

The symbolic meaning of the number of days mentioned in the book of Jonah

**Author:**Jo-Mari Schäder¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Ancient and Modern Languages and Cultures, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Jo-Mari Schäder,
jo-mari.schader@up.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 01 Apr. 2020
Accepted: 21 July 2020
Published: 26 Oct. 2020

How to cite this article:

Schäder, J-M., 2020, 'The symbolic meaning of the number of days mentioned in the book of Jonah', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(4), a6019. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6019>

Copyright:

© 2020. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The book of Jonah uses four indications of time: (1) Jonah spends 3 days and three nights in the fish; (2) the city of Nineveh takes 3 days to cross; (3) Jonah enters the city to the extent or distance of one day's travel; and (4) Jonah proclaims to Nineveh that she has 40 days to repent. In this article it will be pointed out that each of the four instances where time is mentioned in the book of Jonah has a symbolic meaning and intends to mean more than is evident on the surface of the text.

Contribution: This article contributes to the ongoing critical scholarship of the book of Jonah. In this article the interpretation of time in relation to the number of days mentioned in the book of Jonah is revisited and it is argued that the days should be understood symbolically and not literally. An evaluation is also given of what their meanings are.

Keywords: Jonah; time; symbolism; interpretation; number of days.

Introduction

The book of Jonah uses four indications of time: (1) Jonah spends 3 days and three nights in the fish; (2) the city of Nineveh takes 3 days to cross; (3) Jonah enters the city to the extent or distance of one day's travel; and (4) Jonah proclaims to Nineveh that she has 40 days to repent. What is their meaning and could it be that they are used symbolically? In this article each use of the number of days mentioned in the book of Jonah will be investigated. It is anticipated that each has a symbolic meaning and intends to mean more than is evident on the surface of the text.

The numbers one, three and 40 are then also numbers that typically have symbolic value (cf. Eynikel 2005:65). However, consensus on this disappears when it comes to the meaning or interpretation of the numbers of days mentioned. This article will make a contribution to aid us in better understanding their significance through a renewed critical discussion of the interpretations posited for their meaning and an ultimate evaluation and proposal of what their significance could be. The discussion will focus on the significance of the mention of 3 days, then 1 and then 40.

Three days and three nights in Jonah 2:1

In Jonah 2:1, we read that Jonah was 'in the bowels of the fish' (בִּבְטֵן דְּיִשְׁתָּר) for a period of 3 days and three nights. This time period has been variously interpreted in the past, of which two popular interpretations are that (1) it is an allegory that refers to the period of Israel's Babylonian captivity, and (2) it refers to a span of 72 h, or a period of one full day and portions of two others. The former understanding is likely influenced by the manner in which Matthew 12:40 has utilised Jonah 2:1, where it points (Landes 1967):

[T]o the death and resurrection of Jesus, thus also suggesting that the NT and late Jewish interpretation of the phrase should be normative for its meaning at the beginning of Jonah 2. (p. 446)¹

In Ancient Near Eastern literature, the phrase 'three days and three nights' also appears to be closely associated with death. For instance, in *Inanna/Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld*, she instructs her divine minister, Ninshubur to set up a lament for her if she does not return from the abode of her sister Ereshkigal. When she dies at her sister's hands, it reads that

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

¹This time period is used to designate the time between Jesus' death and his resurrection (cf. Mt 16:21, 17:23, 20:19; Lk 9:22, 18:33, 24:7, 21; 1 Cor 15:4; cf. Mark for 'after three days', in 8:31, 9:31, 10:34; however, note Mt 27:63) (Landes 1967:447). 'If this interpretation of the phrase is applied to Jonah 2 1, it would apparently mean that the great fish was not primarily an instrument of Jonah's deliverance from death, but rather a further indication of danger to his life, and the "three days and three nights" motif would point to the precarious transitory state of his existence, hovering between life and death, with only a very tenuous possibility of survival' (Landes 1967:447).

'After three days (and) three nights had passed, her minister Ninshubur, her minister of favorable words, her knight of true words, sets up a lament for her by the ruins ...' (Part II, lines 169–73) (cf. Landes 1967:448–449). It was thus also believed that if someone appeared to be in the 'realm of death' for 3 days and three nights that they could only be brought back to life through divine intervention. The realm of death was also called or associated with the grave, the underworld or the depths of the sea (Watts 1975:83). Also, it appears to have been an ancient belief that when a body did not show signs of life for 3 days, death was considered to be final. This appears to be the case in John 11, where reference is made to the resurrection of Lazarus on the fourth day (Steenkamp & Prinsloo 2003:443).

Also, from examples such as the Persian *Vendidad*, Homer's *Iliad*, the New Testament (John 11:39; cf. vs. 17) and rabbinical literature, it would appear that (Landes 1967):

[T]he expression 'three days and three nights' is seen to reflect the conception that death is permanent only after a body has shown no signs of animation for a period of three days, the idea being that until that time had elapsed, the soul was conceived as still lingering near the individual, encouraging the hope of revival. (p. 446)

This time span has then often been associated with travel in or to the netherworld by modern commentators.

However, scholars are divided whether it takes 3 days to travel in a particular direction or whether it includes travel to and from the netherworld (cf. Landes 1967:449; Watts 1975:83). Sasson (1990:153–154) wrote regarding such arguments, based on the reference to 3 days and three nights in Jonah's Psalm, that it 'risks turning the Psalm into a travel guide to hell and back!' Thus, it does not aid us in better understanding its symbolic value.

The phrase 'three days' is used throughout the Hebrew Bible to imply either a longer² or a shorter³ period of time, depending on the context in which it is used. However, when the words 'and three nights' are appended, or even 'an equivalent implication', it emphasises a long(er) length of time (Landes 1967:447).⁴ From examples in the Hebrew Bible it would also appear that acts are repeated for a number of three times to emphasise it (Sasson 1990:153).⁵

Of special significance are instances in the Hebrew Bible where it employs the 'three day' motif to refer to the length

of a journey.⁶ In several examples, a trip is completed 'on the third day'.⁷ 'On other occasions, some kind of travel is indicated as taking place or coming to an end within a span of three days'.⁸ Of significance is then the mention in Jonah 3:3 that it is a 3 days' journey to traverse the city of Nineveh (Landes 1967:448). The only other instance where the phrase 'three days and three nights' is used is in 1 Samuel 30:12, where an abandoned Egyptian servant 'had not eaten bread or drunk water' in the desert. Landes (1967:447) proposed that it is a 'plausible possibility' that Jonah's tenure in the fish implies that he had no 'physical sustenance' for 3 days and three nights. However, he also pointed out that 'there is nothing in the context that gives us a definite hint that the author may have had this in mind when he used these words in this manner' (Landes 1967:447).

A more plausible argument is that a period of 3 days is 'the absolute limit of human endurance', with the meaning 'to the (absolute) limit' or 'to the bitter end'. See for instance 2 Samuel 24:11–12 where David chooses 3 days of pestilence as punishment 'for transgressing the prohibition on the population count' (Eynikel 2005:68, 69). Pertaining to the use of the number three, which supports the hypothesis above, is that it can indicate 'a conventionally complete set', indicating 'completeness or full effect'. It can also indicate a 'considerable lapse of time' (cf. Ex 1:18; 5:3; 23:17; Is 20:3; 2 Sm 6:11; etc.) (Eynikel 2005:68).

In all likelihood, 'three days and three nights' in the context of the book of Jonah refer to the time for a complete act to occur, namely Jonah's travel in the fish. In all likelihood, it can also be understood that this was the limit of the punishment he could endure before it became too much, evoking the lament that he utters in Jonah 2:3–10. In the light of the mention of the fish's bowels in parallel to Sheol in Jonah 2 that the fish is simultaneously Jonah's vehicle of salvation and Sheol, it would appear that this hypothesis for understanding the reference to 'three days and three nights' is the most likely one.

Three days' journey in Jonah 3:3

The clause עיר-גְּדוּלָהּ לְאֵלֵהֶם [and Nineveh was a great city to God] provides the relevant background information to understand the reference to the exaggerated size of the city of Nineveh as being 'a journey of three days' (מִמָּוֶלַח שְׁלֹשָׁת יָמִים) big (Sasson 1990:228). I am in agreement with the likes of Tribble (1963:42) that it is an idiomatic expression.

2.Cf. Joshua 2:16; 1 Samuel 20:5, 19; Jonah 3:3; and 2 Chronicles 20:25 (Landes 1967:447). Eynikel (2005:68), in turn, refers to the following examples of texts indicating a 'considerable lapse of time', namely Exodus 1:18; 5:3; 23:17; Isaiah 20:3; 2 Samuel 6:11; etc.

3.Cf. Joshua 1:11; 2 Samuel 20:4; 2 Kings 20:8; Hosea 6:2; Ezra 8:32; and Nehemiah 2:11 (Landes 1967:447).

4.Cf. Watts 1975:83 who refers to 1 Samuel 30:12 and Esther 4:16.

5.The examples where 'three days' is cited that Sasson refers to as noteworthy to this discussion are the following: (1) Genesis 42:17, where Joseph jails his brothers for three days; (2) 2 Esdras 14:1, where Ezra had to wait three days for a vision to finally come to him; (3) Judith 2:21, where Holofernes' troops had to march three days, between Nineveh and Bectileh (in Upper Cilicia); and (4) 2 Kings 20:8, where Hezekiah hopes to heal from his wounds 'by the third day' (Sasson 1990:153).

6.Perhaps most familiar is the Israelite request of Pharaoh to be permitted to leave Egypt to go on 'a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to Yahweh our God' (Ex 3:18, 5:3, 8:27, 15:22; cf. Nm 33:8). Later on when the Israelites depart from Sinai, we are told 'they set out from the mount of Yahweh three days' journey' (Nm 10:33) (Landes 1967:448).

7.Abraham's reaching the place where he is to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22 4); the Israelites' arrival at the city of the Gibeonites (Josh 9 17); David and his men coming to Ziklag (1 Sam 30:1) (Landes 1967:448).

8.'Thus the spies are to stay at Jericho three days "until the pursuers have returned" (Josh 2 16); David commands the men of Judah to be assembled to him "within three days" (II Sam 20 4); the fifty strong men dispatched by the sons of the prophets to find Elijah search for him for three days (II Kings 2 17); and the returned exiles are ordered to assemble at Jerusalem and are given three days to do so before their property is confiscated (Ezra 10:7–9)' (Landes 1967:448).

Past hypotheses that have been proposed to account for the grandiose size of the city are as follows:

1. Jonah took three days to walk through all the streets of Nineveh;
2. it refers to the time that it took Jonah to visit the most important places or sites in the city;
3. it refers to the circumference around Nineveh;
4. the time that Jonah required to visit the city, namely one day for travelling to Nineveh, one day to conduct his business, and another day to return. However, Jonah was 'not sent to Nineveh to negotiate business;' and
5. it is the diameter of the city (Eynikel 2005:71; cf. Stuart 2012:464).

In the Hebrew Bible we find that units of length are usually based on the human anatomy. 'For larger spans and distances, the criteria and terminology become vague and apply only roughly to various lengths ...' (Sasson 1990:230). More likely is that the mention of 'three days' journey' is used to establish that two positions are separated by a large space of time (Sasson 1990:231). It then appears to be 'hyperbolizing the circumference of the city in grandiose terms' (Nogalski 2011:438). This then suggests that the author of the book is far removed from when Nineveh was still in existence (Nogalski 2011:438). But what if the mention of a 3 days' journey is meant to recall Jonah's tenure in the fish and Sheol? What if it has a symbolic meaning, also related to death and dying? The mention of a 3 days' journey is clearly meant as a contrast to the mention of 1 day's journey, which is mentioned following upon it.

One day's journey in Jonah 3:4

In light of the preceding, it ought to be clear that the reference to Jonah only entering the city, the equivalent of one day's journey, implies that it is a short period of time that he spends travelling. Other examples where 'one day' is used along with verbs of motion, apart from in Jonah 3:4, are 1 Kings 19:4 and Ezra 4:34. In 1 Kings 19:4 it is used of the extent of time Elijah spends going into the desert, that is 'one day', and in Ezra 4:34 it is used of the time it takes the sun to travel its course in the heavens (Eynikel 2005:66).

Elijah did not venture far into the desert before he expressed his desire to die. Similarly, Jonah also expressed his desire to die in Jonah 4. Sasson (1990:236) proposed that the reason why Jonah only travelled into the city for 1 day was because he was 'very much in a hurry to do what God asks of him, whether earnestly and enthusiastically or just to get over it'. Jonah would rather experience the equivalent of 3 days and three nights of *hell* (in Sheol), that is to be dead. However, he can only tolerate a day of the pain and inconvenience it causes him to prophesise to the Ninevites (see Jonah 4, where Jonah expresses his wish to rather die [again]).

Although the number three is associated with the completion of an action, Jonah's 1 day journey into the city is the result of his half-hearted attempt of proclaiming against the Ninevites.

Forty days in Jonah 3:4

In Jonah 3:4, Jonah utters his prophecy to the Ninevites: *עוד יום וְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְהָיְתָה נְהֻפָּקֶת* [Still 40 days and Nineveh will be overturned!]. However, unlike other prophecies, his message has no qualification of the type of sin or perpetration committed, no call to repentance, no message of hope and no plea for change (cf. Nogalski 2011:439; Watts 1975:88). Neither is there a standard prophetic formula such as 'the word of Yahweh', 'thus says Yahweh' or 'oracle of Yahweh' (Trible 1996:511).⁹ However, not each proclamation of doom is prefaced by an explicit justification (e.g. 1 Ki 17:1; 2 Ki 20:1) (Simon 1999:29).

In the Hebrew Bible, the number four connotes completeness, such as the four directions of the wind, the four corners of the land¹⁰ and the four rivers in Eden.¹¹ However, four and its derivatives appear to possess a negative connotation (Eynikel 2005:72). From elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible it would appear that the number 40 is a conventional number to indicate major 'physical, social, or spiritual' changes, whether it refers to days or years (Sasson 1990:233).¹² It also denotes periods of trial or waiting.¹³ Special retreats or fasting can also take 40 days (Watts 1975:88),¹⁴ as (Eynikel 2005):

[A] reference to time often indicates a bad period but can also contain the prospect of a better future, of salvation especially when it is coupled with notions of praying, fasting, etc. (p. 76)

According to Eynikel (2005:73), '[T]hus, forty in the context of time often has not only a negative connotation but sometimes suggests a new and better future' (cf. Ex 24:18; 34:28; Dt 9:9, 11). It is then interesting that the Ninevites mourn and fast and that their luck should turn for the better.

Pertaining to Jonah's prophecy, it is likely used to indicate a 'cataclysm [which] is not precisely timed'. It can either denote *at the end of or after or within 40 days* (Eynikel 2005:73).¹⁵

It has been argued by some that the verb *נְהֻפָּקֶת* [to overturn] is a *futuruminstans* participle and should be translated as 'is about to be overthrown', indicating imminent action. This is also the only instance where the Niph'al form is used of overthrowing a city (cf. Sasson 1990:234; Tucker 2006:70).

9. Other prophecies addressed to foreign nations do contain such formulae, e.g. Jeremiah 46–51; Ezekiel 15:1–3; 27:1–2; 28:1; 31:1–2; 32:1–2 (Trible 1996:511).

10. See Isaiah 11:12; Jeremiah 49:36; Ezra 7:2; 37:9; Daniel 7:2; 8:8; 11:4; and Zechariah 2:11; 6:5.

11. See Genesis 2:10–14.

12. Also see Sasson 1990:233 for some examples of the use of the number 40 in the Hebrew Bible.

13. Cf. Genesis 7:4; Exodus 16:35, 24:8; Deuteronomy 9:9, 18; Numbers 14:33; Judges 13:1; Psalm 95:10, etc. (Trible 1963:43).

14. See Moses at Sinai (Ex 24:18), Elijah at the same place (1 Ki 19:8) and Jesus in the wilderness (Mk 1:13).

15. "Forty days" is a favorite biblical period of time. It designates the length of the flood (Gen. 7:4, 12, 17), the time Moses spent on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:18; 34:28; Deut. 9:9, 11, 18, 25), the time for the mission of the spies (Num. 13:25; cf. 14:34), the duration of Goliath's taunting (1 Sam. 17:16), the time of Elijah's journey to Horeb/Sinai (1 Kings 19:8) as well as the time of Jesus' fasting (Matt. 4:2; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2) (Limburg 1993:79).

However, it would appear that *הִתְחַלֵּף* is deliberately used ambiguously. Two contrary meanings are possible for understanding Jonah's proclamation: 'Nineveh will soon be destroyed or Nineveh will undergo a (spiritual) change' (cf. Eynikel 2005:74–75; Sasson 1990:295).¹⁶ The implication is that Nineveh will be destroyed

Summary and conclusion

The book of Jonah uses four indications of time: (1) Jonah spends 3 days and three nights in the fish; (2) the city of Nineveh takes 3 days to cross; (3) Jonah enters the city the extent or distance of one day's travel; and (4) Jonah proclaims to Nineveh that she has 40 days to repent. These are then also numbers that typically have symbolic value.

In all likelihood, 'three days and three nights' in the context of the book of Jonah refers to the time for a complete act to occur, namely Jonah's travel in the fish, but most importantly the time it takes for him to be (thoroughly) dead. This contributes to the emphasis of the wonder of the miraculous resurrection that he experiences when he is vomited onto dry land. It can also be understood that this was the limit of the punishment he could endure before it became too much, evoking the lament that he utters in Jonah 2:3–10.

The fish is then simultaneously Jonah's vehicle of salvation and Sheol. The reference to the 'three days' journey' for Nineveh's size is typical of the hyperbolising and aggrandising of the author in the book of Jonah.

This then suggests that the author of the book was far removed from when Nineveh as capital of Assyria was in existence. I speculated that the mention of a 3 days' journey is meant to recall Jonah's tenure in the fish/Sheol, and that it symbolically refers to death and dying.

The mention of a 3 days' journey is meant as a contrast to the mention of Jonah's one day's journey into the city. Jonah would rather experience the equivalent of 3 days and three nights of *hell* (in Sheol), that is be dead. However, he can only tolerate a day of the pain and inconvenience it causes him to prophecy to the Ninevites (see Jonah 4, where Jonah expresses his wish to rather die [again]). Whereas the number 3 is associated with the completion of an action, Jonah's 1-day journey into the city is the result of his half-hearted attempt of proclaiming against the Ninevites.

From elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible it would appear that the number 40 is a conventional number to indicate

major changes, whether it refers to days or years. It also denotes periods of trial or waiting. Special retreats or fasting can also take 40 days. Jonah's prophecy of Nineveh's destruction is not precisely timed and can either denote *at the end of or after* or *within 40 days*. Two contrary meanings are possible for understanding Jonah's proclamation: Nineveh will be destroyed or she will experience change. The implication is that Nineveh will be destroyed unless she changes her ways.

From the preceding, it would appear that each of the four instances where time is mentioned in the book of Jonah it has a symbolic meaning and intends to mean more than is evident on the surface of the text.

Acknowledgements

This study is based on my PhD (Semitic Languages) thesis titled 'A literary-exegetical and social-scientific analysis of the book of Jonah: An exposition of its ancient social values', obtained in 2016. This degree was obtained from the Department of Ancient and Modern Languages and Cultures, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. The supervisor of my study was Prof. Dr J.H. (Henk) Potgieter.

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

Eynikel, E., 2005, 'One day, three days, and forty Days in the book of Jonah', in P.C. Counet & U. Berges (eds.), *One text, a thousand methods: Studies in memory of Sjef van Tilborg*, Brill, Leiden.

¹⁶The somewhat ambiguous meaning of *הִתְחַלֵּף* in 3:4 is central to the plot of Jonah. In the Qal, the verb frequently describes the turning, or overturning, of a city as a result of judgment. The verb appears in association with the overturning of Sodom and Gomorrah. A similar use, albeit one couched in eschatological imagery, appears in Haggai's description of God overturning the armies and thrones of the earth's kingdoms (2:21–22). In the Niphal, however, the verb frequently carries the connotation of "turning" but frequently in the sense of changing or turning back, as well as that of deliverance (cf. Exod 14:5; 1 Sam 10:6; Isa 60:5; 63:10; Jer 2:21; 31:13; Ps 66:6). In Hosea 11:8, the heart of God is "overturned" or "changed." In other places, the Niphal form still retains the notion of physical destruction associated with the Qal form (cf. Josh 8:20). The ambiguity of Jonah's announcement accords well with the narrator's ironic tone' (Tucker 2006:70, 71).

- Landes, G.M., 1967, 'The "Three Days and Three Nights" Motif in Jonah 2:1', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86(4), 446–450. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3262800>
- Limburg, J., 1993, *Jonah: A commentary*, SCM Press, London. (Old Testament library).
- Nogalski, J.D., 2011, *The book of the twelve: Hosea-Jonah*, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Macon, GA. (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary).
- Sasson, J.M., 1990, *Jonah: A new translation with introduction, commentary, and interpretation*, Doubleday, New York, NY. (The Anchor Bible Commentary).
- Simon, U., 1999, *Jonah יונה*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, PA. (The JPS Bible Commentary).
- Steenkamp, Y. & Prinsloo, G.T.M., 2003, 'Another look at Jonah 2', *Old Testament Essays* 16(2), 435–454.
- Stuart, D., 2012, 'Jonah, book of', in M.J. Boda & J.G. McConville (eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament prophets*, pp. 455–466, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Trible, P.L., 1963, 'Studies in the book of Jonah', Doctoral thesis, Columbia University, Columbia.
- Trible, P.L., 1996, 'The book of Jonah: Introduction, commentary, and reflections', in N.M. Alexander et al. (eds.), *The new interpreter's Bible Volume VII*, pp. 463–529. Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.
- Tucker, W.D., 2006, *Jonah: A handbook on the Hebrew text*, Baylor University Press, Waco, TX. (Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible Series).
- Watts, J.D.W., 1975, *The books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. (The Cambridge Bible Commentary Series).