

Jonah 1:17-2:10

Jonah Inside the Fish

1. Introduction

After discussing the fate of the sailors, we read what happens to Jonah after he is thrown overboard in 1:17-2:10. A fish swallows him. Jonah prays to God from inside the fish (1:17-2:1). After that the so-called "Psalm of Jonah" follows. Finally God sees to it that the fish spews Jonah out on dry land (v.10).

The prayer of Jonah (vv.2-9) is a finely composed song, a psalm. As a result of this psalm, however, we are forced to ask a few questions. Jonah's life is in danger. Even so he manages to be sane enough to produce such a balanced and well-composed song. How can this be explained? You would rather expect to hear a cry for rescue from Jonah's mouth, a prayer for deliverance. Verses 2-9 give us a song instead. A song of thanks for salvation accomplished, not a prayer for salvation hoped for. We look back at the need that was (v.6), at words of prayer which were cried out (v.2) and of promises that had been made (v.9). How is this song consistent with Jonah's critical situation in the fish? We expect Jonah to be inside the fish, yet in verse 9 he appears to be in the temple courts, ready to keep his vow and to sacrifice to the Lord. How is that possible?

In order to answer these questions we must look closely at verse 2a: "He said..." We can also ask ourselves how this psalm of Jonah is of value to us? Why is it included in the Bible? Is it not a very personal document used in very peculiar circumstances? What meaning does this song have for us today?

2. Text Notes

Verse 1:17-2:1

After what is recounted in verse 1:16 about the sailors, we turn back in 1:17 to Jonah. In the meantime much has happened to him. In light of this, a better translation is: "the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah." [RSV] Much has been written about this fish. The Bible, nevertheless, is very frugal on the subject. Exactly what sort of fish it was is not recorded, only that it was large.

By "three days and three nights" we do not have to think precisely of three times 24 hours. These words can also be used to indicate part of days and nights. Compare also with this what the Saviour says about himself in Matthew 12:40 (cf. Luke 24:21). Compare also Esther 4:16 with 5:1. These words do not point to the exact length of time, as the description is a little too broad for that. The point is that little more could be expected of Jonah. Presumably, somebody who gives no sign of life for such a long time must be dead. (cf. John 11:17; Luke 24:21)

Verse 2a

Verse two begins with the words "He said." This presents a difficulty. The impression is given that what follows is what Jonah said literally from within the fish. But the

song of verses 2-9 is not a prayer for rescue. It is a song of thanks for the salvation which has been accomplished. The poet utters no words of humiliation. He does not ask for forgiveness. He gives no sign of wanting to repent. There is mention of a great need, a situation from which the Lord has saved him. For this he is thankful to the Lord. The man who speaks these words does not seem to be in the fish but in the temple from where he brings a thank offering to the Lord (v.9).

Some commentators explain it as follows. The fish swallows Jonah. According to them he is actually already saved, that is, from drowning. Jonah realizes that the Lord does this. Now that God has begun to save him, he trusts that the Lord will complete what he has begun. Hence, in advance, he lifts up a song of thanks from within the fish.

There are some objections to this explanation. First of all, it is not plausible that Jonah knows he is safe. As long as he remains in the fish his life is threatened. How can he be so sure that he is not to die a slow death? He finds himself in an extremely critical and hopeless situation. Phrases such as "the depths of the grave" (v.2) And "to the roots of the mountains ... barred me in forever" (v.6) are fitting. As long as he remains in the fish he is not saved from the realm of death. Also, you would then expect words of humiliation and a prayer for forgiveness as well as a cry for salvation.

Further, this explanation does not fit in with what 1:17 says about being swallowed by the fish. A better translation of this word would be "devoured." Devouring means, and often results in, the digestion and destruction of something or someone. As far as man is concerned, it indicates an extremely dangerous situation.

Finally, it remains difficult to explain why the speaker appears to find himself on the temple court (v.9). In short, this song of thanks does not suit Jonah's situation in the fish.

Jonah must have spoken this psalm after he was saved. It could have been an existing song which he likely modified several times. After everything he had experienced, the psalm affected him deeply. He sees his desperate situation expressed in it just as much as his wonderful deliverance from the kingdom of death. The song clearly expresses the thankfulness which he feels. Making use of an existing song happens more often in the Bible (cf. 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and Luke 1:46-55).

How must we then understand the words "He said" in v.2a? Does that not make it appear that Jonah prayed to God from inside the fish (see 2:1)? Are the words that follow not the words which he then spoke? Considering the circumstances, it is better to give the words "He said" a broader meaning, in the sense that what Jonah prayed inside the fish can be seen in this song. This is a psalm which, after he was saved, he reworded in order to show how he himself called to God and how he was saved from danger. Why then was this song placed after 1:17 and not after 2:10? This remains a difficult question. We do well to consider the following.

By praying (2:1), Jonah finally goes on his knees before God. It is right, then, to say something after 2:1 about what he prays. In this way the danger in which Jonah had

been, receives more focus. The text dramatically paints what it means for Jonah when he finds himself inside a fish. He lies in the depths of the grave, imprisoned in an enormous mass of water. The deep surrounds him. Bars lock behind him forever. When the situation is that bad, then, finally, he prays to God. It could not have been delayed any more. The situation could not have been more serious. In this way this song connects 2:1 with 1:17. It gives these verses more dimension and depth. At the same time the way is prepared for verse 10. When things look so bleak for Jonah, when, after waiting so long, he finally turns back to God, God still saves him. When it was already too late God still opens a way to life for him.

Verse 2-9

The first two lines of the song summarize its content (v.2). It is noticeable that something is said *about* the Lord, and something is said *to* him. This structure should be seen as a style feature that had to do with the place where such a song of thanks would originally have been sung – the temple court. Thanks were brought to the Lord there but at the same time the people who were listening were told what God had done (see Psalm 9:1-11; 18:2-7; 30:1-5; 116 for example).

Jonah cried to God “from inside the fish.” That is to say, he saw himself as already dead. It is good to realize that death is understood here in a different way than we think about death. Here death is experienced as a power which takes hold of your life. While you are still completely alive, while your heart still beats, while you are still in your right senses, you can be in death's grip. You can be experiencing such a degree of fear, sickness, or danger that you can no longer call that living. Life has become a form of death. Conversely, death can be portrayed as the lowest form of life; there spirits live a stale and sombre existence in darkness in “the land of oblivion” (Psalm 88:10-12).

“The belly of Sheol” (RSV) can also be translated as: “the belly of the underworld.” The association with the inside of the fish, where Jonah was, is obvious. Sheol is introduced here as a monster which has swallowed Jonah (cf. Isaiah 5:14; Habakkuk 2:5). It is a special sign of God's wrath when a person descends alive into Sheol (cf. Numbers 16:29-34; Psalm 55:15) Check a Bible Dictionary for more information on the difference between “Sheol” and “hell.”

Verse 3 describes Jonah's distress beginning with the moment that he is thrown in the sea. He recognises God's hand in this action, although it is men who throw him overboard. Hence he can say, “You hurled me into the deep.” Jonah realizes the enormity of God's anger. In a few sentences this wrath piles up (cf. Psalm 42:7; see also Psalm 18:5; 69:2,3). The dire situation into which Jonah has fallen shows that God has cast him off. No longer living before God's face means that there is no more relationship with the Lord. You can no longer count on his attention and protection.

Even so, the reality was surprisingly different from what Jonah had expected. The second part of verse 4 forms an opposite to the first. Jonah does not ask a question but states a fact. Linguistically, it is better to translate verse 4b as: “none the less I can behold your holy temple again.” Jonah thought he was cast off by God, but nothing was further from the truth. He could still appear before God in the temple.

Verse 5 and 6 describe a terrible situation once more but again with an indication of

how the Lord saves from it (v.6b). "Seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down." This saying is based on the idea that the earth floats like a disc on the sea. The mountains rest upon foundations laid deep in the sea (see Psalm 24:2; 46:3). They hold the earth in her place, just like anchors hold a ship. It is impossible to sink deeper.

It is a suffocating experience when seaweed winds itself around your head on the seabed. Seaweed probably indicates a sort of great algae which grows in the depth of the sea.

The beginning of verse 6 should be merged with verse 5. This has consequences for the translation of the remainder of verse 6. This now reads as "I went down to the land where bars closed upon me for ever."

Death is described here as territory from where there is no return. The dead live there in the land without return. There you are separated from the land of the living by barred doors. The realm of death is often portrayed in this way in manuscripts from the Old Near East. For the same thought see Job 10:21 and 16:22.

Nevertheless God made the impossible possible (6b). He brought Jonah back from death and the grave (cf. Psalm 30:3). A deeply grateful person expresses himself with the heartfelt and moving words "O Lord my God."

As with verse 2, verse 7 looks at the whole. The distress, the prayer, and God's intervention are brought forward together once more as the finale. The distress was great: "When my life was ebbing away." In Jonah's distress he was on the point of giving up. All resources of life flowed away. He had nothing left in himself to fall back on.

Then Jonah says, "I remembered you, Lord." That remembering does not only mean thinking about God. It also means surrendering yourself in trust to Him. It involves thinking and saying (people often spoke out loud), but also doing. In this way the prayer for salvation rose up to the Lord. From the depths of the Mediterranean Sea it reached God. He heard!

Because God hears him, the poet draws a conclusion for the sake of those who are listening to him (v.8). How foolish it is to honour idols instead of God. Turning yourself away from him who is "grace." The verse could also be translated "...forfeit the grace who is their Strength." Such people exchange God for something that is totally worthless, for "vain idols." Here are two words that imply the complete worthlessness of something. Psalm 31:6 also describes idols in this way.

In contrast to the idol worshippers, Jonah brings thank and honour to God (v.9, compare Psalm 66:13; 116:4, 17-19; see also Psalm 50:14). With the confession "Salvation comes from the Lord!" this psalm has a fine ending and at the same time looks forward to verse 10.

Verse 10

God sees to it that Jonah is spewed out onto dry land. The word used here is reminiscent of the sound of vomiting. It is not very uplifting for a prophet of God to be

sent back to his commission in this way. Jonah's precise landing place is not recorded. Obviously it is not important for us to know. Jonah is saved and stands with both feet on dry ground, back where he started.

3. Comments for today

1. The song in Jonah 2 is a psalm. That means that we must read it as such. In psalms people get a chance to speak. They express not only their distress, their sorrow, their complaints and frustrations to God (and people), but also the rejoicing and thankfulness that exist after the wonder of salvation. They bring God praise and voice their intention to serve him. At the same time these songs from men are also the Word of God. They form a part of the Bible. God has given them a place in the revelation of himself. He shows us how alive a relationship with him can be, how far a man can go in his complaining to God, and how one must respond to God's great deeds. He himself places the response of thankfulness to his saving love in our mouths. That can also be seen in this psalm. Therefore it is still important to listen to this song of so many years ago.
2. We must read this psalm in the context in which it is placed. The background is formed by the story of Jonah's flight. He has been thrown overboard during a terrible storm, is threatened with drowning but is saved.

His distress, however, has a spiritual background. Jonah had turned his back on the service of God, in which he even had the specific task of prophet. He broke his relationship with God within the covenant of the Lord with his people. Therefore this song still has a meaning for us today. It shows what can happen when someone turns his back on the Lord, but it also shows how his life can blossom again after his return. It shows in what way you may come back to the Lord and his people, what direction your life must then take.

3. It is clear that this song is more than a very personal document. It is a song for the whole of God's people functioning in a thankful life before the Lord. Jonah uses this song, one which had probably already existed, in his particular circumstances. More than likely the first time it was recited was as the result of yet another distressed set of circumstances. We can use it in every new situation.
4. From Jonah's experiences we can also learn that we cannot wander so far away that we cannot come back to God. God's door is always open to hear an honest and humble prayer for mercy. This says a lot about our God.
5. The Lord saves Jonah from the distress in which he found himself. The fish spews him out onto the dry land. God's favour is reflected in this rescue. This rescue is possible because Jonah's unfaithfulness is forgiven on the grounds of the sacrifice that Christ Jesus would later bring. Because Christ would be crushed under God's judgment, there is a way back for Jonah. God's favour to us is not always as visible as it was in Jonah's case, but he has proved his love for us, once and for all, in the coming of Christ. His love is clearly visible in the offering of his Son. We can find rest in that fact, even when real distress remains.

4. Summary

Jonah's psalm accounts for the greatest part of chapter 2. It can be arranged as follows:

- Verse 2 appears to be the introduction which summarizes the content of the song. The themes of distress and salvation are already strongly evident.
- Verse 3 and 4 belong together. Now the critical situation is developed more broadly. At the end of verse 4 the poet thankfully describes how he, alive and well, he can see the temple once more. He is saved.
- Verse 5 and 6 together have the same construction. New images make clear how critical the situation had been but finally it is God who has brought the poet back from death.
- In verse 7 the distress returns one more time. Implicit is that God has done the saving at the last moment. The prayer has reached him.
- Verse 8 and 9 bring the conclusion. Considering the experience of the poet, it is folly to worship idols instead of God. The poet brings God the praise. He comes with thanks in the temple to pay his vow.

The psalm of Jonah can be classified as a song of thanks or praise. The wonder of God's salvation is sung aloud. He is honoured by it. God's great deeds in the salvation of one of his children are celebrated.

This song can be compared with other psalms of praise. We know several from the book of Psalms. The same themes that are found in Jonah 2 appear in many of these psalms. You can think, for example, of Psalm 9; 18; 30; 66; 107; 116; 138. Often the same elements recur - a cry for rescue, God listening, and being brought back from death by the Lord.

5. Tips for introduction and study

1. Compare the psalm of Jonah with other psalms of praise. A number are named in section 4, but there are more. See if the theme of the song in Jonah 2 can be found in these psalms. Are there also differences evident in the content? On the basis of Jonah 2, try to say something about songs of thanksgiving in general.
2. Take a stand concerning the question about Jonah's situation when this song is voiced. Do you think Jonah totally saved when he voices this song or not? Work out your answer using the notes explaining the song.
3. Using section 3, determine the meaning that the salvation of Jonah and his song have for us today.
4. Trace the connection between repentance and salvation/grace. What connection does Jonah's distress have with his state before God? Try to describe the relationship between his rescue and the work of Christ.

6. Discussion aid

1. Is it right to sum up the psalm of Jonah as a song of thanks? Does the great emphasis on the distress fit in with thanks? Does this psalm simply exaggerate the distress in a typical eastern manner, or can it also teach us something for our prayers and songs of thanks?

2. How must we understand the beginning of verse 2 which tells us that Jonah said this psalm – "He said"? Which is the most likely explanation and why? Is it worth the study?
3. It is possible that Jonah used an existing song. That means this song probably originated (in the most part) as the result of another situation of distress. Does this have consequences for the explanation of this psalm?
4. What message does Jonah 2 have for us? What does it tell us about the Lord God?
5. The song in Jonah 2 is a very personal poem made centuries ago. How can it be relevant to us?
6. Many psalms, including the one in Jonah 2, end with the praise of God. What place does praise have in your own prayers? Do you run the risk of not giving enough attention to the praise of God? Compare also the Lord's Prayer.
7. How can you meaningfully involve Psalm 139 with Jonah 2?
8. How can Jonah 2 encourage you, even if in your life the Lord has not saved you from a specific problem or need?

Hendrick Jan Room