Numerical Features of the Book of Jonah
A New Approach to its Compositional Structure

Please read the General Introduction and the Introduction to the Embedded Poetry.

The compositional unity of the story of Jonah

What meets the eye immediately in terms of storytelling is that the book divides into three episodes:

Episode 1 (1,1-16): Jonah at sea: he tries to escape from YHWH but ends up in the sea.
Episode 2 (2,1-11): Jonah in the belly of a great fish: he thanks God for his deliverance.
Episode 3 (3,1-4,11): Jonah in and at Nineveh: he fulfils his mission, but mistrusts God’s judgement.

This strongly suggests that it is a compositional unity. However, many modern scholars regard the Prayer of Jonah (2,2-10) as an inset poem, arguing that a prayer of thanksgiving is totally inappropriate on the lips of Jonah who is still in the belly of the fish. In my opinion, they fail to realize that when Jonah finds himself in the ‘belly of the fish’, he has actually just been saved from the ‘belly of Sheol’ (2:3), and that YHWH has ‘brought him up alive from the deep’ (2:7). That he offers a prayer of thanksgiving from there is perfectly in place, because the ‘great fish’ functions as a life-boat used by YHWH to rescue Jonah from the waters of death. The ‘belly of the fish’ is the safe haven Jonah finds himself in after he had been rescued by Yahweh from drowning.

Others assert that the disobedient and recalcitrant Jonah we encounter in Chapters 1 and 4 cannot be the humble and thankful person we meet in Chapter 2, and that there is no trace of the prophet’s confession of guilt or his praying for forgiveness. But why should his conversion and rehabilitation be a prerequisite for Yahweh to free him from the belly of the fish? What matters is that Yahweh has already saved him from drowning and will now also free him in order to let him fulfil his commission.

Scholars who raise objections against the suitability of the prayer in its context, are obviously influenced by the interpretation of the story of Jonah ascribed to Jesus in Matthew 12:40. There, the Old Testament image of the ‘belly of Sheol’ (representing the sea) and the image of the ‘belly of the fish’ (relating to the fish as the safe haven), are not differentiated but understood as one and the same: ‘the sea monster’s belly’, “Just as Jonah was in the sea monster’s belly for three days and three nights, the Son of Man shall be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”. The story of Jonah should be interpreted from its own perspective, not from that of the New Testament writers who had their own way of interpreting Old Testament texts.


The quantitative structural analysis confirms the prayer’s firm embedding in the narrative. The evidence strongly suggests that the prayer was not selected because it more or less suited the context, but rather points to its being specifically composed to suit the context with which it forms a structural unity. It cannot be excluded that the author used one or more existing poems which he adapted to let the prayer function meaningfully. It has clearly been designed to function as a prayer of thanksgiving, for having found a temporary refuge in the belly of the fish, the prophet offers Yahweh praises for his escape from death by drowning. At the same time, he anticipates Yahweh’s next saving act: to free him from the belly of the fish. The author expressly left out of consideration as totally irrelevant the idea of a confession of guilt by the disobedient prophet.

The prayer is an essential component for the flow of thought in the story, especially in light of the fact that in Chapter 1 the sailors pray, each to his own god (1,5) and collectively to YHWH (1,14) and in Chapter 3 the people of Nineveh are ordered by the king ‘to cry mightily to God’ (3,8). In Chapter 1, on board of the ship, everyone prays except Jonah. That he prays from the belly of the great fish stands to reason: it is now his turn. Moreover, without Jonah’s prayer, the reference to his stay of three days and three nights in the belly of the fish would hang in the air as a piece of casual information, which it is not. From a rhetorical point of view, Jonah’s prayer is an indispensable element to fill in this crucial period.

In the present quantitative structural analysis I shall produce evidence to show that the book as a whole, as it came from the hand of the author, is a logical, coherent literary unity shaped as a numerical composition.
Various views on the structural design of the book of Jonah


J.M. SASSON (Jonah, in: AB 24B, 1990): 1,1-3; 4-6; 7-12; 13-16 | 2,1-3a; 3b-10; 11 | 3,1-4; 5-10; 4,1-6; 7-11.

F.W. GOLKA (Jona, in: Calwer Bibelkommentare, Stuttgart, 1991): 1,1-3; 4-6; 7-10; 2,1-11 | 3,1-3; 4-5; 6-9; 10; 4,1-4; 5-11.

K.A. DEURLOO (Jona, in: Verklaring van de Hebreuws Bijbel, Callenbach: Baarn, 1995): 1,1-3; 4-5; 6; 7-10; 11-13; 14-16 | 2,1-2; 3-10; 11 | 3,1-3a; 3b-5; 6-9; 10 | 4,1-4; 5-6; 7-9; 10-11.


E. ACHTMEIER (Minor Prophets II, in: New International Commentary, 253-84): §1 1,1-3; §2 4-6; §3 7-8; 9-12; §4 13-16; §5 2,1-9; 10; §6 3,1-4; §7 3,5; 6-9; 10; §8 4,1-4; §9 5-8; §10 9-11.

J. JEREMIAS (Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha, ATD 24/3, 2007, 75-112): 1,1-3; 4-6; 7-10; 11-16; 2,1-2; 3-10; 4,1-11.

J.D. NOGALSKI (The Book of the Twelve: Hosea-Jonah, in: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary 18a, Macon GA, 2011, 401-57): I: 1,1-3; 1,4-16; II: 1,17-2,1; 2,2-9; 2,10; III: 3,1-3; 3,4; 3,5; 3,6-9; 3,10; IV: 4,1-4; 4,5-8; 4,9-11. (4 scenes: Jonah on the sea; Jonah in the sea; Jonah in Nineveh; Jonah outside Nineveh.

Additional Literature dealing with the structural design of the book


Outline based on extant layout markers, content, and numerical features

The paragraphs marked blue are individually and/or collectively highlighted by 17 and 26.

**Episode 1: 1,1-16 Jonah on the sea fleeing from YHWH:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vs</th>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Heb</th>
<th>Sum words</th>
<th>$/P</th>
<th>Structural Design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>§1 YHWH commissions Jonah but he flees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>§2 A hurricane at sea: everyone prays except Jonah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,3</td>
<td>21/41</td>
<td>88/159</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>41/41</td>
<td>[]</td>
<td>§3 Jonah is singled out and unmasked as a Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
<td>§4 Jonah confesses and is thrown overboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1,5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>94</td>
<td></td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
<td>§5 God ordains a plant for shade, but it withers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1,6</td>
<td>19/54</td>
<td>68/213</td>
<td>95/54</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>[]</td>
<td>§6 God ordains a hot wind and reproaches Jonah: Col.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1,7</td>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
<td>113</td>
<td></td>
<td>In terms of letters, 1,4 and 1,6 have multiples of 17.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1,8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
<td>133</td>
<td></td>
<td>§3 Jonah is singled out and unmasked as a Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>149</td>
<td></td>
<td>§1 JONAH - PM (x) letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1,10</td>
<td>20/74</td>
<td>78/286</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>169/74</td>
<td>[]</td>
<td>§3 has 286 (11x26) letters; 1,10 has 78 (3x26).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1,11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
<td>181</td>
<td></td>
<td>§4 Jonah confesses and is thrown overboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1,12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
<td>199</td>
<td></td>
<td>§1 YHWH commissions Jonah but he flees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1,13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td>211</td>
<td></td>
<td>§4 Jonah confesses and is thrown overboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>1,14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>85 (5x17)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>The paragraph is highlighted by 85 (5x17) words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>1,15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td>243</td>
<td></td>
<td>V. 16 has 51 (3x17) letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>1,16</td>
<td>11/336</td>
<td>10-11</td>
<td>254/85</td>
<td>[]</td>
<td></td>
<td>§1-16 has 254 words. 11x YHWH.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Episode 1</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>11x</td>
<td>254</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Episode 2: 2,1-11 Jonah prays to YHWH who sets him free**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vs</th>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Heb</th>
<th>Sum words</th>
<th>$/P</th>
<th>Structural Design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>2,1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>269</td>
<td></td>
<td>§1 YHWH sends Jonah to Nineve to denounce the city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>2,2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>276</td>
<td></td>
<td>§2 A hurricane at sea: everyone prays except Jonah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>288</td>
<td></td>
<td>§3 Jonah is singled out and unmasked as a Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>2,4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td>299</td>
<td></td>
<td>§4 Jonah confesses and is thrown overboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2,5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>104 (4x26)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>310</td>
<td></td>
<td>§5 God ordains a plant for shade, but it withers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>2,6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td>319</td>
<td></td>
<td>§6 God ordains a hot wind and reproaches Jonah: Col.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>2,7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>331</td>
<td></td>
<td>§7 Jonah confesses and is thrown overboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>2,8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>343</td>
<td></td>
<td>§8 God ordains a plant for shade, but it withers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>2,9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>348</td>
<td></td>
<td>§9 God ordains a hot wind and reproaches Jonah: Col.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>2,10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>43/432</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>358/104</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>17 instances of the name YHWH.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>2,11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29/29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>366/8</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Episode 2: 7 instances of the name YHWH.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Quantitative structural analysis of the book of Jonah**

It cannot be excluded that some of the multiples of 17 and 26 are due to coincidence.
Observation 1 If we regard the 8 words in 1,1 as a heading, the story of Jonah is made up of precisely 680 (40x17) words. Then the story starts with a divine speech (1,2) and ends with a divine speech (4,10-11). This means that 1,2-4,11 is in its entirety governed by the divine name number 17 symbolizing YHWH’s all-presence in the events described in the book. The number 40 may be a happy coincidence, but it may have been chosen deliberately in order to refer to the 40 days mentioned in Jonah’s message of doom in 3,4b.

Additionally, 30 of the 48 verses (63%) and 420 of the 688 words (61%) are highlighted by the divine name numbers 17 and 26. Some multiples may be due to coincidence.

Observation 2 The text of the book as a whole is sealed by 26 instances of the name YHWH. Significantly, the passage from the beginning of the book to the end of Jonah’s prayer (1,1-2,10) is sealed by 26 verses and 17 instances of the name YHWH.

Observation 3 In terms of the 81 words of the Prayer, its arithmetic centre is constituted by the 3 words in 2.6c, with 39 words on either side (81 = 39 + 3 + 39).

This vivid description of Jonah’s state during his sinking to the bottom of the sea offers a most eloquent depiction of his near death situation, with his head already swathed in bandages as that of a corpse. Therefore, I regard these words as the consciously designed meaningful centre, containing the gist of the poem. Note the correspondence of the surrounding 39 words to the 39 words spoken by Yahweh in 4:10-11 and the 39 words spoken by Jonah in 4:2-4.

This shows that the prayer is a skillfully designed poem embedded in a painstakingly composed story.

 Crucial passages highlighted by the divine name numbers 17 and 26.

1. Jonah confesses and is thrown overboard (1,11-16): 85 (5x17) words.
2. The prayer with the introduction, delimited by S (2,1-10): 104 (4x26) words.
3. Jonah proclaims his message of doom and Nineveh repents (3,4-9): 85 (5x17) words.
4. The people and king of Nineveh repent (3,5-6): 26 words.
5. Fast, don sackcloth and pray to God; maybe he will spare us (3,8-9): 26 words.
6. YHWH spares Nineve but Jonah objects (3,10-4,3): 68 (4x17) words.
7. God ordains a hot wind and reproaches Jonah (4,8-11): 78 (3x26) words.

Words ascribed to God and to the humans in the book of Jonah

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YHWH/Elohim</th>
<th>Jonah</th>
<th>The Sailors</th>
<th>The King of Nineve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 1,1-2 8+12=20</td>
<td>1 1,9 2+14=16</td>
<td>1 1,6 6+13=19</td>
<td>3,7-9 7+38=45: See Observation 7.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 2,11 3+0=3</td>
<td>2 1,12 2+16=18 34 (2x17)</td>
<td>2 1,7 4+8=12</td>
<td>An alternative is 3+42=45:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 3,1-2 7+14=21</td>
<td>3 2,2-10 8+81=89</td>
<td>3 1,8 2+18=20 26</td>
<td>What is significant in this case is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 4,4 2+3=5</td>
<td>4 3,4b 2+5=7 153</td>
<td>4 1,10a 6+3=9</td>
<td>that the humans speak altogether</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 4,9a 4+5=9</td>
<td>5 4,2-3 4+39=43 (9x17)</td>
<td>5 1,11a 2+6=8 17</td>
<td>163+67+42=272 (16x17) words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 4,10-11 2+39=41</td>
<td>6 4,8b 5+3=8</td>
<td>6 1,14 4+19=23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 *4,9b 1+5=6</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals: 26+73=99 Totals: 24+163=187 (11x17) Totals: 24+67=91

Observation 4 The speeches in which God orders Jonah to go to Nineveh (1+3) have altogether 26 words. The next two divine speeches (4-5) have 8 words, bringing the four speeches up to 34 (2x17) words. The concluding speech (6) has 39 words, which represent the numerical value of יד רדה יד, YHWH is One: 10+5+6+5=26 + 1+8+4=13 = 39.
In addition, the introductions to the divine speeches have altogether 26 words, which is underscored by the 26 instances of the name YHWH in the book.

Observation 5 The words devoted to the 7 utterances of Jonah, including the introductions, are significant: to 1-2 34 (2x17) words; to 3-7 153 (9x17) words; altogether 187 (11x17) words.

Observation 6 As for the words spoken by the sailors: in utterances 2-3 they speak 26 words. When they reproach Jonah and ask him what they should do (4-5), 17 words are devoted to their speaking.

Observation 7 There is no consensus about the precise delimitation of the proclamation in 3,7-9. Is it 7 words introduction and 38 proclamation, or 3 words introduction and 42 proclamation?
In the first case, 7+38-45, the proclamation are made up of 156 (6x26) letters (Eikelenboom), which may be conscious design, seeing the striking number of letters in 1,4 (51); 1,6 (68); 1,10 (78); 1,7-10 (286=11x26); 1,16 (51); 2,4 (51); 2,7 (51), and 4,5 (68). See the table above. Moreover, the fact that the proclamation is introduced by יְהֹוָה understands this delimitation.
In the second case, 3+42-45, the introductions to the human utterances have 51 (3x17) words (resembling the 26 words introducing God’s words), while they speak altogether 272 (16x17) words. Also deliberately intended?

The Hebrew text is to be found on the next full page
Jonah 1

1 And the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 Go, go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to them, saying, "Repent!"

The sailors

2 Now the sailors of that ship had been afraid when they had heard that God was going to destroy the city of Nineveh.

The captain

6 But the sailors said to Jonah, 'If you do this, we will not have to die!'

The sailors

8 And they said, 'We will cast you out into the sea, so that the sea may kill you, rather than let the land kill you.'

Jonah 2

19 Then Jonah got into the ship, and she sailed to the land of Tarshish to flee from the presence of the Lord.

The sailors

19 So the sailors were afraid, and each man cried to his god.

The sailors

11a And they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

The sailors

11a They said to one another, 'Declare your guilt to us, and let us know which of us has caused you to do this evil thing.'

Jonah 3

12a Then they said to him, 'Tell us, you! What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?'

YHWH: 2

3+0=3

YHWH: 1

1,1-2 8+12=20

Jonah 1

1 And the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 Go, go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to them, saying, "Repent!"

The sailors

2 Now the sailors of that ship had been afraid when they had heard that God was going to destroy the city of Nineveh.

The captain

6 But the sailors said to Jonah, 'If you do this, we will not have to die!'

The sailors

8 And they said, 'We will cast you out into the sea, so that the sea may kill you, rather than let the land kill you.'

Jonah 2

19 Then Jonah got into the ship, and she sailed to the land of Tarshish to flee from the presence of the Lord.

The sailors

19 So the sailors were afraid, and each man cried to his god.

The sailors

11a And they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

The sailors

11a They said to one another, 'Declare your guilt to us, and let us know which of us has caused you to do this evil thing.'

Jonah 3

12a Then they said to him, 'Tell us, you! What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?'

YHWH: 2

3+0=3

YHWH: 1

1,1-2 8+12=20
Episode 3: 3,1-4,11

Jonah 3

YHWH: 3 3.1-2 7+14=21

1 YHWH נָתַן לְיְוָהוֹ יָד אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר לָא לָא יָדַע אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר לָא לָא יָדַע אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר לָא לָא יָדַע אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר לָא לָא יָדַע אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר לָא L

Jonah: 4 3.4b 2+5=7

2 Jonah יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר לָא יָדַע אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר לָא יָדַע אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר L

King of Nineveh: 3 3.7-9 7+38=45

3 יַעֲקֹב יָדַע אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר לָא YHWH נָתַן לְיְוָהוֹ יָד אֱלֹהִי אֲשֶׁר L

156 (6x26) letters

For an alternative (3+42=45) see the table above. and Observation7.

Jonah 4

YHWH: 4 4.4 2+3=5

Jonah 5 4.2-3 4+39=43

Jonah 6 4.8b 5+3=8

YHWH: 5 4.9a 4+5=9

Jonah 7 4.9b 1+5=6

YHWH: 6 4.10-11 2+39=41

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