

STRUCTURE AND MEANING [YONAH 2]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Study of structure in Biblical writings has taken increasing prominence in modern times in parallel with the shift from a focus on the meaning of Scripture to one on its language, historical and archeological background and milieu. One might say that the world has gone from trying to understand and apply timeless lessons to attempting to particularize and restrict them to a specific bygone time and place, so much better not to have to be bothered by them. Structural investigation originated with the schools of thought that wished to slice, dice and separate, that desired to demonstrate that the Bible is a babble of conflicting and arguing voices that, cannot hold us to anything.

Nevertheless, the renewed focus on structure has had some beneficial results. We have learned to understand better how form and function interplay and how compositional structure communicates the Author's intent. These methods are now in wide use among all who study Hashem's word.

The second chapter of Yonah is especially suited to structural investigation for it is all about contrasts and oppositions. Not all oppositioning is structural; the language and expression also darts from one extreme to another. The prophet switches between I and Thou, third person and second person, depths and heights, exhilaration and despair. We will delve more into these patterns as we go forward. In this first lesson, let us look at the overall structure of the chapter.

First, a quick introduction and definition of terms. A chiasmic pattern is one that has the beginning mirroring the ending and the middle parts set in opposition to one another. The ancient reader did not read as we do. We read solely forward. The ancient reader read both forward and backward, frequently returning to earlier passages and sentences to re-read them in the light of the later ones. For example, verse 9: "They that care for lying vanities their own mercy forsake." It follows the A B B' A' pattern; 'vanities' contrast with 'mercy' while 'care' plays off 'forsake'. The overall purpose of a chiasmic arrangement is to return our attention to the middle of the chiasm, wherein lies the key to meaning. In this case, it is the contrast between vanity and mercy.

Another pattern present in this chapter is A B C A' B'. Unlike the A B C B' A' pattern that draws our attention to the central C segment, the ABCA'B' pattern is a model for progression and development. You see something from one point of view and then see it again from a different point of view. Certain key words emphasize the relationship between sentences and The font available does not allow me to highlight these words. Please read carefully noting repetitions and parallelisms (A-A', B-B') as you go along. Consider the following:

A. For Thou didst cast me into the depth, in the heart of the seas, and the flood was round about me; all Thy waves and Thy billows passed over me.

B. And I said: 'I am cast out from before Thine eyes'; yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple.

C. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the deep was round about me; the weeds were wrapped about my head.

A. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars closed upon me for ever; yet hast Thou brought up my life from the pit, O HaShem my G-d.

B. When my soul fainted within me, I remembered HaShem; and my prayer came in unto Thee, into Thy holy temple.

The overall chiasmic symmetry of the chapter is striking for the first sentence "Jonah prayed unto HaShem his G-d out of the fish's belly" corresponds to the last one "And HaShem spoke unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land". Thus in overall structure the first sentence serves as prologue and the last as after-word. The second sentence is the introduction: "And he said: I called out of mine affliction unto HaShem, and He answered me; out of the belly of the nether-world cried I, and Thou heardest my voice." The next to the last sentences is a summary and it responds to the introduction: "They that regard lying vanities forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice unto Thee with the voice of thanksgiving; that which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is of HaShem". This chiasm draws us to the middle sentences and indicated to us that the meaning of the chapter is to be sought there.

The overall effect is to center our attention on the A B C A' B' sentences and what they mean. This structural device moves us along a process of development and growth as the A B transforms into A' B', similar but crucially different. How exactly this is accomplished and to what purpose must unfortunately wait until the next lesson.

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