

THE PIOUS PRAYER OF AN IMPERFECT PROPHET: THE PSALM OF JONAH IN ITS NARRATIVE CONTEXT

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The question of whether the psalm of Jonah 2 is integrative or disruptive in its narrative context greatly effects one's interpretation of the book of Jonah as a whole. While the older historical-critical scholars have almost universally concluded that the psalm of Jonah was a disruptive addition to an otherwise coherent narrative, more recent canonical interpreters have tended to argue for its integrative nature. Utilizing the canonical method of interpretation, this article freshly evaluates the issues and argues for the integrative nature of the psalm of Jonah in its narrative context by exploring: 1) comparative vocabulary between psalm and narrative in Jonah; 2) the phenomenon of Hebrew poetry inserted into narrative; 3) the psalm's contribution to the theme of irony in Jonah; 4) the psalm of Jonah in the broader context of the Book of the Twelve; and 5) a rethinking of the problem of Jonah's conflicted character between psalm and narrative.

KEYWORDS: *Jonah, Canonical, Characterization, Integrative, Narrative, Psalm*

INTRODUCTION

The psalm of Jonah has been the focus of scholarly attention for two thousand years, and scholarly debate for two hundred years,¹ or as Tribble put it, “[e]voking a great storm over the centuries, the eight-verse poem

1. Watts notes that, “The relation between the narrative and the psalm in the book of Jonah has been studied and discussed more than any other psalm in a narrative context.” James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative* (JSOTSup 139; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 132.

threatens to swallow the forty-verse narrative.”² The book of Jonah as a whole seems to see-saw back and forth between “the bad Jonah” and “the good Jonah,” with the psalm as the prime example of the prophet’s piety. The book opens with a surprising note of role reversal, as “the bad Jonah” disobeys the word of YHWH and is ultimately cast into the deep, while “the good Gentile sailors” cast themselves on YHWH’s mercy, fear him with a great fear, recognize his sovereign pleasure, sacrifice to him, and vow vows to him. But in the psalm of Jonah 2 the prophet *seems* to have caught up to the spiritual stature of these Gentiles, as “the good Jonah” is mercifully swallowed by a great fish, prays a model prayer, and promises a sacrifice of thanksgiving and the fulfillment of vows to YHWH. The reported words of the prophet are a well-constructed psalm of thanksgiving, with some praise elements as well.³ This psalm is filled with words and phrases that are common in the Psalter,⁴ and it focuses vividly on Jonah’s desperate circumstances; however, it is told from the perspective of one who looks back on deliverance. It seems certain that these pious words are included in the book because “the good Jonah” is an example to follow. With the psalm freshly in mind, the reader’s perception of “the good Jonah” of chapter 3 is only amplified, for after his ejection from the fish the prophet obeys YHWH, announces judgment to Nineveh, and witnesses nationwide repentance by magisterial decree. But the story does not end there: in chapter 4 “the bad Jonah” resurfaces, this time as the sulking prophet who never really wanted Israel’s enemies to be objects of YHWH’s mercy in the first place. If the book begins with a word of command from YHWH to Jonah about his call to preach in Nineveh, it ends with a word of correction from YHWH to Jonah about his sovereign right to pity Nineveh.

Even this cursory overview of the book has raised questions about the psalm. Why a psalm of thanksgiving and not lament: was Jonah not still in distress in the belly of the fish? Are model words of piety appropriate from the lips of a prophet whose heart will later be displayed as still hard and rebellious? What about the language: do expressions that

2. Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 173.

3. Although the psalm contains a great deal of lament, the perspective of the psalmist is one of looking back on deliverance. See Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (trans. James D. Nogalski; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 201–02, 340–41.

4. As noted in Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 423; Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 133.

have more parallels in the Psalter than in the Jonah narrative belong in this book? In short, why is the seemingly disruptive psalm in the book at all? Without the psalm “the bad Jonah” of chapter 4 is less of a surprise and could possibly indicate that the prophet’s preaching ministry in chapter 3 was the result of coercion by YHWH rather than true heart change. Is there a reasonable solution that explains the placement of the psalm in its broader narrative context?

In what follows I will explore these issues by showing first that pre-critical interpreters had already begun to ask these kinds of questions, even as they assumed the book’s coherence. Next, I will summarize the most popular historical-critical answers to the question. This will set the stage for the main focus of the article, in which I employ the canonical approach as a helpful means of explaining the integrative nature of the psalm in a unified book of Jonah. Although some interpreters have focused their energy on arguments for or against the psalm as *original* to the book, and others have reasoned for or against *redactional unity* in Jonah, I will focus my attention on the question of the psalm as *integrative or disruptive*, without commenting on the text’s prehistory.⁵ In so doing I will glean insights from those who argue along the lines of authorial or redactional unity/disunity while maintaining a focus on the question of whether the interpreter may approach the book of Jonah as a meaningful and coherent, and indeed inspired whole.⁶

THE PSALM OF JONAH AND THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

Although the dominant assumption throughout the history of interpretation has been that the psalm in Jonah 2 is original and essential to the prophetic book as a whole, difficult questions relating to the unity of the

5. This appropriation of the canonical approach differs slightly from Childs, for although he viewed the final form of the biblical text as primary in a culminating way, he still often asserted his own theories about the text’s prehistory. In the case of the book of Jonah, Childs believed the psalm was a secondary insertion, and that the canonical shaping offered an integrative, though altered message for the book as a whole. He went so far as to posit a lack of evidence for two versions of the story that were separated by a long historical development, implying that the stages of redaction must have been close together. See Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 425. In my appropriation of the canonical approach I desire to spend less time on theories of the text’s prehistory because of their speculative nature.

6. This explains why I will interact appreciatively with, for example, Watts, throughout the latter portion of this article, despite the fact that I am not arguing along the lines of redactional unity, but rather, the integrative nature of the book of Jonah with the psalm included, without comment on the text’s prehistory.

book had also been considered prior to the rise of enlightenment hermeneutics. In addition to the debated question of how to best interpret the psalm,⁷ in the Middle Ages ibn Ezra observed that the fish was female in 2:2 but male in 2:11, and that the language in between reflected present and past deliverance. However, he explained the latter as a sort of “prophetic perfect tense,” because the prophetic mind regarded the prayer to have been answered even before the salvation was accomplished.⁸ In the Reformation period, Luther struggled with how one could compose a psalm while in the belly of a fish and concluded that Jonah did not pray these very words with his lips, as “his mood when surrounded by this horrible death was not so cheerful as to compose such a fine song.”⁹ Instead, for Luther this psalm was a later work of praise and thanksgiving by Jonah, which recorded how he felt at the time of being swallowed by the fish.¹⁰ Finally, contrary to a positive view of Jonah’s three-day retreat in the depths, Calvin saw the fish as tantamount to hell or the grave, but that even there Jonah gathered courage, an example of faith.¹¹ For Calvin as with Luther, though Jonah’s prayer was not composed in the words now related, these words relate the thoughts in Jonah’s mind when he was in the belly of the fish.¹²

At the hinge between pre-critical and critical interpreters, George Adam Smith interacted directly with critical views, noting the parallels with the Psalter, along with the prayer’s unique features, before declaring

7. For example, Basil ignored its thanksgiving elements and assumed Jonah was crying for help; Gregory of Nazianzus set forth Jonah’s endurance in prayer as a model of Christian piety and his fate in the fish’s belly was a sign of salvation; Cassiodorus saw Jonah’s psalm as a place of repentance, Theodoret, a place that typified Christ’s three days in the tomb, Symeon, a place where Jonah cried out and God heard and delivered him. For Tertullian, Jonah’s expulsion from the whale after three days typified Christ’s resurrection. See *The Twelve Prophets* (ed. Alberto Ferreiro and Thomas C. Oden; ACCS; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 136–40; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 240–41.

8. As noted in 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; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 186–87, and R. Reed Lessing, *Jonah* (CC; St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 174.

9. Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets II: Jonah Habakkuk* (ed. Hilton C. Oswald; trans. C. Froelich; Luther’s Works; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1974), 70.

10. *Ibid.*, 71.

11. See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets, Volume III: Jonah, Micah, Nahum* (trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), 74.

12. See *Ibid.*, 75.

that it was original to the author¹³ (whether originally composed by him or not), and inserted from his perspective of the fish as the point of Jonah being saved. Smith also agreed with Luther that a man in Jonah's position could not have composed or even compiled such a psalm. He further asserted that the spirit of the psalm was national, in conformity with the truth underlying the book.¹⁴

THE PSALM OF JONAH IN HISTORICAL-CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Phyllis Tribble notes that while there are no major text-critical problems in the book of Jonah, historical-critical interpreters have struggled without resolution to determine the book's author, date, setting, and purpose, with the psalm in Jonah 2 as a major source of tension.¹⁵ Over the past two hundred years, the dominant conclusion from historical-critical scholarship has been that the psalm of Jonah was a disruptive later interpolation, and that it serves no ultimate purpose in the flow or plot of the book.¹⁶ The eight most common arguments from this school of thought are as follows:

- 1) A psalm of lament rather than thanksgiving would better fit the context of chapter 1.
- 2) The psychological picture of Jonah in chapters 1, 2, and 4 is markedly different from the pious Jonah of chapter 2.

13. Although my focus in this article is not on the text's prehistory, when I am reporting the view of another interpreter I will sometimes comment on their view along these lines; hence the use of the term "original" in this instance.

14. See George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets, Commonly Called the Minor, Volume II: Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Joel, Jonah* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906), 499–501.

15. See Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 107–08.

16. According to Holbert, one of the first critical commentators to argue that the Psalm of Jonah was a part of the original composition (though not original to the book), was Landes. See J. C. Holbert, "'Deliverance Belongs to Yahweh!': Satire in the Book of Jonah," *JSOT* 21 (1981): 70.

- 3) It is odd to find the Jonah who had to be coerced into any speech by pagans in chapter 1, to be voluntarily in prayer in chapter 2.¹⁷
- 4) The psalm was out of step with Jonah's prophetic task.
- 5) The psalm should appear after Jonah's deliverance from the fish and not before.
- 6) The vocabulary of psalm and narrative are markedly different in Jonah.
- 7) The drowning language must be metaphorical as it is in other psalms.
- 8) The psalm interrupts the overarching pattern of the book.¹⁸

In short, proponents of this view believe the psalm to be a *disruptive* later addition that does not fit into the narrative of Jonah.

Hans Walter Wolff is a thoughtful representative of those who take this critical position with regard to the psalm. I choose to interact with him because he is often extremely insightful, as displayed in his discussion of the dating of the book, his setting of Jonah in the context of the Twelve, and his discussion of the intentional caricature of Jonah by the book's author.¹⁹

In the end, though, Wolff cites six reasons why the psalm of Jonah was not incorporated into the text by the original author, with the implication that it is disruptive, rather than integrative, in the context of the book as a whole:²⁰

- 1) The psalm is said fit a setting of the temple much better than a fish's belly.

17. These first three common arguments in favor of the disruptive nature of the psalm were taken from Landes (who will later argue for the originality of the psalm) and summarized in Holbert, "“Deliverance Belongs to Yahweh!”" 70.

18. The last five common arguments in favor of the disruptive nature of the psalm were taken from Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 141. Note that Watts is not a proponent of this view, but his summary of the position is helpful.

19. See Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 75–178.

20. See *Ibid.*, 78–79; 128–31.

- 2) With regard to language, the prayers in the narrative are said to address God alone (O YHWH), but never talk about him. Further to this, Wolff notes that different words are used to describe the petitioner's distress in psalm and narrative in Jonah, and that גדול ("great") is used 14 times in the narrative but not at all in the psalm.
- 3) The characterization of Jonah is problematic for Wolff, as the psalm of Jonah "presents the reader with a Jonah who has repented in the most exemplary way"—a Jonah who for Wolff is not found at the end of the ancient prose narrative.
- 4) The agent of Jonah's trip into the sea is reported differently: the narrative identifies the seamen and in the psalm it is YHWH.
- 5) The timing of the song of thanksgiving: in reality one needs to be in the sanctuary, but Jonah is far from the sanctuary.
- 6) The intended audience who will be instructed by the psalm: the construct chain הבל־ישוא ("meaningless emptiness")²¹ would suggest that it is directed to correct those who do not worship YHWH, but the fact that these "idol worshippers" forsake their חסד ("steadfast love") shows that they were formerly Yahwists.

Wolff continues:

Even when, in the following passage, the narrator can talk about an obedient Jonah for a time, his "hero" remains as coldly reserved and taciturn as he was in chap. 1. But at the end his initial reluctance actually builds up to a sulky defiance that makes him want to die rather than submit. No, the man in the psalm, who prostrates himself before God in thanksgiving, and rejoices at being able to tell his brothers what he has experienced, is quite a different person—a later person.²²

Wolff concludes that the book of Jonah is best interpreted with the psalm extracted. On this model the fish swallows Jonah, Jonah stays there for three days and nights, he preaches in Nineveh after his ejection from the

21. See the discussion of this term in what follows.

22. *Ibid.*, 130.

fish, and his heart is revealed to have never been changed as he sulks in chapter 4.²³

Inexplicably though, for Wolff the psalm does have meaning. The addition of the psalm is said to show that the mercy of God can turn the belly of hell into the womb of a new birth.²⁴ Without explanation, then, the disruptive interpolation is somehow relevant devotionally. However, in the end Wolff will still conclude that present day exegesis of Jonah need not be burdened with any explanation of the psalm—for him, the interpreter ought to focus on the narrative flow with the psalm extracted and ignored.²⁵ But is this the best explanation?

THE PSALM OF JONAH AS INTEGRATIVE IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

While the historical-critical method of interpretation employed by Wolff is most concerned with reconstructing the text's pre-history, canonical interpreters are most concerned with the message of the final form of the text. Like historical-critics, canonical interpreters *consider* the text's pre-history, but with caution as a speculative and theoretical enterprise.²⁶ They make a theological decision in favor of the final form presentation as the proper parameter for interpretation, rather than the simple history of the text's development as it is reconstructed by historical critics.²⁷ In our specific case, the canonical approach *gives the psalm a chance to*

23. See *Ibid.*, 131. Though on different grounds, Tribble (*Rhetorical Criticism*, 172) agrees, claiming that rhetorical-critical analysis, "supports source critical findings that deem the psalm a secondary addition to the narrative." She goes on to argue on the basis of the narrative as a complete literary unit, and the disruptive nature of the psalm (in terms of the symmetry of the book). See *ibid.*, 172–73.

24. See Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 88, citing Uwe Steffen, *Das Mysterium Von Tod und Auferstehung. Formen und Wandlungen Des Jona-Motivs, Etc.* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 106. Also a legitimate application for Wolff, Jonah's time in the belly of the fish became a type, or prefiguration of the fate of Jesus, and the church herself can learn from this scene. In addition, Wolff adds, "Very many groups within the church deserve no more than to be devoured and spat out; and yet the church must not forget the playful triumph of her God who, in spite of it all, still makes her serviceable and ready to set out at long last on the way to Nineveh" (*Obadiah and Jonah*, 142).

25. George M. Landes notes this in "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah: The Contextual Interpretation of the Jonah Psalm," *Int* 21 (1967): 6.

26. See Christopher R. Seitz, "Canonical Approach," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, et. al.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 100.

27. See *Ibid.*, 101.

show itself as integrative in the flow of the book of Jonah, and this “innocent until proven guilty” attitude will prove fruitful as we progress.²⁸ In what follows I will look at the issue of vocabulary, the phenomenon of psalms inserted into Hebrew narrative, the theme of irony in Jonah, the book of Jonah in the context of the Twelve, and a rethinking of the so-called problem of the inconsistent character of Jonah. In so doing, I will omit the question of whether the psalm was original to the author of the book of Jonah and will replace this question about the text’s prehistory with a consideration of the psalm’s integrative or disruptive nature in the flow of the book as a whole.

Vocabulary

Although the psalm and the narrative in Jonah do exhibit differing vocabulary, Watts notes that there are also some similarities, with קרא (“to call”);²⁹ the mention of sacrifices and vows,³⁰ and the verb ירד (“to go down”) as compared to Jonah’s downward motion throughout the early narrative,³¹ among other examples.³² Even where the vocabulary differs, one must not forget that in its very nature Hebrew poetry uses more diverse language than Hebrew prose.³³ One should *not expect*, therefore, the vocabulary or the ethos of psalm and narrative to match. In addition, it needs to be remembered that the psalm of Jonah does not need to be an original composition of the author of Jonah in order to be integrative in the context of the book. For example, a plausible solution

28. After rehearsing the major source-critical arguments in favor of the psalm as neither composed nor included by the author of the narrative, Trible notes that the debate has subsequently “swum around” to the “dry land” of traditional formulation, with the subjectivity of the debate finally resulting in views that now “turn on their circuit” back-and-forth between the two positions. See Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 160–61.

29. See 2:3; cf. 1:2, 6, 14; 3:2.

30. Cf. the זבח (“sacrifice”) and נדר (“vow”) Jonah promises as reflected in the sailor’s reaction to the calming of the sea; 2:10; cf. 1:16.

31. See 2:7; 1:3, 5.

32. Watts further notes that the prose introduction to the psalm (2:2) echoes the introduction of Jonah’s prayer in 4:2, with the two prayers also sharing vocabulary חסד (“steadfast love”) in 2:9 and 4:2; חיי (“my life”) and נפשי (“my soul”) in 2:7–8 and 4:2–3. But also of note are the *different* words used between psalm and narrative to describe “the sea,” and being “inside” (the ship, the belly of Sheol). See Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 133–35.

33. See Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, (WBC 31; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 439.

could be that in his reported speech, the prophet was viewed as citing a preexisting psalm in the belly of the fish, much the same as worshipers through the centuries have used the biblical psalms to express their own praise, thanks, and laments.³⁴ The idea that this could have been a pre-existing psalm written originally for another (cultic?) context does not preclude it from being meaningfully incorporated into the text of Jonah.

The Art of Hebrew Poetry Inserted into Narrative

Lacking in much of the discussion about the psalm of Jonah in the narrative flow of the book is a broader analysis of this phenomenon throughout the Hebrew Bible. With the 1992 publication of *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative*, James W. Watts has provided interpreters with a valuable resource in this regard. He notes that the mixing of prose and poetry is a distinctive literary feature of the Hebrew Bible, where books that are primarily prose interrupt the narrative sequence with the insertion of poems.³⁵ Many (but certainly not all) of these poems are very similar to the contents of the Psalter and share some common features among themselves, most notably they often occupy thematically climactic and structurally crucial positions in larger blocks of narrative.³⁶ These psalms are spoken by the characters in the narrative rather than the narrator, and although the internal evidence of the psalms suggests that they once existed in the cult, they are presented in non-cultic contexts in their new narrative context.³⁷ Throughout his analysis Watts shows that a given inset psalm could be deleted without being missed in the narrative flow, but this points to the fact that *it was not meant to be used for plot development* but for other narrative purposes such as thematic exposition and characterization, a practice consistent with the other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Therefore, a psalm's failure to develop the plot does not necessarily indicate that it is disruptive in the

34. This point is also made in Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah," 8–9.

35. See Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 11.

36. Note that Watts believes most of these inset psalms show signs of being later additions to the narratives in which they are now found. In his view, evidence of this includes, "textual disturbances around the psalms, thematic conflicts between the psalms and the prose narratives, and in one case, an edition of the narrative in which the psalm is missing." See *ibid.*, 11–12.

37. See *ibid.*, 12.

context of its biblical book!³⁸ For Watts, whereas prose narrative eschews direct commentary, poetry offers vivid descriptions of feelings and emphatic statements of ideas. Therefore,

[when] writers or editors of narrative needed to make thematic emphases and emotions explicit, they did not try to reproduce the effects of poetry in prose, but simply switched modes. Explicit emotional displays and interior characterization were thus introduced into Hebrew narrative without changing its basic nature.³⁹

For Watts it was natural, then, for the authors of Hebrew narrative to turn to psalmody in order to deepen the characterization of the figures in the narrative.⁴⁰

Watts then deals specifically with the psalm of Jonah. He notes that the prior and subsequent narrative plot contains no direct references to the psalm, with the possible exception of 2:11—if YHWH’s order to the fish was *a response* to the psalm, which is only possible if the fish is viewed as an agent of rescue from drowning rather than a further deterioration in Jonah’s condition.⁴¹ Further, it has already been shown that there are verbal and thematic links between the psalm and the narrative.⁴² Although many wrestle with the “two Jonahs” between psalm and narrative, Watts shows that the picture of YHWH is consistent between them, and therefore the characterization of Jonah deserves to be taken seriously as well.⁴³ He adds that Jonah’s piety in the psalm accords with that expressed by him in his narrative speeches, from his orthodox confession to the sailors (1:9) to his accurate diagnosis of the cause of the storm (1:12), and the reason he gives for his disobedience to YHWH (4:2). It is therefore clear to Watts that, “the psalm accords with the

38. See *ibid.*, 34, 83 (song of Deborah), 100, 108 (song of David). Stuart adds that in any narrative, large chunks can be removed without doing damage to what remains: e.g., deleting 10–20 percent of the Gospels, Psalms, Deuteronomy, or Isaiah. See Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 438.

39. Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 194.

40. See *ibid.*, 131.

41. See *ibid.*, 133.

42. See section on vocabulary above; *ibid.*, 132–35.

43. See *ibid.*, 136–38.

narrative in characterizing Jonah as an orthodox Yahwist.”⁴⁴ Although there is tension, then, between the narrative and the psalm in Jonah, the narrative role of the psalm is said to focus on characterization.⁴⁵ As for the supposed need for a lament where a psalm of thanksgiving is found, Watts adds that, “individual thanksgivings tend to be placed at a point in the narrative when deliverance is expected, but not yet accomplished.”⁴⁶ Therefore, the psalm’s position or genre is no reason to conclude that it must be disruptive in the book as a whole.⁴⁷ The psalm of Jonah, like Exod 15, is used to evoke reader identification with the characters in the narrative; and like 2 Sam 22 and Isa 38, to provide inner characterization.⁴⁸ In fact, although these things could have been accomplished without a psalm in a modern novel, “in Hebrew literature deep inner characterization and the close reader identification that it can engender are usually reserved for poetry.”⁴⁹ Far from being a clumsy interpolation that lacks sense, a book of Jonah that includes the psalm is powerfully applied to the reader. And far from being merely a device for aesthetic pleasure or midrashic interpretation, the psalm does contribute to the narrative through its position in the book and its thematic contents.⁵⁰ Since plot development is not the primary criteria for evaluating a psalm’s narrative role, and since the narrative’s themes can be altered and enhanced with such poems, one should not be hasty to dismiss their interpretive value.⁵¹

Irony

Many have noted the theme of irony in the book of Jonah. For example, Hauser has shown that Jonah’s name, which means “dove,” adds an element of surprise to the book, as the themes through chapters 1–3 of

44. *Ibid.*, 138.

45. See *ibid.*, 140.

46. *Ibid.*, 141–42. cf. Hezekiah’s Psalm, Daniel’s Praise, and the Song of the Three.

47. See *ibid.*, 141–42.

48. See *ibid.*, 143.

49. *Ibid.*, 144.

50. See *ibid.*, 186.

51. See *ibid.*, 190.

flight, submission to the sacrificial cult, and beauty all seem to fit various nuances of the dove image, but this “fit” grinds to a sudden halt in chapter 4.⁵² However, is there a purpose in this contrast? Is the irony purposeful and intentional?

We have already noticed verbal links between psalm and narrative in Jonah, but a phrase from Jonah 2:9 adds to the theme of irony and helps display its purpose. In Jonah 2:9 we read that “those who regard *הבלי־ישׁוּא* [‘meaningless emptiness,’ or something similar] forsake their *הסד* [‘steadfast love’].” Many have noted that the terms are used together in Ps 31:7 and that *הבלי* (“meaningless”) is in parallel with “idols” in Deut 32:21.⁵³ But is it possible that the terms have connotations of idolatry, and are also purposefully broad to include the earlier actions of Jonah (from ch. 1) which he now regrets, as well as those he would return to later in the book (in ch. 4), thus forming an intentional ironic contrast between the repentant Jonah of 2:9 and the clearly disobedient Jonah of chapter 4? Especially as these words are coupled with the covenantal term *הסד* (“steadfast love”), there seems to be room for such an interpretation. A broad look at the use of the terms throughout the Hebrew Bible shows clearly that they can both refer to idols or what idols do, but they are also broad terms. In the context of Jonah, perhaps it is better to favor Simon’s general translation of “empty folly.”⁵⁴ This would only add to the parabolic/ironic function of Jonah. If the Jonah of the psalm resolves to never succumb to empty folly, the Jonah of chapter 4 has done just that, for in his own self-deception his false views of the proper object of YHWH’s grace and mercy have surfaced. The reader of the book of Jonah has journeyed with Jonah, and so has been led to identify with “the pious Jonah’s” prayer in 2:9, only to be rebuked along with “the impious Jonah” in chapter 4. In this way the prayer of Jonah 2 functions in a similar way as Nathan’s ewe lamb story in 2 Sam 12, and the words of YHWH to Jonah in chapter 4 correspond to Nathan’s “you are the man.” In other words, the reader is first drawn in to relate to Jonah as a pious worshiper in Jonah 2 who would never forsake their *הסד* (“steadfast love”) by following empty folly before being rebuked along with Jonah in chapter 4 for doing just that in a way they had not seen in themselves previously. Without the psalm of Jonah,

52. See Alan Jon Hauser, “Jonah: In Pursuit of the Dove,” *JBL* 104 (1985): 22–23.

53. See, for example, Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 127.

54. See Uriel Simon, *Jonah* (JPS; ed. Michael Fishbane; trans. Lenn Schramm; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 23–24. Alternatively, Stuart (*Hosea–Jonah*, 468) translates the terms as “empty nothings.”

which highlights Jonah's resolve and his allegiance to YHWH, the fall of Jonah in chapter 4 would lose its force, and the parabolic/ironic function of the book would vanish. The psalm powerfully adds, then, to both the irony and the kerygmatic purpose of the book for the Israelite people.

Clues from the Context of the Book of the Twelve

Although many commentators approach the book of Jonah as an individual work,⁵⁵ more recently there has been a canonical movement which appreciates the final form of prophetic books, including the Book of the Twelve as a unit.⁵⁶ Seitz notes that this movement is concerned, "to show that the Twelve is a single coordinated work as well as a composite collection,"⁵⁷ and therefore, "outfitted to speak both as twelve and as one."⁵⁸ Already in the early second century B.C.E., Sirach refers to the twelve prophets as a unit (Sir 49:10), the Qumran manuscripts have them collected into one scroll, and many other early witnesses do the same.

In Book of the Twelve scholarship, the catchword is often seen as binding books together, and Dempster points out that Obadiah succeeds Amos and deals with Edom, Jonah deals with repentance and salvation in Nineveh, Micah predicts judgment on Assyria, and Nahum describes the fall of an unrepentant Nineveh.⁵⁹ The Book of the Twelve

55. For example, in Collins's standard *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, he deals with Jonah outside of his section on the prophets, grouped with Ruth, Esther, Tobit, and Judith in a chapter called, "prose fiction." See John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 536. Seitz also notes that whereas Jonah is placed fifth in the canonical presentation (MT) of the Twelve, Blenkinsopp and von Rad (and others) put him last in their analyses. See Christopher R. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 140. For a helpful overview of the rise of higher criticism and its application to the prophets, see *ibid.*, 75–87.

56. See *ibid.*, 18.

57. *Ibid.*, 30.

58. Christopher R. Seitz, *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 88. In that same place Seitz goes so far as to suggest that, "it is questionable whether individual books of the Twelve had much of an individual life." For his full explanation, see *ibid.*, 110.

59. See Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (NSBT; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 183. See also Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, 120–21; Seitz adds that Jonah follows Obadiah, and so, "the account of Edom and the nations in Obadiah affects our understanding of God's dealings

as a whole, then, offers a more full-orbed picture of this foreign nation than the individual books could accomplish on their own.

From the perspective of a unified Book of the Twelve, a unified book of Jonah also adds to the multifaceted message.⁶⁰ If the Day of YHWH will figure in as a day of great judgment, the book of Jonah is clear that if those nations repent, YHWH will relent from the disaster he plans to send them, a theme applied to Israel in Hosea.⁶¹ On the other hand, if those repentant nations will cease to diligently seek YHWH, then Nahum makes clear that they will undergo judgment.

I have already shown that the psalm of Jonah intensifies the theme of irony in the book, adding to its parabolic/ironic use among the people of Israel. From this perspective, the book of Jonah shows that even the most sincere member of the covenant community can experience inner rebellion against YHWH's mercy to their enemies, and that the member of the covenant community must be as excited about YHWH's mercy (cf. Exod 34:6–7) *to the nations* as they are when it comes to the people of Israel.

Finally, although it is not in line with a direct keyword link, within the Twelve as a collection, Jonah can also be seen as a counterpart to Habakkuk. If Habakkuk needed correction from YHWH (cf. 1:5), then Jonah needed to be rebuked! But both prophets are also set forth as pious

with the nations in what lies ahead in the canonical depiction of the Minor Prophets as a whole" (139–40). He notes further that the theme of the repentance of the Ninevites, both human and animal in Jonah (3:8), has its counterpart in Joel 1:20, where even the wild beasts cry to YHWH because the water brooks are dried up. See *ibid.*, 148.

60. Seitz (*ibid.*, 119) agrees: "Jonah is a special case whose interpretation follows best when a sense of the larger conceptuality of the arrangement of the Twelve as a whole is grasped."

61. For more observations along these lines, see especially Marvin A. Sweeney, "Sequence and Interpretation in the Book of the Twelve," in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve* (ed. James Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 63; Rolf Rendtorff, "How to Read the Book of the Twelve As a Theological Unity," in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, 82–83; Paul R. House, "The Character of God in the Book of the Twelve," in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, 134. Seitz (*Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, 170) adds, "What if, for example, it could be shown that the primary context of interpretation for the book of Jonah is the book of the Twelve, wherein it operates as its own book, but also as a commentary on the dense theological confession that YHWH is compassionate and merciful, but also will by no means clear the guilty. . . . This theme cuts with special force when one considers Israel's relationship to the nations and God's forbearance and justice vis-à-vis them and vis-à-vis his chosen people Israel, not just in general terms (as in the case of Jonah), but also in terms of the final-form arrangement of the book of the Twelve."

singers of psalms whom the covenant people ought to imitate.⁶² The lives of both of these prophets will correct the covenant member in their approach to YHWH (whether mildly in Habakkuk or strongly in Jonah), as well as offer them pious words for their own prayers. What an encouragement within the Twelve that if at least two prophets needed mild or strong correction, the reader may also approach YHWH, gracious and compassionate, in the midst of their own failings.

Rethinking The Problem of Jonah's "Dual Character"

This leads to the question of the so-called dual characterization of Jonah between psalm and narrative, and particularly between chapters 2 and 4 of the book.⁶³ However, that there is wavering, imperfect faith in Jonah does not preclude the idea that the psalm is integrative in the flow of the book. It would seem very two-dimensional to claim that every person is either "good," and always acting as such, or "bad," and always acting as such, or that the Bible always portrays its main characters as heroes to imitate and never fools to learn from. In fact, we meet other such conflicted characters throughout the Hebrew Bible. For the sake of space, I will briefly explore two of these figures, one from Hebrew narrative that also includes poetic text and one from Hebrew narrative that does not include any poetic text. These brief descriptions will serve to confirm that the Hebrew Bible is replete with figures who are more complicated than simply "good" or "bad" and that the real hero of the Old Testament is YHWH. They will also show that perceived differences in characterization are not only found in prose versus poetry, but also in narratives themselves. Dual, or competing, characterization is not the issue, then, but the use of different modes to communicate different aspects of a figure's character.

David is the obvious choice as an example of a figure whose life is presented in Hebrew narrative that also contains poetic material.⁶⁴

62. See *Ibid.*, 146, 243.

63. Contrary to most, Tribble (*Rhetorical Criticism*, 171–72) sees the psalm as negative and not positive, with Jonah's words of deliverance received in the psalm as a proclamation of his arrogance. I am not, however, persuaded by her argument, as the five points in this section make clear.

64. Moses (and the poetic text in Exod 15) and Hezekiah (and the praise in Isa 38) are two other figures whose descriptions in narrative also contain inset psalms. Moses and Hezekiah are also two complicated figures who exhibit great victories and great failures, and in both cases their failures appear in material subsequent to their reported pious poetic songs.

Aside from the material in Chronicles or the 73 psalms attributed to him, in the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel David is linked to *two* psalms that have been inserted into Hebrew narrative.⁶⁵ In addition, the narrative portions of Samuel clearly present David as a complicated figure who exhibits flaws and faith from beginning to end.⁶⁶ In other words, these texts all combine to present an integrative rather than a disruptive portrait of David between portions of narrative and between narrative and inset psalms.

First, at David's anointing the use of a horn of oil (1 Sam 16:1, 13; cf. 1 Sam 2:10) links him to the song of Hannah and the prophecy that YHWH will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed one.⁶⁷ He is clearly presented, then, as the hoped-for monarch who will be YHWH's instrument of victory for his people, as set forth in the poetic overture to the books of Samuel. Then, near the end of 2 Samuel David is recorded as singing a song of thanksgiving to YHWH (1 Sam 22), which could have closed the account of his life on a high note. However, *after* the recorded words of this psalm, the narrative will present David as taking a census of the people and those same people will bear the consequences of his sin in the form of a mass execution by YHWH, before the book finally closes with an account of David's repentance. The narrative of his life will indeed present David as the great king of Israel, as the anointed of YHWH (1 Sam 16) who defeats the enemy of God's people on their behalf (1 Sam 17), and as the righteous suffering one who refuses to put YHWH's anointed to death despite suffering greatly at his hand (1 Sam 18–31). He will be the recipient of the great promises of 2 Sam 7 (referred to as a covenant in 2 Sam 23:5), and his reign will be viewed as the high point in the history of Israel. However, he is also presented in the narrative as one who would

65. One might also be tempted to include the poetic "last words of David," which would raise the count to three poetic texts. However, since the focus of this study is on *psalms* inserted into Hebrew narrative, I leave off the third text in this place.

66. It could be argued that David is the most important human figure in the Old Testament from the point of his first appearance in 1 Sam 16 onwards, as his name will appear 1,075 times in the Hebrew Bible and the time of his reign will be looked upon as the high point in the history of God's people. Also note that while Watts presents the material in 1 and 2 Samuel as a redactional unity, I am simply working with the final form as an integrative whole, without comment on the text's prehistory. For a more in-depth discussion of these two inset psalms in the context of 1 and 2 Samuel, see Watts, *Psalms and Story*, 19–40, 99–117.

67. While Watts notes the proleptic nature of this psalm in the books of Samuel, he does not list the horn as one of his links with the narrative that follows. See Watts, *Psalms and Story*, 22–24.

have chosen to incur bloodguilt had YHWH not saved him from it (1 Sam 25:22ff), as a polygamist who fails to heed the warning to not take many wives (1 Sam 25:42–44; cf. Deut 17:17), and as an adulterer and murderer who needed to be induced to repentance through prophetic rebuke (2 Sam 11–12), even before the failure of the census (and subsequent repentance) at the end of 2 Samuel (ch. 24). In other words, David is presented in narrative texts as a flawed but forgiven and faithful king over the people of God, even as poetic texts near the bookends of the narrative will anticipate his greatness (1 Sam 2) and record his pious words of thanksgiving (2 Sam 22). Further to this, in the New Testament the Christ will be presented as the Son of David (cf. 2 Sam.7), but this should be no surprise, for this is how the later Old Testament texts also anticipated him.⁶⁸ Evidently David's failures did not change YHWH's commitment to him or his use as an instrument of YHWH and type of the Messiah. His presentation in narrative and poetry were not seen as disruptive to those who shaped the final form of 1 and 2 Samuel, then, but as two integrative sides of a rounded presentation of this complex figure.

A second complicated figure whose presentation in a Hebrew narrative text does not contain poetic texts is the person of Abraham. In the Genesis narrative, this "father of the faithful" could in one instance believe God and have this credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6), and in the next chapter not believe God and marry his wife's slave girl (Gen 16). Further, Abraham could also, as a pattern over the course of his adult life, claim that his wife was his sister out of fear of being murdered (cf. Gen 20:13)! This is but one additional example of a faithful worshiper of YHWH who, *after* some of his great acts of faith, was also shown to be a horrible failure. And yet within the Christian canon Abraham is mentioned in "the great faith hall of fame" in Hebrews 11. Evidently, in the Genesis narrative his later failures did not change YHWH's commitment to him or the usefulness of his model acts of piety for later believers in Jesus.

In conclusion, then, as it was with David and Abraham, so it was with Jonah, a conflicted prophet, yes, but also one who would, within the Christian canon, be set forth as a type of Christ, in both his three days in the tomb,⁶⁹ and in his successful preaching ministry (cf. Matt 12:39–41;

68. Cf. among many other texts, Ps 2.

69. Note that 1 Pet 3:18ff indicates that for Christ the grave was not a place of defeat but a time when he preached to spirits in prison. This would coincide with the interpretation of Jonah's time in the belly of the fish as a time of salvation/rescue, and confirms the consistency of the type/antitype between Jonah and the Gospels.

16:4; Luke 11:29–32). To borrow some terms from systematic theology, would it not be possible that Jonah was genuinely repentant and further along on the sanctification trajectory after his rescue at sea, but shown two chapters later to be not wholly sanctified and in need of further correction from YHWH as the remaining sin of his heart was displayed? Far from evincing a disruptive interpolation, then, the conflicted prophet between psalm and narrative in Jonah offers a powerful display of God's covenant grace to the conflicted reader of the book of Jonah.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the psalm of Jonah in its narrative context has proved a challenge for interpreters, the difficult work is to be rewarded. The book of Jonah and the Book of the Twelve would not be the same without this pious prayer that is certainly integrative in the context of the book as a whole. The poem's inclusion makes sense in light of considerations concerning vocabulary and the art of inserting poetry into Hebrew prose. Its inclusion adds interpretive value in light of the ironic/parabolic nature of the book of Jonah and the book in the context of the Twelve. Finally, the pious prayer provides lessons about the earthy, imperfect walk of faith that all of God's people experience.