms.³⁵

To conclude, some, because of Jonah's character, situation, and the structure of the psalm, accept the identification of Jonah's psalm as lament. Jonah 1:17-2:10 seems to fit the category of a lament psalm; Jonah expresses sorrow that eventually leads to joy. His sorrow is over the fact that he is in the "belly of sheol" and aside from Yahweh's saving compassion, he is as good as dead.

But is Jonah lamenting over his *present condition* in the "belly of the fish"? Or is he praising Yahweh for his deliverance from the ocean currents and seaweed that surrounded him? In other words, is the great fish his judgment or deliverance? This is the subject under analysis next.

Declarative Praise Psalm

Given Jonah's seemingly distressful situation, one would expect a lament psalm. However, the author of this article follows the lead of several scholars and identifies Jonah 1:17-2:10 as a

³⁵ There is no petition that God intervene on his behalf and rescue him; therefore a discussion of this element is not warranted.

declarative praise psalm.³⁶ This psalm can also be classified as a song of thanksgiving. There are two reasons for this conclusion.

First, the structure of Jonah's psalm lends itself to a declarative praise psalm. Although the classification of the elements of the structure varies among scholars, the typical structure of a declarative praise psalm is present.³⁷ For the consistency of this article, Barker's structure, based on three elements, points to the identification of Jonah's psalm as a declarative praise psalm. Jonah begins with an introductory statement of praise regarding his answered prayer by God ("I called out to the Lord, you heard my voice," 2:2). As typical with a declarative praise psalm, Jonah announces his intention to praise God for his deliverance.³⁸ Jonah continues with a recollection of his moment of distress and cry for help (2:3-6a). Jonah gives thanks for the deliverance already experienced ("Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God," 2:6b). Last, Jonah includes his promise to present a thank-offering and acknowledges God's gracious act of deliverance ("But I, with a voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you," "salvation belongs to the Lord," 2:9). The elements for a typical declarative praise

³⁶ A list of these scholars, though not exhaustive, includes Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 66-69; Barker, "Praise," 228-30; Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 412; Kaiser, *I Will Lift my Eyes unto the Hills*, 87-98; Kohlenberger, *Jonah and Nahum*, 214-19; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 439.

³⁷ Barker proposes three sections: introduction, main section, and conclusion ("Praise," 229); Allen and Fretheim propose four sections: introduction (including a statement of praise or prayer), recollection of personal crisis, divine deliverance, and vow of praise (*The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 215; and *The Message of Jonah*, 94-95 respectively); Kohlenberger follows Westermann's six structural elements (*Jonah and Nahum*, 45-47). See also Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 102-16.

³⁸ Kohlenberger writes, "Most Psalms of Declarative Praise begin with a proclamation of praise, such as 'I will praise Yahweh.' . . . Jonah's psalm begins with the summary of what he is praising God about" (*Jonah and Nahum*, 47).

psalm (introductory prayer/praise to God, recollection of time of distress, and God's deliverance) are all present, thereby providing a favorable identification as a declarative praise psalm.³⁹

Second, Jonah's psalm, as a declarative praise psalm, complements the context of the book. Jonah's prayer is not one "of petition for deliverance, but of thanksgiving for deliverance already experienced."⁴⁰ This is a major oversight of those who identify Jonah's psalm as lament, for they see Jonah responding to his situation, the belly of the fish, as one of judgment instead of deliverance. He is not asking God to rescue him *from* the fish. Rather he is thanking God for rescuing him from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea.⁴¹ This rescue happened when he was swallowed *by* the fish, which ultimately provided his deliverance.⁴²

³⁹ Fretheim states, "The psalm of Jonah is thus quite typical. It was the type of psalm which the readers of the book would have sung on regular occasions. They, too, would have expressed their thankfulness to God upon deliverance from some distress. They can thus identify with Jonah here" (*Message of Jonah*, 95).

⁴⁰ Barker, "Praise," 229. Magonet states, "Jonah sees his prayer as appropriate, dutiful thanksgiving one – he acknowledges that God has saved him, and describes with due humility his loss of self-centeredness" (*Form and Meaning*, 52).

⁴¹ Kaiser states, "Praise is a natural response to every one of God's acts of deliverance for each of us. Jonah's prayer, then, is a prayer of thanksgiving for God's rescue of him from drowning; it is not a prayer asking for escape from the fish!" (*I Will Lift My Eyes unto the Hills*, 96).

⁴² Allen states, "Yahweh mounts a special rescue operation: *an enormous fish* plays the astounding part of a submarine to pick up Jonah from the murky seaweed at the bottom of the ocean and transport him safely to the mainland. The fish stands for the amazing grace of Yahweh, which came down to where he was and lifted him to new life. The Lord of the sea is Lord also of its creatures, and his providential control extends over both" (*Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 213).

Jonah's near death experience (2:3-6) speaks to the drowning in the sea, not the belly of the fish.⁴³ To conclude, most scholars, due to the psalm's structure and context, accept the identification of Jonah's psalm as a declarative praise psalm. All elements of a typical declarative praise psalm are evident, unlike the elements for the lament psalm where the petition to God is missing. There is no need for Jonah to petition God because he has already experienced salvation. It seems evident that Jonah's psalm follows the typical pattern and provides the reader with a "psalm of thanksgiving sung in praise of God for rescuing the psalmist from a perilous situation," that is, in Jonah's case, drowning in the sea.⁴⁴

Jonah's psalm also speaks to a context quite different from what readers often expect. Jonah's situation is not perilous because he is in the great fish, but it is a praiseworthy situation because God has already answered his cry for help in the sea.⁴⁵ Stuart summarizes, "Once Jonah is inside the belly of the fish he has been delivered from drowning. A lament psalm would be appropriate only while he was still sinking in the Mediterranean. He *has* already experienced deliverance, and a thanksgiving psalm is the only sort appropriate to his situation."⁴⁶ This is the fundamental difference between the lament and declarative praise psalm classifications. The lament psalm is appropriate for those who are in distress, whereas the declarative praise psalm

⁴³ Barker claims that "the synonymous parallelism of terms for the stormy sea (deep, seas, currents, waves, breakers, engulfing waters, and seaweed)" speak to drowning in the sea ("Praise," 229).

⁴⁴ Peter F. Lockwood, "Jonah's Psalm: Fathoming Its Depths," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 34, no. 3 (2000): 109.

⁴⁵ Chisholm states, "Despite his earlier decision to choose assisted suicide over repentance, he was quite happy to be alive. Having come face-to-face with the horror of death, he greatly appreciated God's merciful deliverance" (*Handbook on the Prophets*, 412).

⁴⁶ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 439.

refers to those who have already experienced deliverance. Jonah is praising Yahweh for his deliverance.

Summary

The identification of Jonah's psalm elucidates two fundamental problems concerning the interpretation of the psalm. The problems relate to how one views (1) the character of Jonah (his thankful attitude in relationship to his rebellious attitude in the rest of the book) and (2) the situation of Jonah (one of deliverance or judgment). The literary structure and the genre classification of chapter two is where one finds the apex to this twofold problem.

First, an analysis of Jonah's character has led some to see a contradiction with respect to attitude. Chapter two illustrates Jonah's seemingly thankful attitude, whereas the rest of the book portrays Jonah's rebellious attitude. Chapter two therefore is structurally and theologically incongruent with the rest of the book. To resolve this contradiction, some scholars conclude that 1:17-2:10 is not original and should be excised. This decision potentially affects how one views the historicity of the book of Jonah. As a result, some may conclude by asking, can the rest of the book be trusted? And are other portions of the book fanciful and unrealistic? If other portions can be viewed in like manner as that of chapter two, a later redaction to the text or as unrealistic, this can support the claim that the book's historicity is in jeopardy. This claim in turn affects the perception of literary structure of the book.

The structure of the book is often viewed as a parallel structure. For example, chapters one and two relate to chapters three and four. If some view chapter two as unrealistic, the structure of the book then becomes incongruent, and then chapter two is indeed out of place.

A proper structural analysis of Jonah however, shows that 1:17-2:10 fits into the overall development of the structure of the book.⁴⁷ Jonah's character in his psalm does not contradict other

⁴⁷ Kohlenberger's chiastic structure illustrates this.

parts of the book; rather it complements them. Jonah's thankful disposition is due to the received deliverance, thus illustrating God's compassion and sovereign control. This is the theological message of the book.

The second problem is how one views the situation of Jonah. If one sees the situation of Jonah in chapter two as one of judgment rather than deliverance, then he will naturally identify Jonah's psalm as lament. This is what the reader would expect. This can be a logical conclusion due to one's improper understanding of the book's theological message, which ultimately or directly, affects the genre classification of the psalm and book as a whole. If one sees this psalm as best communicated through a lament, then potentially the exegete's view of the overall theological message of the book is skewed.

A proper theological analysis of Jonah however, shows that 1:17-2:10 fits into the overall theological message of the book. Jonah's situation does not contradict the message; rather it contributes to and complements the overall big idea. The big idea, or theological message, of Jonah is that God delights in performing acts of compassion on whom he wishes and when he wishes. Jonah's response in chapter two validates the theological message because he is a recipient of God's compassion, thus the irony found in chapter four, not incongruity. It is now necessary to integrate the conclusions concerning the book of Jonah, his character and its structure. This will further validate the psalm's role within the context of the book as a whole.

PART THREE: THE ANALYSIS OF THE PSALM OF JONAH

Upon concluding that the psalm in Jonah is a declarative praise psalm, what happens when it is placed into the book as a whole? Does it fit the context? Part three of this article demonstrates that Jonah's psalm is an integral part of the book. A contextual and exegetical analysis validates the psalm's identification and provides the reader with an understanding of the psalm's meaning.

Contextual Analysis

The declarative psalm of praise fits within the context of the theological message of the book. Although the poem breaks the movement of the plot of the narrative, the poem is deliberately chosen and compositionally original as part of the storyline.⁴⁸ Two reasons support this conclusion. First, 1:17-2:10 is an integral part of the theological message of the book. Divine deliverance, or God's gracious compassion, is the central theological theme of the book. It is undoubtedly clear that Jonah receives deliverance, and as stated previously, it is his deliverance from the raging sea, not the great fish. Jonah's psalm directly contributes to the reinforcement of the theological theme of the book. Allen concludes,

The deliverance of Jonah is a prime factor in the story as a whole, not only for its own sake but for its implications in the later part of the narrative. It is a theme the author means to stamp upon the minds and memories of the listening circle, and it is for this reason that a wonderful device is employed, the use of a giant fish by which to effect not only Jonah's rescue but also his conscious preservation inside it.⁴⁹

The theological theme, God performing acts of compassion upon whom he wishes, when he wishes, is illustrated through three different objects. They are the sailors (1:10-16), the prophet (1:17-2:10; 4:6), and the city of Nineveh (3:4-10). The sailors were spared from the raging of the sea; thus they feared

⁴⁸ Athalya Brenner, "Jonah's Poem Out of and Within Its Context," in *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings*, ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 186-89. D. W. B. Robinson states the poem has "a real appropriateness in its context, and we need not doubt that its essential content belongs to the occasion to which it is ascribed"

["Jonah," in *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Davidson, A. M. Stibbs, and E. F. Kevan [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953], 717].

⁴⁹ Allen, *Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 213.

Yahweh exceedingly and vowed vows.⁵⁰ Yahweh was in control of the sea. Jonah, too, was spared from drowning and distress, thus producing a voice of praise and joy. Salvation is only of the Lord. Nineveh was safe from Jonah's message of judgment. God relented concerning the calamity, which he had threatened to do to them, and he did not do it. Therefore, through these three objects, God's sovereign and compassionate activity is evident throughout the book.

Second, 1:17-2:10 enhances the structure of the whole book. Without the identification of chapter two as a declarative praise psalm, the reader will miss the author's intention. The book of Jonah is comprised of parallel halves, though they communicate opposing panels of thought. For example, Jonah's disobedience (1:3) is countered by his act of obedience (3:3). Jonah plans to disobey God because of what God is requiring of him, that is, to take the message of impending judgment upon a city undeserving of God's compassion. Yet, due to Jonah's deliverance in chapter two, he takes the message of repentance to the city of Nineveh in chapter three. The disobedience in chapter one and the obedience in chapter three thus illustrate the opposing panels of thought that give the book cohesion.

The second half of the book is like that of the first. It too communicates opposing panels of thought. Jonah's deliverance, resulting in his thankful disposition (2:4, 7, 9-10), is countered by an angry disposition (4:1, 8), resulting from God's act of gracious compassion and deliverance from judgment upon Nineveh. This creates quite the irony. Jonah is thankful for his deliverance from being cast into the sea (1:15, 2:4-7a); thus he vows with a voice of thanksgiving and claims that salvation is only of the Lord. Jonah's thankful disposition in chapter two and Jonah's angry

⁵⁰ Schrader comments, "The Lord who made the sea and sent the storm has heard their prayer and has saved them. . . . The sailors have made a life-changing discovery because they have come into contact with the living God. They make such offerings as they can, then and there, but plan to do more, formulating their intentions into vows to be carried out later" (course notes for OTBL 731, 14).

disposition in chapter four also illustrate opposing panels of thought producing cohesion.

Through illustrating opposing panels of thought, the reader can see the inextricable link that all the chapters have with one another, especially the role of 1:17-2:10.⁵¹ The result of Jonah's disobedience (chap one) is ultimately what prepares him for his deliverance and thankful disposition (chap two). The result of God's compassion (chap three) is the prophet's angry disposition (chap four). Therefore, the reader is able to see clearly the cohesion of the parallel halves of the book (see figure one below). If one expects and thus concludes 1:17-2:10 is a lament psalm, he has unnecessarily pulled apart the structure of the book. The author intends to communicate in *opposing* panels of thought; a back-and-forth illustration between the prophet's disposition and God's attention to every situation of distress. This therefore communicates the theological theme of the book (4:2c).



	<i>Opposing Panels of Thought</i>		<i>Opposing Panels of Thought</i>
First half of book (chapters 1 & 2)	God's Compassion & Jonah's <i>Disobedience</i> (chapter 1)	Results in 	God's Compassion & Jonah's <i>Thankful Disposition</i> (chapter 2)
Second half of book (chapters 3 & 4)	God's Compassion & Jonah's <i>Obedience</i> (chapter 3)	Results in 	God's Compassion & Jonah's <i>Angry Disposition</i> (chapter 4)

Figure 1. Structure of thought for Jonah.

⁵¹ Stuart *Hosea-Jonah*, states that chapter two contributes to the theological thrust of the book. It is pivotal to the theological theme of Jonah. "Through the psalm the wayward Jonah confesses Yahweh's undeserved rescue. . . . The psalm provides the focal statement of Yahweh's concern for individuals in need of favor" (*Hosea-Jonah*, 473).

Summary

Based on the whole context of the book, the reader must view 1:17-2:10 as a declarative praise psalm for three reasons. First, it illustrates the theological theme of the book. Yahweh delivers his prophet from his desperate situation, thus communicating to the reader that Yahweh acts compassionately to whom he wishes. This is why Jonah is thankful and not lamenting over his situation, for salvation is only of the Lord.

Second, it also enhances and complements the structure of the book. Though one might expect a lament psalm, the book's structure as two parallel halves with opposing panels of thought does not allow for this classification. The lament classification would thus disrupt the book's congruity. Jonah's declarative psalm fits the context.

Third, the structure of the psalm reflects a declarative praise psalm. The elements of the declarative praise psalm are analyzed both grammatically and syntactically below. This demonstrates cohesion between the psalm and the rest of the book of Jonah.

Exegetical Analysis

The identification of 1:17-2:10 as a declarative praise psalm is further validated by an analysis of the psalm's grammatical and syntactical elements.⁵² 1:17-2:10 will be analyzed according to the poem's structure presented earlier in the article. Each of the elements of Jonah's poem and its relationship is presented so the reader understands the meaning and significance.

⁵² Jonah 1:17 and 2:10 in the English text are not part of the declarative praise psalm. However, throughout the paper, 1:17-2:10 is referenced for contextual reasons. These two verses provide introductory and concluding thoughts as part of the narrative construction, while Jonah 2:2-9 actually comprise the declarative praise psalm.

Jonah 1:17 provides the reader with whom Jonah directs his prayer ("Yahweh, his God") and with the location from where Jonah prayed ("out of the belly of the fish"). Jonah 2:10 resumes the narrative part of the story and at Yahweh's command, the fish vomits Jonah onto dry land.

Introductory Prayer/Praise to God (2:2)

The first element of the psalm of praise is the summary of Jonah's prayer to Yahweh. He announces his intention to give thanks to God. The first element is constructed into two couplets that communicate Jonah's appeal to be delivered from a distressful situation and his subsequent deliverance.⁵³ This verse describes the obvious intervention of Yahweh and his gracious compassion upon Jonah in two ways.

The first way the reader sees the gracious compassion of Yahweh on Jonah's behalf is found in his situation and deliverance. Jonah states that his situation of distress ("out of my distress") in 2:2a is parallel to the ("belly of sheol") in 2:2b. This latter phrase demonstrates the seriousness and life-threatening situation of Jonah. It also "indicates that Jonah expected to die. *Sheol* was the abode of the dead, a great cave beneath the earth, even more final than the grave unless the Lord intervened in power."⁵⁴ Only Yahweh could save his prophet. Jonah's situation of distress led to his deliverance. As a matter of fact, Yahweh answered and heard Jonah's cry for help. The verse thus indicates rescue. Stuart explains,

⁵³ The two couplets demonstrate an overall synonymous parallelism. For example, (a) "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress"; (b) "and he answered me"; (a') "out of the belly of Sheol I cried"; (b') "and you heard my voice." Kaiser states, "This marks an altered feeling toward God, for just a few days ago Jonah was fleeing from God" (*I Will Lift My Eyes*, 91).

⁵⁴ Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah," in *The Minor Prophets*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 569. Fretheim states, "Most distressing of all, however, is that it was considered a place largely cut off from God (see Psalm 88:5, 10-12, 115:17; Isaiah 38:18), beyond his presence, though not beyond his power" (*Message of Jonah*, 101). Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner state this word as wasteland, void, underworld (*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament Volume 4: The New Koehler Baumgartner in English* [Leiden: Brill, 1999], 2, 1369).

'Responded to me' and 'heard my voice' are both idioms for more than just auditory sensation; they connote the gracious accession of God to the suppliant's situation, not simply receipt of his or her words. Employing literary clichés typical of thanksgiving psalms, Jonah's psalm actually concentrates not on what he said but on the fact that, from the trouble he was in, God mercifully delivered him.⁵⁵

The second way the reader sees the gracious compassion of Yahweh on Jonah's behalf is found in Jonah's verb usage. Jonah's use of the definite past ("I cried out") denotes an action completed and finished in the historical past, fixed by the narrative.⁵⁶ Jonah thus states that God *had already answered* him. This is indicated by the verb, the preterite + *waw* consecutive ("and he answered me").⁵⁷

In sum, it is clear that Jonah praised God for delivering him from his situation of distress. This introductory praise of Jonah provides the reader with a connection to both the past and the future. The past is explained through Jonah's verb usage, therefore communicating that he *was delivered* from drowning in the sea rather than *asking for present deliverance* from the fish. The reader can see through the use of the verbs that Jonah's situation of distress was a past event, therefore making further claims for the identification of the psalm as praise instead of lament.

The future is explained through Jonah's situation. Due to his past deliverance from the sea, Jonah experienced the compassion of Yahweh. This is the theological theme of the book, which is later illustrated with the city of Nineveh (chapter three). Therefore, Jonah's statement of introductory praise provides cohesion between the psalm's structure (Jonah's past deliverance) and theology of the book of Jonah (Nineveh's future deliverance). It also indicates that chapter two is not to be excised

⁵⁵ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 476.

⁵⁶ Schrader, course notes for OTBL 731, 17.

⁵⁷ See Allen P. Ross, *Introducing Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 18.2, 136-37.

but rather, serve as an integral part of the book complementing its structure.

Recollection of the Time of Distress (2:3-6a)

The second element of the declarative praise psalm is Jonah's description of his past distress. It is a looking back in the time of need. The praise psalm (2:2-9) is constructed around a metaphor depicting his life-threatening situation (2:3-6a). Due to the imagery, it is clear that Jonah was saved from drowning.⁵⁸ This element further describes Jonah's situation; therefore like the first element (introductory prayer to God), it also reflects Yahweh's gracious compassion. It does so in two ways.

The first way in which Jonah's distressful situation illustrates Yahweh's gracious compassion is seen through his use of drowning imagery. Jonah describes his situation with such magnitude that it enhances one's understanding regarding God and his saving power. Upon being cast into the sea, Jonah states the severity of his situation with two phrases: ("and the flood surrounded me") and ("all your waves and your billows passed over me," 2:3).⁵⁹ Stuart states that this verse continues "the theme of the brush with death begun in verse two. It was a mortal danger that Yahweh had caused (*you threw me*)."⁶⁰

In verse five Jonah relives the process of drowning. Three verbs communicate that Jonah was hopelessly entangled. Jonah was "*engulfed* by waters up to his throat," "*surrounded* by the

⁵⁸ Barker states, "The synonymous parallelism of terms for the stormy sea (deep, seas, currents, waves, breakers, engulfing waters, and seaweed) all depict drowning in the sea, not in the fish's stomach" ("Praise," 229). OT psalms provide the imagery of drowning in the sea.

⁵⁹ "The currents surrounded me," is a description typical of other psalms (Pss 69:1-2, 14-15; 88:6-7, 17). "All your breakers and your waves passed over me," is an identical statement found in Psalm 42:7. See also Kaiser, *I Will Lift My Eyes*, 92-93.

⁶⁰ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 476.

deep,” and “seaweeds were *wound around* him.”⁶¹ He was a prisoner of the sea. So much so that Alexander states that “try as he may, Jonah cannot free himself from his watery prison. Death by drowning seems inevitable.”⁶² This leads to Jonah’s final descent.

The first couplet in verse six concludes Jonah’s description of his situation. Here he reaches the extremity, the bottoms of the mountains. The two expressions (“to the foundations of the mountains”) and (“the bars of the underworld”) in this first couplet metaphorically illustrate the finality of death.⁶³

Alexander claims that Jonah viewed the underworld “as having a gate which was locked secure by bolts and bars: there could be no escaping from it. Once in Sheol, Jonah would be imprisoned there forever.”⁶⁴

The second way in which Jonah’s distressful situation illustrates Yahweh’s gracious compassion is through his recognition of coming into Yahweh’s presence again (v. 4). This is the turning point of the psalm. He was driven away from the sight

⁶¹ These three verbs—suffixed form of the verb, prefixed form of the verb, and suffixed form of the verb—provide the reader as to how the second verb ought to be translated. Ross notes, “In fact, this prefixed form of the verb occurs in poetic passages even without the conjunction (the *yipqod* pattern), and yet context indicates that it must be translated as a past-tense verb” (*Introducing Biblical Hebrew*, 18.2, 137). Koehler and Baumgartner see שָׁוַת as throat here (*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, vol. 2, 1. 712).

⁶² Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 115.

⁶³ Stuart states that these are expressions from ancient Near Eastern and OT imagery that relate to death. “The distance from the land of the living represented by arrival at the bases of the mountains and the fact that the Underworld’s bars prevented one from returning back to life” (*Hosea-Jonah*, 477). Schrader claims that ‘the land’ “only here refers to the underworld, beyond the grave. He reckoned that he had entered Sheol, the land of the dead, envisaged as a fortress from which there is no escape” (course notes for OTBL 731, 21).

⁶⁴ Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 116.

of Yahweh and "This denotes the present state of the subject affected by a past act," a present perfect verb, 'I have been driven away.'⁶⁵ Although Jonah was, literally "from in front of your [Yahweh's] eyes," driven from Yahweh, the force of the particle ("nevertheless") introduces a 'yes, but' clause.⁶⁶ In other words, although Jonah is driven from in front of Yahweh's eyes, he will still have the privilege of praising and worshipping him again in Yahweh's heavenly abode.

In sum, the second element (recollection of time of distress) of the declarative praise psalm presents similar conclusions to the first element (introductory prayer to God). The two ways in which Yahweh's gracious compassion is illustrated are through Jonah's use of drowning imagery (a near death experience) and his recognition that he will again be in the presence of Yahweh. Yahweh has saved Jonah from the land of the dead. The magnitude of Jonah's situation not only illustrates Yahweh's compassion toward him but it also reminds the reader that, like Jonah, he too is *not* far removed from Yahweh's care.

Concluding Statement of Thanksgiving (2:6b-9)

The third and final element of the declarative praise psalm is Jonah's statement of thanksgiving. This is where he speaks to Yahweh's gracious act of deliverance and then what he plans to do as a result of this deliverance. The third element therefore speaks to Yahweh's gracious compassion. Yahweh's compassion is seen in Jonah's report of deliverance (2:6b-7), his personal testimony (2:8), and his thanksgiving (2:9).

Jonah's situation is reflected by the term "grave."⁶⁷ This place of death is where Jonah found life and unexpected deliverance. Jonah is not merely spared from a serious risk; rather he was

⁶⁵ Schrader, OTBL 731, 19. It is interesting that this verb also is used in Gn 3:24 denoting Adam being driven out of the Garden of Eden.

⁶⁶ Baldwin, *Minor Prophets*, 570.

⁶⁷ See Koehler and Baumgartner, 1. pit, trap; 2. pit grave (*Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 4: 1473).

actually snatched up from a watery grave.⁶⁸ Jonah recognized Yahweh's work in saving him. This is evident in his direct address to Yahweh ("O Yahweh, my God").

Jonah continues his report of deliverance in the next verse as well. The reality of Yahweh's grace is evident in verse seven. Jonah's life was "fainting away." This idiomatic word construction denotes the 'process of growing feeble.'⁶⁹ As a result, Jonah emphatically remembers Yahweh ("I remembered the Lord").⁷⁰ The word order here puts the emphasis on the one who alone can save Jonah. His prayer came into the heavenly presence of Yahweh, in which the Jerusalem temple was an earthly representation ("your holy temple").

Jonah's personal testimony is captured through a contrast between ("worthless vanities") and ("their covenant-faithful God").⁷¹ Jonah is indicating or attributing his behavior to that of those who forsake their covenant-faithful God. This is the reason for this verse. Jonah is convicted of his folly in forsaking such a

⁶⁸ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 477. Although some scholars and versions translate הַקֶּבֶר in the psalms as 'pit, hole, or abyss' (Psalm 16:10; 49:10 [9]; 103:4), it is better to use the modern English equivalent 'grave'. (See Robert Chisholm Jr, *From Exegesis to Exposition* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 33-34).

⁶⁹ Baldwin states, "Its force is to give pathos to the expression of an emotion, by emphasizing the person who is its subject, and who, as it were, feels it acting *upon* him" (571).

⁷⁰ Schrader states, "The verb implies more than mere recollection; it is an unspoken plea for help, and implies faith in the Lord's power and willingness to save" (OTBL 731, 22). Kohlenberger III states, "In Jonah, 'remembering' Yahweh means calling upon His name as the God who is there, mighty to save" (*Jonah and Nahum*, 53).

⁷¹ It is probably best to understand, *hesed*, as 'their own covenant faithful God.' This is due to the reference in the first part of the verse to false gods, so one would expect a reference to the true God in the latter part of the verse (cf. Ps 144:2 where God is referred to as, my *hesed* a metonymy for God himself).

God and states that anyone "who broke the covenant's first commandment by having other gods had 'abandoned' his or her loyalty to Yahweh."⁷² Barker adds that in reference to Jonah's later statement, "salvation comes from the Lord," this personal testimony presents a polemical twist and states that salvation does not come from "worthless idols."⁷³ Therefore, Jonah is warning those who seek help in "worthless vanities" are foolish.⁷⁴

Jonah moves to his final remarks in verse nine. After experiencing a near death experience, Jonah vows thanksgiving to Yahweh. In emphatic contrast to his previous discussion regarding those who worship worthless vanities, ("but I") Jonah expresses his attitude of thanksgiving in two ways. First he offers praise to Yahweh ("with the voice of thanksgiving"). He is responding to Yahweh's covenant-faithfulness, thus making his response identical to that of the sailors in 1:16. This was typical of worshipers in ancient Israel to recite praise portions of thanksgiving psalms. But his expression of thankfulness did not stop there.

Second, Jonah pledged to offer sacrifices to Yahweh ("will sacrifice to you, what I have vowed, I will pay").⁷⁵ Jonah intends

⁷² Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 478. Feinberg states, "He knew now the condition of the heathen, because in seeking to flee from the Lord, he had also forsaken the only source of mercy" (*Minor Prophets*, 141).

⁷³ Barker, "Praise," 229. Declarative praise psalms sometimes include instructions. Lessons are drawn from the experience and taught to the congregation. Jonah warned about the danger of idolatry in Jonah 2:8. For other instructions in declarative praise psalms see Ps 30:4-5, Ps 32:8-11, and Ps 34:11-14.

⁷⁴ Kaiser notes, "Yahweh offers his free, loving, gracious act of salvation, while the idols, who are dead as doornails, offer nothing at all; how could they, being inert and without any vitality!" (*I Will Lift My Eyes*, 96).

⁷⁵ Thanksgiving offerings were given in gratitude for deliverance from sickness (Ps 116:2-4, 17-18), trouble (Ps 107:22), or death (Ps 56:12) or for a blessing received.

to fulfill his side of the bargain, and to continue to do it in the future, not just in the present. This multiplies the magnitude of the total thanksgiving, which can be said to parallel the magnitude of Yahweh's gracious compassion.⁷⁶

Jonah's final expression of praise is delivered when he states that salvation comes only from Yahweh. Salvation here is of Jonah's physical life, "but when applied to the work of God it implies the far-reaching purpose of God to save in the fullest sense."⁷⁷ Jonah is praising Yahweh as Savior and as sole Savior. He intentionally labels Yahweh this way, yet ironically this very same fact will later fill Jonah with anger in chapter four.⁷⁸

In sum, the third and last element of the declarative praise psalm reflects once again Yahweh's gracious compassion. Jonah expresses this attribute of Yahweh through his report of deliverance, testimony, and thanksgiving. It is clear that through Jonah's thankful disposition and vow of thanksgiving that Yahweh's gracious compassion is accentuated.⁷⁹

Summary

The exegetical analysis validates that 1:17-2:10 is a declarative praise psalm. The analysis demonstrates cohesion both in theological and structural ways. Each element of Jonah's psalm reflects God's gracious compassion toward him, even

⁷⁶ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 478.

⁷⁷ Schrader, OTBL 731, 24. See Pss 62:2[1]; 69:30[29].

⁷⁸ Fretheim states, "This stands in sharp contrast to his reaction to the deliverance of Nineveh. God's deliverance extended to Jonah in spite of his *lack* of repentance would be denied by Jonah to those who have in fact repented. . . . As such, his confession, 'deliverance belongs to the Lord!' stands in brilliant incongruity to the limitation which Jonah places on that very deliverance when it comes to the Ninevites. For Jonah, in the final analysis, God should *not* be able to extend his deliverance to whomever he pleases" (*Message of Jonah*, 103.)

⁷⁹ See Allen, *Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 217-18.

though he is a disobedient prophet. Stuart states that chapter two is “full of rescue and thanksgiving, miracle and praise, it allows Jonah to see that God’s determination to do good can mercifully benefit even those who deserve punishment.”⁸⁰ This compassion is not foreign to the book, for God’s compassion is the theological theme of the book. The psalm serves to prepare the reader for circumstances that occur later in the book (i.e., the repentance of the city of Nineveh and the prophet’s angry disposition).

Jonah’s psalm also reflects the structure of a declarative praise psalm. Jonah announces his intention to give thanks to God, he speaks of his time of distress and deliverance, and he also speaks to God’s gracious act of deliverance. Therefore, he vows to give thanks while expressing that salvation is only of Yahweh. Jonah’s psalm mirrors the typical structure of a declarative praise psalm.

PART FOUR: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PSALM OF JONAH

The story of Jonah being swallowed by a whale has captured the attention of generations of Christians. Although this story is fascinating and truly gripping, an analysis of Jonah’s psalm makes it evident that there is more to the book than just a prophet swallowed by a whale. There is more to the story. As one returns to the question in the title of the paper, “what are the implications for today,” he will see that God’s role in this story is far more significant than has typically been communicated.

Jonah’s psalm provides three implications for Christians today. First, God is covenant-faithful, compassionate, and sovereign. Christians today are not always obedient, even when God makes his intentions clear in his Word. Similar to Jonah, people run from God (cf. 1:1-4). For whatever reason, it seems that the Christian’s agenda, plan, roadmap to success, and/or revenge toward someone always looks better than what God sovereignly provides. At this point, often in a distressful and hopeless situation, Christians realize that what they brought upon themselves is a break in fellowship with God, not the “bed

⁸⁰ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 480.

of roses” so often aspired to. This is exactly where Jonah found himself. Surely disobeying and running from God (cf. 1:1-4) is better than offering a pagan culture (chap three) the chance to experience the compassion of God. He had the opportunity to get revenge against those who created havoc on him and his people. The real perplexity is that all the while he was trying to run from God, the ultimate conclusion is that he found himself banished from God’s presence (cf. 2:4). Yet, God in his gracious compassion, goodness, and covenant-faithfulness continues to respond to the believer’s sinful behavior. God’s character is such that he will keep his covenant with his people. “His grace is always open, even to those who seem unlikely to be recipients of that grace because of their outright disobedience.”⁸¹ Jonah clearly recognized that salvation belongs to God, and God alone. His compassion and grace is clearly seen in Jonah’s rescue. This leads to a second implication. Prayer.

Second, God listens to prayer. Christians today are to pray. Jonah was concerned with his absence from God, so much so that he prayed from the depths of the sea and from the belly of the great fish. Though he thought he had fled from God, yet his disobedience only gave rise to his voice through prayer. But Jonah did not just pray, “God, please be with me in my time of distress.” No, Jonah used the Scriptures to speak to Yahweh. “Jonah’s prayer was filled with words from the Psalms, which he no doubt had stored away in his heart for such a time as this.”⁸² This is a challenge for Christians today, the memorization of Scripture. How often is Scripture memorized? Maybe a better question would be *do* believers take the time to memorize Scripture? Jonah has clearly demonstrated that comfort is found in talking to God using God’s words.

There are no limits regarding the places from which to pray, and neither are there any limits to the times when one can pray. The point here is to pray, and to do so using the language of God’s word. The Psalms were written for one to express joys and

⁸¹ Kaiser, *I Will Lift My Eyes*, 97.

⁸² Ibid.

sorrows, successes and failures, and hopes and regrets. They are used to speak to God in words that he inspired others to speak to him in the past. Through prayers, believers affirm and express God's attributes; they demonstrate their dependence upon God.

Third, God saves people. It goes without saying that Christians today experience difficult and unpleasant situations throughout their lives. Some go through a considerable amount of despair, while others, not so much. The sailors (chap one), Jonah (chaps two and four), and Nineveh (chap three) are no exception. The events preceding Jonah's psalm of praise involve pagan sailors and a tempestuous sea. The sailors, due to this renegade prophet, experienced a raging sea that was threatening to drown the entire crew. Desperate measures were necessary. Both cargo, and eventually Jonah, were thrown overboard. But what resulted from this desperate situation? Both the sailors and Jonah offered prayers, the God of heaven and earth calmed the sea, and the sailors, though pagan as they were, offered sacrifices and made vows; they exceedingly feared God (cf. 1:16). Moments of crisis often turn people to Yahweh. By calming the sea, God saved the sailors; certainly a moment they will never forget.

Sometimes Christians, like the sailors, go through difficult situations where it seems all is at loss. Desperate times call for desperate measures. But know that when trials and distress come from the hand of God, they come, as they did in the sailors' and Jonah's case; that is, for the purpose of surrendering one's will and placing one's dependence upon God alone.

What can be said about Jonah in chapter two? His recollection of his distressful situation placed him in a near death experience. Jonah was as good as dead (2:2-6). However, God had other plans for the prophet (cf. chap three). He brought Jonah from the pit into his presence, such that the prophet could exclaim, "Salvation belongs to the Lord!" (2:9). Yahweh ordained Jonah's rescue; the great fish spewed out Jonah at the command of the Lord.

The events following Jonah's psalm of praise involve a pagan city (Nineveh) that turned from its evil ways and repented and an angry prophet. God, through his sovereign plan, saved both of them (3:10; 4:6), and does so because he is a compassionate, merciful God (4:2) who always acts within his character.

The salvation experienced by the characters in this story is not indicative of what God will do all the time in all circumstances. God is sovereign and compassionate on whom he wishes when he deems appropriate. The Christian's responsibility is to trust, fear, submit, and depend upon God in all circumstances.