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 fulfills 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 (Jona, 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: Calver 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 Hebreewe 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:

§1: 1,1-3 YHWH commissions Jonah but he flees: [] 3 vs; 41 words.
§2: 1,4-6 A hurricane at sea: everyone prays except Jonah: [] 3 vs; 54 words.
§3: 1,7-10 Jonah is singled out and unmasked as a Hebrew: [] 4 vs; 74 words.
§4: 1,11-16 Jonah confesses and is thrown overboard: [] 6 vs; 85 (5x17) words.

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

11 vs; 112 words.

Episode 3: 3,1-4,11 Jonah at Nineveh fulfilling his mission:

§1: 3,1-3 YHWH sends Jonah to Nineveh to denounce the city: [] 3 vs; 36 words.
§2: 3,4-9 Jonah proclaims his message: Nineveh repents: [] 6 vs; 85 (5x17) words.
§3: 3,10-4,3 YHWH spares Nineve but Jonah objects: S 4 vs; 68 (4x17) words.
§4: 4,4-5 YHWH reproves Jonah; he leaves the city: [] 2 vs; 25 words.
§5: 4,6-7 God ordains a plant for shade, but it withers: [] 2 vs; 30 words.
§6: 4,8-11 God ordains a hot wind and reproaches Jonah: Col. 4 vs; 78 (3x26) words.

Jonah 1-4 No less than four paragraphs are highlighted by 17 and 26. 48 vs; 688 words.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vs</th>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>סיד ו</th>
<th>Sum words</th>
<th>S/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>
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<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>
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<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>In terms of letters, 1,4 and 1,6 have multiples of 17.</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>§3 Jonah is singled out and unmasked as a Hebrew</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1,5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>94</td>
<td></td>
<td>76</td>
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<td>The paragraph is highlighted by 85 (5x17) words.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1,6</td>
<td>19/54</td>
<td>68/213</td>
<td>95/54</td>
<td>[]</td>
<td></td>
<td>V. 16 has 51 (3x17) letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1,7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
<td>113</td>
<td></td>
<td>§4 Jonah confesses and is thrown overboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1,8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
<td>133</td>
<td></td>
<td>The prayer itself, including the introduction, clearly delimited by a Setumah after v. 10, which marks the end of the prayer, has 104 (4x26) words. See the Hebrew text on page 6 below.</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>Until this point, the end of the prayer, 26 verses and 17 instances of the name YHWH.</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>1,1-16 has 254 words. 11x YHWH.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>1,11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
<td>181</td>
<td></td>
<td>§5 God ordains a plant for shade, but it withers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1,12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
<td>199</td>
<td></td>
<td>§6 God ordains a hot wind and reproaches Jonah: Col.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1,13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td>211</td>
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<td>§7 The prayer is highlighted by 85 (5x17) words.</td>
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<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>V. 16 has 51 (3x17) letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>1,15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td>243</td>
<td></td>
<td>§8 YHWH commissions Jonah but he flees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>1,16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>51/336</td>
<td>10-11</td>
<td>254/85</td>
<td>[]</td>
<td>§9 Jonah proclaims his message: Nineveh repents:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>11x</td>
<td>254</td>
<td></td>
<td>§10 YHWH spares Nineve but Jonah objects:</td>
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Episode 3 3,1-4,11

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<td>14</td>
<td>52</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>3,3</td>
<td>15/36</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>402/36</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3,4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>3,5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>3,6</td>
<td>15/15/26</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>442</td>
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<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>3,7</td>
<td>19/85 (5x17)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>461</td>
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</tr>
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<td>35</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16/71</td>
<td>477</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>3,9</td>
<td>10/10/26</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>487/85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>3,10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>505</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>7/68 (4x17)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>512</td>
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<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>21-22</td>
<td>544</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>4,3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35/241</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>555/68</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>42</td>
<td>4,5</td>
<td>20/25</td>
<td>68/87</td>
<td>580/25</td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>4,6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>4,7</td>
<td>10/30/46/129</td>
<td>610/30</td>
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<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>4,8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>632</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>4,9</td>
<td>15/78 (3x26)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>647</td>
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<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>4,10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>665</td>
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<td>48</td>
<td>4,11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>83/287</td>
<td>688/78</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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).

יהוה יומם ידועיםatteh tehom leviati Seaweed is wrapped about my head!

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 ¥ (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 Nineveh 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**

| YHWH/Elohim | Jonah | The Sailors | The King of Nineve
<table>
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<tr>
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<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>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 4,9b 1+5=6</td>
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</table>

**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 תֹּם הָגֵד, 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 מְלַאכָּת underscores 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?

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

The captain

YHWH: 1

Jonah 2

The sailors

YHWH: 2

Episode 1: 1,1-16

Jonah 1

The captain

YHWH: 1

Jonah 2

The sailors

YHWH: 2

Episode 2: 2,1-11

Jonah 2

The sailors

YHWH: 2

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Episode 3: 3,1-4,11

Jonah 3

YHWH: 3 3,1-2 7+14=21

Jonah: 4 3,4b 2+5=7

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

16 (6x26) letters

For an alternative (3+42=45) see the table above. For Observation 7.

Jonah 4

YHWH: 4 4,4 2+3=5

Jonah: 5 4,2-3 4+39=43

Jonah 6

YHWH: 5 4,9a 4+5=9

Jonah: 7 4,9b 1+5=6

YHWH: 6 4,10-11 2+39=41