

**Can the Book of Jonah be Described
as a “Ring Composition”? :
A Case Study through the Lens of Mary Douglas’ Narrative Reading**

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Abstract:

The Lord’s question in Jonah 4:11 remains unanswered and ambiguous. Jonah does not reply. This leaves the reader wondering what the Lord’s message was. This article proposes that the Lord’s rhetorical question in Jonah 4:11 may imply Jonah’s mission. This article will offer a new perspective to the literary reading of the book of Jonah by using Mary Douglas’ “Ring Composition” format, which is a kind of chiasmus. The chiasmus is usually applied to short pieces of writing, while Ring Composition is used for much longer texts. It is a construction of parallelism. It opens a theme, develops it, and rounds it off by bringing the conclusion back to the beginning. As a result of this ring-formation reading Douglas concludes that “the meaning is in the middle of the text. Since the book of Jonah offers a construction of parallelism, in order to explore the meaning of the Lord’s question, this article will consider whether the Book of Jonah is an example of the Ring Composition pattern.

Keywords:

Jonah, Nineveh, Mary Douglas, Ring Composition, Chiasmus

ヨナ書は Mary Douglas が提唱するリング構成と言えるだろうか —リング構成読書法を通しての一研究—

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要旨

ヨナ書四章の終わりの主の問いは、ヨナの返答もなく、曖昧さを残して終わる。主の問いは一体、何を意味するのであろうか。

四章の主の疑問文には、一章冒頭における主のヨナに対する命令と同じ言葉が用いられている。ヨナ書の文学的研究は、近年広がりを見せている。本稿は、Mary Douglas の提唱する「リング構成」読書法の観点よりヨナ書を研究したい。リング構成とは、Douglas 自身が名付けた、一種のキアスムス構成であり、従来のキアスムスが小作品に用いられるのに対して、比較的長い作品に対して用いた呼び名である。それは並行法によって構成されている。リング構成においては、物語は主題で始まり、展開し、中間点において主題に言及し、結末は初めの主題へ戻るというリング状を成している。このように、作品の構造と意味は深い関係を示し、テキストの「意味は中心部にある」と主張するものである。

ヨナ書が、並行法の構成であることから、主の問いの意味を探るために、本稿はヨナ書が Douglas のリング構成を示しているか否かを考察したい。

キーワード

ヨナ、ニネベ、Mary Douglas、リング構成、キアスムス

Preface

The Lord's question in Jonah 4:11 remains ambiguous because Jonah does not answer. What does the Lord's question mean?

This article proposes that the Lord's rhetorical question in 4:11 may imply Jonah's mission. However, this interpretation is not prevalent among previous scholars and commentators. For example, Jack M. Sasson, Phyllis Tribble, and Hans Walter Wolff interpret this question as God's request for Jonah to understand God's mercy and thus the question is not linked to continuation of his mission.¹ Jacob M. Myers interprets Jonah 4:11 as a claim against the exclusivity of postexilic Judaism.² Albert Kamp associates Jonah 4:11 with the story of Noah in Genesis, in terms of saving humans and animals. In the Noah story, it is not God who utters the curse against Ham, but Noah. According to Kamp, Jonah 4:11 argues that the divine perspective is quite different from human beings (Noah and Jonah).³ James Limburg superimposes the image of the Lord in Jonah 4:11 on Jesus in Luke 19: 41-44. Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem in the same way that the Lord spares Nineveh.⁴ Another different interpretation is seen in the work of Rabbi David Kimchi. He explores the saying among the sages "Is this the second time He spoke to him not the third?" Kimchi found two ways of interpreting this. One is the Lord's words regarding Nineveh in Jonah 1:1 and 3:1. The second is the order of Nineveh and the event in the days of Jeroboam ben Joash. Through Jonah ben Amittai, they turned themselves from evil to good. Kimchi argues the word "second" (3:1) implies the relationship between the book of Jonah chapter three and the event in 2 Kings 14:25.⁵ Jonathan Magonet and Uriel Simon have slightly different interpretative nuances. Magonet argues that God is not satisfied with the effect of His words on Nineveh alone and that these words also should have consequences for the messenger.⁶ Simon interprets Jonah's silence after 4:11 as expressing praise with mute language.⁷ These scholars, however, do not directly link the word of the Lord with Jonah's mission.

This article will introduce a formal analysis of Mary Douglas' Ring Composition to the discussion.⁸ Douglas proposes a kind of chiasmus as "Ring Composition". "Chiasmus" is a rhetorical term describing a construction involving the repetition of words or elements in reverse order.⁹ Douglas explains the difference between chiasmus and ring composition as follows: "A chiasmus is usually applied to short pieces of writing, whereas I am using the words Ring Composition for much longer texts".¹⁰ The ring composition is "a construction of parallelism that must open a theme, develop it, and round it off by bringing the conclusion back to the beginning."¹¹ In that format, Douglas explains that "the meaning is in the middle"¹² of the text. This use of "Ring Composition" appeared not only

in the Middle East, but all over the world. The Bible and Homer’s *Iliad* are typical examples according to Douglas. Douglas abstracts the features common to those writings through seven conventions to be explored below.

As observed by the scholars mentioned above, the Book of Jonah is composed of word repetition and parallelism. In order to explore the meaning of the question in Jonah 4:11, this article will focus on Mary Douglas’ Ring Composition analysis. By applying her theory, the question of the Lord may have a strong connection with the Lord’s command at chapters 1:2 and 3:2.

This article will proceed as follows. First, we will review the seven conventions of ring composition proposed by Douglas, looking at her analysis of the story of Isaac’s binding in the book of Genesis. Next, we will explore how the book of Jonah appears in the light of Douglas’ seven conventions. Finally, we will explore the significance of the Ring Composition seen in the book of Jonah.

1. The Seven Conventions of Ring Composition according to Mary Douglas

According to Douglas, the seven conventions which outline a stylistic form found in the eastern Mediterranean region in the eighth to the fourth centuries BCE show that a system of parallels can fill the composition with a deep and wide meaning as if its words resonate with each other and connect distant contexts.¹³ Here follows an introduction of the seven conventions.¹⁴

Convention 1: The Prologue

This is an introductory section that introduces the theme, the main characters, and the time and place. The prologue describes the challenges that the main characters must face. Readers anticipate intermediate developments and outcomes.

Convention 2: The Narrative Is Split into Two Halves

When the end of the story has a phrase related to the prologue, we are looking for a point where the story turns back toward the beginning. That is, we are seeking a turning point. The turning point must have a phrase related to the prologue. This convention has an imaginary line between the middle and the beginning. The line divides the story into two halves. The first develops the challenge, the second resolves it. This will become more clear in a later section of this article.

Convention 3: Parallel Sections

After the turning point is determined, the two sides must be found to be parallel to each other.

Convention 4: Indicators that Mark Individual Sections

The signs for marking each unit of the story are technically necessary. Particularly, the reader needs to know where one section stops and the next begins. Various methods can be used but especially, key words are often used to indicate a beginning or closing.

Convention 5: The Importance of a Center

The turning point of the ring can be expressed as C, that is the center of a chiasmus, AB /C/ BA. The keywords that appear in the prologue are also used in the center. At the end, words are shared with the prologue. In the center, we can see words parallel to the beginning and the end.

Convention 6: Rings within Rings

The large ring may be constructed of smaller rings. They may have different sources, times, and authors. A large ring may be a gathering and uniting of smaller rings. Examples of rings inside a ring are the story of Balaam in the book of Numbers, and Isaac's binding in Genesis.

Convention 7: Closure at Two Levels

It is necessary that the structural closing of the composition and the closing of the meaning match. When the ending phrase is a repetition of the prologue phrase, this formal structure indicates completion. In addition, this completion must occur on a thematic level. This dual literary conclusion of structure and theme is not a coincidence, but result of the skill of the author.

1-1. The Ring Composition of the Story of Isaac's Binding

As an example of the ring composition, Douglas introduces the story of Isaac's binding. She summarizes the story of Isaac's binding and arranges it as a chiasmic structure in the following table.¹⁵

Table 1. The Ring Structure of the Story of Isaac’s Binding (Gen 22:1-18).¹⁶

1. God tested Abraham and said to him: ‘Abraham!’ and he said: ‘Here I am’	
2. ‘Take your son, your only son, Isaac, and offer him on the mountain...’	15-18. The Angel of the Lord called to Abraham, ‘you have not withheld your son.
3-5. They went to the place of which God had told him.... Abraham saw the place.	14. Abraham called the name of the place ‘God will provide.’
6. Took the wood for the burnt offering, laid it on Isaac.	13. Abraham took the ram...offered it as a burnt offering, instead of his son.
7-8. ‘Father’ ‘Here I am, my son’ ‘God will see to the lamb for a burnt offering,’	13. Abraham lifted up his eyes and there was a ram as for a burnt offering.
9-10. Abraham raised his hand, took the knife to slay his son.	12. ‘Do not raise your hand...you have not withheld your only son.’
11. The Angel of the Lord called to him, from heaven: ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ ‘Here I am’	

1-2. The Story of Isaac’s Binding and the Seven Conventions of Ring Composition.¹⁷

(1) The Prologue:

Verses 1-2 introduce the main characters in the story, Abraham and Isaac, and the theme of God's trial of Abraham. Abraham’s quiet obedience to God's command introduces a dilemma. Thus, the prologue is structured to anticipate intermediate developments and outcomes.

(2) The Narrative is Split into Two Halves:

Since the phrase at the end “you have not withheld your son” (v.16) is in parallel with the phrase at the beginning (v.2), the convention calls for the similar phrase “your son” in the middle. Verses 11-12 do show the same phrase. Douglas’ analysis proposes an imaginary line between the middle and the beginning/end. Verses 11-12 function as a turning point. Douglas’ imaginary line divides the story into two halves, the first, starting for the mountain, the second, returning home.

(3) Parallel Sections:

Since the turning point is found at vv. 11-12, the form calls for the two sides to be parallel to each other. Verse 1 “Abraham, Here I am” is in parallel with verses 11 and 7. Verse 2 “your son” is parallel with verse 16. Verse 4 “the place” is parallel with verse 14. Verses 6 and 7 “the lamb for a burnt offering” are parallel with verse 13. Verse 10 “raised his hand” is parallel with verse 12. In this way, each section has its parallel in the other half of the story.

(4) Indicators to Mark Individual Sections:

A sign for marking each element of the story is necessary to the form. Particularly, readers need to know where one section stops and the next one begins. In the story of Isaac, the key phrase at the beginning is “your son, your only son”. At the end we find the same phrase. It marks both the beginning and the end of the form.

(5) The Importance of a Center:

The turning point functions as the halfway point of the chiasmus structure, AB / C / BA. In the center the phrase “your son, your only son” occurs as a parallel figure with the prologue. It marks both the beginning and the end. This leads us to the main point of the story, that is, God’s trial of Abraham. It supports Douglas's suggestion that "the meaning is in the center."

(6) Rings within Rings:

The major ring may be constructed of smaller rings. The story of Isaac’s binding is an example. As Douglas explains in her book, it is a small ring in the larger context of the book of Genesis.

(7) Closure at Two Levels:

The ring composition form requires the full closure of form and theme. Regarding the form, this text begins with the Lord's call to Abraham and ends with the call to Abraham by the Lord's messenger. Both stand in parallel. Regarding the theme of the story, it begins with a reference to the theme of God's trial for Abraham. At the end, the Lord's messenger confirms to Abraham the completion of God’s trial. Thus this text meets the convention of double closure required by Douglas’ ring structure.

According to Douglas’ theory, the Isaac story is confirmed as a typical ring composition. It shows the perfect match of the beginning, the turning point, and the end.

2. The Possible Ring Composition of the Book of Jonah

Can the Book of Jonah be read in accordance with the seven conventions of Douglas’ ring form? Table 2 below is a tentative chart of the Ring Composition of the Book of Jonah.

Table 2. A Tentative Chart of the Ring Composition of the Book of Jonah.

Unit 1. (1:1-5) The word of the Lord came to Jonah. “Arise, go to Nineveh ...	
Unit 2. (1:6-16) The captain said to Jonah, “Arise, call to your god...” ... They feared the Lord and sacrificed to the Lord.	Unit 6. (3:10-4:11) Seeing their repentance, God repented... The Lord said, “Shall I not have pity for the great city, where many people and animals are...”
Unit 3. (2:1, 2,11) The Lord prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah... Jonah prayed to the Lord...	Unit 5. (3:6-9) King Nineveh...prayed to God.
Unit 4. (3:1-5) The word of the Lord to Jonah came a second time...	

2-1. The Book of Jonah and the Seven Conventions of Ring Composition

(1) The Prologue:

The prologue begins with a call to God's prophet. It introduces the main characters, the Lord and Jonah; and the place names of destination, Nineveh and Tarshish. The theme is the Lord's declaration, “I know Nineveh's evil”. But Jonah plans to flee from the Lord to Tarshish. Readers anticipate intermediate developments and outcomes. Can the prophet get free from God? The key terms are “the Lord,” “Jonah,” “Nineveh,” “great city” and “evil.”

(2) The Narrative is Split into Two Halves:

Turning to the end of the book (4:9-11), the same keywords found in the prologue, “the Lord,” “Jonah,” “Nineveh,” and “great city” appear again. This indicates a close relation to the prologue. Moreover, at the mid-point (3:1-5), we found God's call to the prophet in parallel with the phrase in the prologue. This functions as the turning point of the story. It divides the story into two halves, the first half at the sea, the second, in Nineveh.

(3) Parallel Sections:

Once the turning point is determined, we must look for parallels between the two sides. Since each part is long, it seems better to divide each side into two parts (1:6-16; 2:1-11 and 3:6-9; 3:10-4:11). The two sections on each side of the turning point (2:1-11 and 3:6- 9) have different settings. The part in the sea (2:1-11) describes the world of Jonah and the Lord, while the section featuring Nineveh (3:6-9) describes the world of the Ninevites and their king. Whereas both scenes share the major phrase “pray to God”, Jonah prays to the Lord, while the Ninevites pray to God. As a result, Jonah is saved from the abyss, while the Ninevites are saved from destruction.

The remaining parts of 1:6-16 and 3:10-4:11 also have different settings. The scene at the sea (1:6-16) describes the sailors wrestling with the storm, while the scene in Nineveh (3:10-4:11) describes God's attempts to persuade Jonah. Both scenes share the keywords (רעה, ידע, מות, אבד, עשה) in Hebrew. The following is an examination of these terms in Table 3.

Table 3. Keywords (1:6-16 and 3:10-4:11)

	1:6-16	3:10-4:11
רעה evil	1:7 on whose account this evil to us. 1:8 Tell us on whose account this evil_to us?	3:10 the God saw that they turned their evil way, and the God repented about the evil. 4:1 And it was a great evil to Jonah. 4:4, 9 Is it good it burns to you?
ידע know	1:7 let us know on whose account... 1:10 for the men knew... 1:12 for I am knowing...	4:2 because I knew that you God are gracious... 4:11 They do not know...
מות death אבד perish	1:6 we will not perish. 1:14 Not let us perish...	4:8 for my death better than my life 4:9 it burns to me unto death. 4:10 which a child of the night perished.
עשה make do	1:9 God made the sea and the dry land... 1:10 what is this done! 1:11 What shall we do to you? 1:14 as you wish you do.	3:10 the God saw their deeds, about the evil he worded to do to them, and he did not do. 4:5 And he made for himself there a booth.

a. רעה (evil)

As seen in Table 3, both sides share רעה. It indicates the evil deeds of Nineveh, natural disasters, divine punishment, and Jonah's discomfort. The existence of this term on both sides of the structure supports a finding consistent with Douglas' Ring Composition.

b. ידע (know)

Both sides share the verb ידע. Sailors want to know the cause of the storm. On the other hand, Jonah knows the cause well. Jonah and the sailors are in a contrasting parallel.

c. מות, אבד (death, perish)

Both sides share the words מות, אבד (death, perish). The sailors want to live, while Jonah wants to die. They are in a contrasting parallel.

d. עשה (make, do)

Both sides share עשה (make, do). The verb is translated by two verbs in English,

“make” and “do” as shown in Table 3. Of particular note here is the contrast between God and human beings. The sea and earth are created by God, whereas a small booth is made by Jonah. In addition, we have the punishment performed by God and Jonah’s disobedience to God. These contrasts bring the theological issues into relief.

(4) Indicators to Mark Individual Sections:

The book of Jonah is composed of six units. Keywords play a role in marking the beginning of each section of the story. Here we will examine the marks of each unit as seen above in Table 2.

Unit 1. The key marker at the beginning of this unit is the formula of God's call to the Prophet. When the expression “The word of the Lord came to” opens prophetic books, it indicates that “his prophetic mission is already established in a previous statement.”¹⁸ This occurs only in Jonah and Ezekiel. Another formula of God’s call to a prophet is the expression “The word of the Lord that came to.” The former word order is the verb imperfect (וַיְהִי) + subject (דְּבַר־יְהוָה), whereas the latter word order is the subject (דְּבַר־יְהוָה) + the verb perfect (הָיָה). The latter appears in many prophetic books (Hosea 1:1, Joel 1:1, Zephaniah 1:1). The expression of Jonah’s opening is related to 2 Kings 14:25. It indicates the importance of Jonah as a prophet.

Unit 2. The marker indicating the beginning of this unit is the captain’s command “Arise, call to your God”. It causes Jonah to evoke the command of the Lord in Unit 1, showing the parallel structure.

Unit 3. As the landmark of the beginning of unit 3, the phrase “And the Lord prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah” is the second miracle of the Lord in this story. The sentence with the verb “prepared” is in parallel with the sentences of 4:6, 7, 8. God uses His creatures as tools to give Jonah miracles, a great wind, a great fish, a great plant, a worm, and a furious east wind.

Unit 4. The landmark of beginning here is almost the same as the words of Unit 1. “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time”. Jonah’s mission opens in Nineveh. Jonah now follows the Lord's command and enters the city of Nineveh.

Unit 5. The mark of the beginning of this unit is the phrase “the word reached the king of Nineveh”. When observing the behavior of the king, his arising from his throne is in parallel with the action of Jonah. Regarding “the word”, the difference between the king and Jonah is that “the word” to the king is not described as being of “the Lord”.

Unit 6. The landmark of beginning here is the word “evil”. In 3:10, the word evil appears three times in a row. This phenomenon is closely related to the idea that Nineveh

is evil in Unit 1. This section shows that the Ninevites have repented of their evil deeds, and they will avoid divine punishment. This leads to Jonah's discontent.

As we have seen, the beginnings of these six units of the book of Jonah are all connected with divine word or action. These phenomena indicate that it is a story led by God.

(5) The Importance of a Center:

The turning point of the story stands out, since it is almost in parallel with the opening phrase of Unit 1 (1:1-3). Although the words of the Lord in the ending (4:10-11) indicates concern for rather than judgement against Nineveh; the beginning, the middle, and the ending are closely related to each other. Douglas' argument that "the meaning is in the middle"¹⁹ indicates that the meaning of the book is the command of the Lord "Go to Nineveh, the great city, and call to her (3:2)". This phrase is the most important statement in the book, and it is in parallel in the Lord's command to Jonah at the beginning (1:2)."

(6) Rings within Rings:

The convention of the ring form suggests also that a large ring composition may contain smaller rings. The book of Jonah is composed of three individual stories and a poem. It is proper to ask whether at least one of these contained stories conforms to the ring conventions. That examination will be pursued below under the heading "Jonah Chapter One and the Seven Conventions of Ring Composition."

(7) Closure at Two Levels:

The Lord talks with Jonah about Nineveh in 4:11. The Lord's concern about Nineveh connects back to the command to Jonah at the beginning of the story. The Lord's words end with a question. Even though Jonah does not reply to it, the story is complete because the structure and theme have come full circle. However, in another sense, we still wait for Jonah's reply.

2-2. Jonah Chapter One and the Seven Conventions of Ring Composition

In chapter one, there is frequent repetition of certain words. They are as follows: (The numbers in parentheses indicate frequencies.) "The Lord, יְהוָה" (11), "sea, יָם" (11), "fear, יִרָא" (6), "Jonah, יוֹנָה" (6) and "great, גָּדֹל" (6). Since the repetition of words expresses emphasis of meaning, chapter one seems to show a pattern of parallelism. In the light of this parallelism we will look for conformity to the seven conventions of ring composition.

Table 4 below is a tentative chart of the ring composition of Jonah chapter one. The keywords in chapter one are “the Lord”, “sea”, “fear”, “Jonah”, and “great”.

Table 4. A Tentative Chart of the Ring Composition of Jonah Chapter One.

Unit 1. (1-2) The word of the LORD came to Jonah , saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call against her, for their evil has come up before me.	
Unit 2. (3) But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He found a ship going to Tarshish and went with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD .	Unit 10. (16) Then the men feared the LORD greatly , and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.
Unit 3. (4) But the LORD threw a great wind upon the sea , and there was a great storm on the sea .	Unit 9. (13-15) They called on the LORD , “Please, O LORD , do not let us perish, and you are the LORD that you do what you want. And they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea .”
Unit 4. (5-6) The sailors feared , and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea .	Unit 8. (12) Jonah said, “Take me up and throw me into the sea .” For the sea grew more and more stormy against them.
Unit 5. (7-8) And let us know on whose account this evil to us. Tell us, what is your occupation, where you have come....	Unit 7. (10-11) The men feared , for they knew that he was fleeing from the LORD . “What the hell have you done?” And they said, “What shall we do to you that the sea may become quiet for us?”
Unit 6. (9) “I am a Hebrew, I fear the LORD , the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”	

(1) The Prologue: (1:1-3)

The prologue introduces the theme “go to Nineveh, the great city, and call to her”. The main characters are the LORD and Jonah. Since Nineveh is a heathen land, this raises questions for the reader as to how Jonah will carry out his mission as we proceed to the middle and ending of this segment of narrative.

(2) The Narrative Is Split into Two Halves:

At the end of this segment (1:16), the heathen sailors feared the Lord and call to the LORD. The keyword “the LORD” is in parallel. This calling to the Lord by the heathen sailors relates to the LORD’s command to go to the heathen of Nineveh. The beginning and ending are thus closely related. In turn, the convention calls for another instance of keyword “the LORD” or “call” as found in Unit 1 and Unit 10. In Unit 6, the phrase “fear the LORD” is in parallel with the phrase “fear the LORD” in Unit 10. Therefore Unit 6 stands as the turning point of chapter one. Chapter one is thus divided into two halves

where the parallelism is seen through the repeated vocabulary and theme. Jonah's confession is a turning point in the story.

(3) Parallel Sections:

With the turning point determined, we will examine the parallel in the two sides in the above table 4. Each side is composed of four units each. As seen in Table 4 the starting side has Units 2, 3, 4 and 5, while the returning side has Units 7, 8, 9 and 10. Unit 5 and Unit 7 resemble a cross-examination scene in court questioning a suspect. Both sides share the interrogative “what, where” to know about Jonah. And both share the verb “know”. In Unit 5, the sailors want to know the cause of the storm, while in Unit 7, they know the culprit is Jonah. Both sides are in parallel. Unit 4 and Unit 8 share the phrase “throw...into the sea”. In Unit 4 the sailors throw the cargo into the sea, while in Unit 8 Jonah tells them to throw him into the sea. Both sides are in parallel and suggest that Jonah is conceived as part of the cargo. Unit 3 and Unit 9 share the word “the LORD” and the verb “throw”. In Unit 3, the LORD throws the great wind to cause the storm, while the sailors throw Jonah into the sea to calm down the storm. These form a contrasting parallel. Unit 2 and Unit 10 share the word “the LORD” twice. In Unit 2 the phrase “from the presence of the LORD” shows Jonah’s escaping, while Unit 10, the sailors worship the LORD. This shows a contrasting parallel. As we have seen, both sides in chapter one show the convention of parallelism.

(4) Indicators to Mark Individual Sections:

In Jonah chapter one, the mark of the beginning of each unit can be identified by the alternation of subject and verb or by the sentence including direct speech.

The beginning of Unit 1 can be recognized by the subject “the word of the Lord”, Unit 2, by the subject of Jonah, Unit 3, by the subject of the LORD, Unit 4, by the subject of sailors. Unit 5 also begins with the subject of the sailors. However, the sentence includes direct speech with Jonah. Unit 6 begins with the subject of “he” (Jonah). Jonah confesses his faith in the LORD. Since this unit is the turning point, it relates to the LORD’s command in Unit 1 (1:1). Unit 7 begins with the subject “men (sailors)” and direct speech between the men and Jonah follows. Unit 8 begins with the subject “Jonah”. Jonah gives instructions to prevent the shipwreck by throwing him into the sea. Unit 9 begins with the subject “men (sailors)”. They must change their plan for preventing the wreckage. They pray to Jonah's God and throw Jonah into the sea, saying they hope not to be punished by Jonah’s God. Unit 10 begins with the subject “men”. Finally, they recognize the power of

Jonah’s God. The verbs “fear”, “sacrifice” and “make an oath” indicate their change of mind.

(5) The Importance of a Center:

In the middle, the turning point, Jonah clarifies his faith: “I (Jonah) fear the LORD”. Jonah’s confession of faith can be interpreted as a response to the LORD’s call to Jonah (1:1). It shows his absolute trust in the Lord in spite of his attempt to escape from the Lord. Its word order emphasizes the word “I” and the close relationship between Jonah and the LORD. Jonah says, “I fear the LORD, the God of heaven”, while the heathen sailors use the verb “fear” three times. When we observe the targets of their “fear”, we see that their perspective shifts as follows. First, they fear the storm on the sea (1:5). Second, after Jonah’s confession (1:9), they fear Jonah’s attempt to escape from the Lord (1:10). And finally, they recognize the LORD’s power and fear Him (1:16). The last “fear” is in parallel with Jonah who also “fears the LORD”. The confession of Jonah that he “fears the LORD” is the core meaning of chapter one. Fear of God echoes throughout the chapter.

(6) Rings within Rings:

The book of Jonah can be seen as being composed of four individual works. As described above, chapter one closely matches the conventions of ring composition. Therefore, chapter one can be identified as a smaller ring in the context of the larger ring of the Book of Jonah.

(7) Closure:

The convention of closure requires the ending to be connected with the beginning. In v. 16 the heathen sailors become fearers of the LORD. The word “the LORD” is a key word in chapter one. “The LORD” connects the beginning, the end, and mid-point turn. Thus, chapter one shows completion in terms of structure. On the level of meaning, the sailors’ worship leads back to the LORD’s word “Go to Nineveh (a pagan land) (1:2)”. Therefore, the closure of chapter one is accomplished on a meaning level as well. The phrase “fear the LORD” shows the correspondence of the theme between the beginning, the end and the mid-point turn. This correspondence is not an accident. Rather it is evidence of the skill of the writer. We can confidently say that chapter one has the form of a Ring Composition.

3. The meaning of the Ring Composition Seen in the Book of Jonah

In the previous discussion of the story of Jonah, we showed that the Book of Jonah was composed of a Ring Composition as described by Douglas. Now we will consider how this usage of ring composition adds to our understanding of the book of Jonah.

According to the Ring Composition form, the final question of the LORD returns to the missional command to Jonah at the beginning. In addition to this, Douglas emphasizes that “the meaning of the work is in the middle.” The middle of the book of Jonah (3:1) is a repetition of the phrase “Go to Nineveh, the great city, and call upon her.” (1:1) As was seen above the meaning of the LORD’s question in chapter 4:11 indicates a request to Jonah to continue his mission.

As with Douglas’ analysis of the Isaac story, the Ring Composition brings the apparent ambiguity of the book of Jonah under control and reduces confusion. As a result, our understanding of Jonah 4:11 receives a fresh interpretation.²⁰

The only story of gentiles being converted by an Israeli prophet is the Book of Jonah. And the idea of a mission of the God of Israel to the gentiles is presumed to be due to the historical background of this book. As to the historical background, Simon argues that Israel was chosen to serve as the carrier of faith to disseminate it among all nations.²¹ And Wolff proposes that the story was written for the Jewish people living in a heathen land. In the Lord’s question at 4:11, the crisis of faith clearly appears.²²

As to the issue of Jonah’s mission to Nineveh, the Book of Jonah is composed in a post-exile foreign country. It is an environment in which the people of a defeated nation must live despised in the land of the victorious nation. For the Israelites their community is the most important means of protecting their faith while living abroad and trying to hold friendly relations with the local people. To do so, they try to convert the inhabitants of that land to the God of Israel, rather than converting themselves to the religion of the land. This article presumes that the Book of Jonah was written in such an environment. In that light, Jonah is a messenger of the word of the Lord, and his mission does not end with the saving of Nineveh. In the light of Douglas’ Ring Composition, Jonah will continue his mission. Jonah’s “return is manifested by humble silence. Expressing his compliance with mute language ‘To You silence is praise.’” (Ps. 65:2)²³

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Notes

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- ¹ Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (The Anchor Bible v. 24B; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 308.
Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Fortress Press, 1994), 224.
Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A commentary* (trans. Margaret Kohl); (Augsburg Publishing, 1986), 174.
- ² Jacob M. Myers, *The Layman's Bible Commentary volume 14 The Book of Jonah* (John Knox press, 1959), 176.
- ³ Albert Kamp, *Inner World, A Cognitive Linguistic Approach to the Book of Jonah* (Leiden Brill, 2004), 233.
- ⁴ James Limburg, *Jonah. A Commentary* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1993), 97.
- ⁵ Rabbi David Kimchi, *Go to Nineveh: Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Book of Jonah* (edited Steven Bob; Pickwick Publications, 2013), 43.
- ⁶ Jonathan Magonet, *Forming and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the book of Jonah* (Sheffield, 1983), 107.
- ⁷ Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary Jonah* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 48.
- ⁸ Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles, An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xiii.
- ⁹ Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics, the Third Edition* (Routledge, 2011), 54.
- ¹⁰ Mary Douglas, op. cit., xiii.
- ¹¹ Mary Douglas, op. cit., x.
- ¹² Mary Douglas, op. cit., 35.
- ¹³ Mary Douglas, op. cit., 38.
- ¹⁴ The following discription is according to Mary Douglas, op. cit., pp. 31-42.
- ¹⁵ Table 1 has been shortened by this article.
- ¹⁶ Mary Douglas, op. cit., 20.
- ¹⁷ The following discription is according to Mary Douglas, op. cit., pp. 36-38.
- ¹⁸ Jack M. Sasson, op. cit., 67.
- ¹⁹ Mary Douglas, op. cit., 35.
- ²⁰ Mary Douglas, op. cit., 38.
- ²¹ Uriel Simon, op. cit., ix.
- ²² Hans Walter Wolff, op. cit., 85.
- ²³ Uriel Simon, op. cit., 48.