

Jonah 2, A Song of Resurrection

Background

Our Lord saw in the prophet Jonah a prefiguring of his own resurrection (chart):

Mat 12:38-40 Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. 39 But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: 40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

While “Jonas was ... in the whale’s belly,” he was occupied in prayer, as recorded in Jonah 2. This is a remarkable prayer, for at least two reasons.

First, Jonah is thanking God for deliverance while he is still imprisoned. vv. 1a, 10 show that Jonah prayed while still in the belly of the fish. Yet this is not his first prayer. It does not ask for deliverance, but thanks God for assured deliverance in answer to a past petition, mentioned in 2, 4a, 7b (chart):

2 **I cried** by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and **he heard** me [answered me];
out of the belly of hell **cried I**, and **thou heardest** my voice.

4a Then **I said**, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.

7b When my soul fainted within me **I remembered** the LORD: and **my prayer** came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.

Perhaps he prayed this prayer while in the ocean, before the fish swallowed him (chart). He is not yet on dry land, but while still awaiting the promised deliverance he is already giving thanks. Perhaps this is the sense of 1 Thes 5:18, “in every thing give thanks.”

Second, the prayer is permeated with citations of the Psalms. Fifteen expressions in the poem are drawn from 23 different passages in the Psalms, with special emphasis on three (chart):

- 2 Sam 22 = Ps 18 (4 references) is a summary psalm of praise that 2 Sam reports as an epilog on David’s life.
- Ps 42-43 (one composition, as the refrain shows; 3 references) is a psalm of lament (crying out for help in trouble) while David was exiled from Jerusalem under Absalom’s rebellion.
- Ps 102 (3 references) is titled, “A Prayer of the Afflicted.”

Jonah knows the Scriptures, and turns to them for encouragement in his darkest hour.

Both of these characteristics—confident trust in God for deliverance, and reliance on the Scriptures for strength—mark our Lord during his time of deep trial. In addition, Jonah frequently describes himself as being dead. These references may be hyperbolic (this is, after all, poetry), but some Bible students think that he was actually resurrected, as was Lazarus. Since the Lord has invited us to compare his burial and resurrection with Jonah, perhaps we can learn from Jonah’s prayer something of our Lord’s attitude during his suffering. And since we are to reckon ourselves as partakers of the Lord’s death and

resurrection, we can take instruction for how we are to face trial.

Structurally, the poem follows a large class of psalms that are known as declarative psalms of praise of the individual, in which a person gives thanks to God for past deliverance. These psalms follow a fairly standard pattern (chart): summary, looking back at the time of need, report of deliverance, and vow of praise to the Lord. We can trace these same features here.

2, Summary

2 I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me [answered me]; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.--Jonah summarizes the entire episode, in words that echo no fewer than seven Psalms.¹ He was in dire trouble, so much so that he could consider himself to be in “hell” שְׁאוֹל, the place of the dead. Yet even there he was not beyond the Lord’s reach, as David acknowledges in his great Psalm on the Lord’s omniscience and omnipresence,

Psa 139:8 if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou *art there*.

This summary is the fundamental truth to which David, then Jonah, and then our Lord’s experience in resurrection need to call our attention: when things are going badly, we are to call on the Lord, and he will hear. We can never be beyond his attention.

3-6a, Looking Back at the Time of Need

Jonah recalls three things: God’s agency in his suffering, his cry to the Lord, and his experience of utter destruction. These are chiastic, with the disaster on the edges and his response in the center.

3, God’s Agency in his Suffering

Sometimes we think, “I can’t call on God for help in this problem. It’s my fault, because I sinned against him.” Jonah’s case shows that even when our suffering is our fault, God will still hear our cry.

In our Lord’s case, his suffering also resulted from God’s judgment—not on his own sins, but on ours.

3 For thou hadst cast me² into the deep, in the midst of the seas;--Note the contrast with ch. 1.

There, the sailors cast him into the sea; here, Jonah recognizes that it was really God’s action, changing the verb to echo the “psalm of the afflicted,” Ps 102.

1 Collocation of קרא, with צרה or צרר and with ענן is common in the pss:

- 81:8 (ET 7), Asaph, recalling God’s deliverance at the time of the Exodus
- 86:7, David’s prayer for deliverance from enemies
- 91:15, God’s promise of protection to those who take refuge in him
- 102:3 (ET 2), “prayer of the afflicted” v. 1
- 120:1, Psalm of Ascent, testimony of deliverance

The first two, with שמע instead of ענן (the parallel at the end of the next colon) are also in 1 Sam 22:7 = Ps 18:7 (ET 6), which are quoted later in vv. 5, 7, and Ps 34:7 (ET 6), David’s prayer after being delivered from Abimelech. Ps 22:25 captures much the same idea, but with שוע instead of קרא and ענה instead of צרה.

2 This verb form elsewhere only in Ps 102:11 (ET 10); the allusion is strengthened by the citation of 102:3 in v. 2. One expects טול, used 4x (1:4, 5, 12, 15) in ch. 1 to describe what the sailors did to Jonah. This form suggests that this “psalm of the afflicted,” along with Ps 18 and Ps 42, is central to Jonah’s meditation.

and the floods **compassed me about**:³ all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.⁴--He accurately describes what happened to him, but in the very words of Scripture, from 2 Sam 22 and Ps 42. “Thy” emphasizes again that he recognizes God’s hand in this judgment.

4, His Cry to the Lord

4 Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight;⁵--What matters most to him is not that he is in the sea, but that he has been separated from God. We recall our Lord’s prayer from the cross, also citing Scripture, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46 and parallels)

yet I will look again toward **thy holy temple**.⁶--Jonah’s longing for the temple stands in a long tradition (chart). First, it recalls David’s words in Ps 42-43, exiled before Absalom:

Psa 42:4 When I remember these *things*, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to **the house of God**, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday.

Psa 43:3-4 O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me **unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles**. 4 Then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy: yea, upon the harp will I praise thee, O God my God.

For David, the house of God was the tabernacle. Solomon built the temple as a place to which people could turn in trouble, a sort of relay point between earth and heaven. His dedicatory prayer (1 Kings 8) is built around a regular template. It envisions seven kinds of problems that the nation may face, and for each one, makes the following request:

- If your people experience a problem of this sort, and
- If they turn toward this house,
- Then hear in heaven, and answer them.

For example:

33 When thy people Israel be smitten down before the enemy, because they have sinned against thee,	and shall turn again to thee, and confess thy name, and pray, and make supplication unto thee in this house :	34 Then hear thou in heaven , and forgive the sin of thy people Israel, and bring them again unto the land which thou gavest unto their fathers.
35 When heaven is shut up, and there is no rain, because they have sinned against thee;	if they pray toward this place , and confess thy name, and turn from their sin, when thou afflictest them:	36 Then hear thou in heaven , and forgive the sin of thy servants, and of thy people Israel,

Approaching Calvary, our Savior longed for the fellowship he had with God before his incarnation (chart):

Joh 17:4-5 I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to

3 2 Sam 22:5 = Ps 18:5 (ET 4); 116:3 (both lacking “waves”; only other use of vb is Ps 40:14 (ET 13). The idiom is repeated in v. 5.

4 Exact quote from Ps 42:8 (ET 7), the Psalm of exile that is quoted also in vv. 7 and 9.

5 31:23 (ET 22), a psalm of deliverance from enemies, with נגרו instead of גרש

6 5:8 (ET 7) הֵיכַל קֹדֶשׁ, also 138:2. Ps 5 is in a Psalm of petition, like the prayer that Jonah recalls here; Ps 138 is a Psalm of praise, like Jonah 2 in its present form. The הֵיכַל was the focus of David’s worship. At that time it was only a tabernacle, but it could be called a הֵיכַל, cf. 1 Sam 1:9; 3:3 in Shiloh.

do. 5 And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.

Note the common thread through all these references to God's house and his presence.

- David sinned with Bathsheba. God chastised him by sending Absalom to drive him out of Jerusalem. Humbled, he longed to come "unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles."
- Solomon knew that the people would sin, and built a temple to focus their minds on God who dwells in heaven.
- Jonah, cast into the sea for his rebellion, longed for "thy holy temple."
- Our Savior, facing the cross for our sin, prayed to return to the glory that he enjoyed with the Father before creation.

The same principle applies to us. We are no longer citizens of this earth. The trials we face in this world should turn our hearts toward home, and sharpen our appetite for heaven.

Col 3:1-4 If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. 2 Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. 3 For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, *who is* our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.

What is the temple to which we are to turn? After Pentecost, the church, the body of Christ, is God's temple (Eph 2:19-21). Our interactions with one another are a central resource for us in dealing with trials and claiming God's deliverance.

5-6a, His Utter Hopelessness

5 The waters compassed me about,⁷ even to the soul:⁸ the depth closed me round about, ~~the weeds were~~ destruction⁹ was wrapped about my head.--The recurrent image here is being surrounded on every side: "compassed about," "round about," "wrapped about." God has removed every avenue of escape.

6 I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars *was* about me for ever:--The imagery is of burial. He is imprisoned by the earth, as though he were in a sepulchre hewn from the mountain.

6b-7, Report of Deliverance

Now Jonah turns from the description of his time of need to a report of how God delivered him.

yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God.--The word translated "corruption" is also sometimes rendered "the pit," and refers literally to the state of a dead person.

⁷ Cf. v. 3: 2 Sam 22:5 = Ps 18:5 (ET 4); 116:3.

⁸ 69:2 (ET 1) only other instance of מים עד נפש

⁹ Where סוף is a plant, it is a reed that extends above the water, not seaweed. See Barto. It seems better (with LXX εσχατος) to appeal to the meaning "end" of the root. Vulgate has simply *pelagus* "the sea."

Jonah may be speaking metaphorically, but he views his deliverance as resurrection from the grave.

7 When my soul fainted¹⁰ within me I remembered the LORD:¹¹ and my prayer came in¹² unto thee, into thine holy temple.¹³--With citations from five different psalms, he recalls his previous cry to the Lord, and how the Lord attended to it.

Vow of Praise

8 They that observe lying vanities¹⁴ forsake their own mercy.--The “lying vanities,” using a phrase from Ps 31:6, probably refers to the false gods to whom the sailors cried during the storm (chart),

Jon 1:5 Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god,

Their prayers were of no effect. But when Jonah explained the power of his God, they cast him overboard, and the Lord then brought calm,

Jon 1:16 Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows.

As we suggested in our studies in Isaiah, a central theme of Jonah is God’s dealings with the Gentiles. Jonah is initially reluctant to carry the good news to non-Jews, but he is now forced to realize that they are without hope apart from the God of Israel.

9 But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving;¹⁵ I will pay *that* that I have vowed.--

Such psalms of praise regularly end with a promise to worship the Lord, and Jonah follows that convention. And what is the word of thanksgiving that he proposes to offer?

Salvation is of the LORD.¹⁶--This expression appears only one other place, in Ps 3:8, David’s prayer when he fled from Absalom. As we have seen from Jonah’s repeated allusions to Ps 42-43, this experience was a model for him, and he draws his culminating word of praise from that history. Now that God has delivered him, he will declare publicly to all who will hear, “Salvation is of the Lord.” So Ps 22 anticipates that after the suffering one is delivered,

Psa 22:22, 25 I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee. ... 25 My praise *shall be* of thee in the great congregation: I will pay my vows before them that fear him.

So we, delivered from death by our Lord’s sacrifice, should proclaim to all around us the futility of trust in “lying vanities,” and the firm salvation that comes only from the risen Lord.

10 נפש התעטף elsewhere only Ps 107:5

11 42:5 (ET 4), translate “these things I remember: ...”

12 תבוא תפלי earlier only in Ps 88:3 (ET 2); later in 2 Chr 30:27; similar phrasing Ps 102:2 (ET 1)

13 138:2; cf. use of 5:8 (ET 7) in v. 4. In a Ps of praise, cf. 2 Sam 22:7 = Ps 18:7 (ET 6) for the idea of prayer reaching God in the temple.

14 31:7 (ET 6)

15 42:5 (ET 4), קול תודה, only in these two and 26:7, a prayer for vindication.

16 ישועה ליהודה elsewhere only 3:9 (ET 8), David’s prayer for deliverance from Absalom

Notes

Parallels from the Pss

Note prominence of Ps 18 = 2 Sam 22 and Ps 42. References here to ET:

Jonah	Ps 18 = 2 Sam 22	Ps 42	Ps 102	Other pss
2 cry, affliction, heard	18:6 = 22:7		102:2	81:7; 86:7; 91:15; 120:1; 34:7
3 thou has cast me			102:10	
3 the floods compassed me	18:4 = 22:5			116:3
3 thy waves and thy billows passed over me		42:8		
4 cast out of thy sight				31:22
4 thy holy temple (also v. 7)				5:7
5 waters compassed me	18:4 = 22:5			116:3
5 Waters ... unto the soul				69:1
7 soul fainted				107:5
7 I remembered the Lord		42:4		
7 prayer came in			102:1	88:2
7 holy temple (also v. 4)	18:6 = 22:7			138:2
8 observe lying vanities				31:6
9 voice of thanksgiving		42:4		
9 salvation is of the Lord				3:8

Note the particular appropriateness of the three Pss with repeated citations:

- 18, another individual declarative psalm of praise, presented in 2 Sam 22 as an epilog over David's experience
- 42, probably describing David's exile from Jerusalem under Absalom; Jonah is also exiled
- 102, titled "a Psalm of the afflicted."