

## Analyzing Structures

### Overview

Analyzing the structural aspects of a passage means to consider the way in which the material is organized. This approach assumes that writers have organized their material in intentional ways and that the order of things matters.

As in a movie or TV show editor, the writer is affecting your impressions of the material by the order in which s/he reveals it to you. Are there flashbacks? Do we follow one character and then another? Does the action come “full circle,” ending at the same place that it began?

*Note: This is not a scientific process. We can't read the minds of biblical authors, nor should we expect everyone to agree on a single “right” analysis. The point is to slow down, pay attention, and gain insight.*

Structural analysis can be subdivided into 3 separate steps:

### 1. Defining a pericope

“Pericope” (pronounced puh-RI-co-pee) is the technical term for a biblical passage. It comes from a Greek word meaning “cut,” and refers to what “cut” of the text you've chosen to work with. In worship settings, it is the portion of Scripture chosen for public reading and preaching. (footnote: add the word “pericope” to your word processing program to avoid having the word changed to “periscope”)

Key question to answer: What clues in the text suggest where to begin and end the pericope?

Clearly, one of the very first tasks facing an interpreter of Scripture is to decide how to define the pericope (meaning “make a decision about where it begins and ends”).

In Lancaster seminary biblical studies classes, we work from the conviction that the most responsible way to define a pericope is on the basis of criteria provided within the text itself—not on the basis of what works best for the point you're trying to make.

Those who come from worship traditions that use the Revised Common Lectionary, which assigns weekly biblical passages on a three-year cycle, might think that you can skip this step. However, the lectionary's judgment about the pericope should always be tested: because the lectionary often tailors passages to fit a particular theme or season of the church year, it doesn't always respect what the biblical writer may have been trying to communicate.

Those who come from traditions in which it is common to preach on a single verse or a series of single verses may find the whole idea of a pericope odd. But, the main goal of this skill is for you to encounter the possibility that Scripture takes on a richer meaning when it is read in the context of larger sections.

Discerning clues within the text itself requires you to become a careful reader, looking for natural breaks or pauses within the larger whole. Of course, you could get very detailed and chop a biblical text into tiny pieces, but for the sake of preaching, teaching, and academic work, consider 10-15 verses as the average size of a pericope. You might compare your task as distinguishing between acts in a play or scenes in a TV show.

Don't assume that a pericope will always match the chapter and verse divisions of the Bible. Chapter divisions were added to the Bible long after it was written, in the Middle Ages, and aren't themselves the best criteria to use. Sometimes a pericope will break in the middle of a

verse. The convention for talking about half-verses is to call the first half “a” and the second half “b.” (In the example I give from Amos later on, the pericope is Amos 5:4-6a).

If you can't take the word of the lectionary, or your personal preferences, or even the chapter and verse divisions of the Bible, what criteria can you use?

How to get there: There are good indicators of “shifts” in the pericope

- Change of character
- Change of location
- Change of topic or tone
- Shift in plot
- Transitional words and phrases

*Example: Genesis 17*

clues to the beginning of a new pericope

17:1 marks several shifts from 16:16

Transitional phrase: “when Abram was 99...”

New plot/topic: God's promise to Abraham

clues to the ending of the pericope

Two logical options:

17:23 marks a shift from 17:22

Transitional phrase: “then”

New plot/action: circumcision of males

18:1 marks a shift from 17:27

Change in location: oaks of Mamre

New plot: appearance of God/3 men

Based on these criteria alone, you could probably make a good case for the pericope being either 17:1-22 or 17:1-23. There is no single “right” way to define a pericope, but you should be able to make a strong case for your judgment based on these or other similar types of criteria. You may change your mind after you study the passage further, but coming to a tentative decision on the pericope is an important first step.

## 2. Structural analysis of the pericope

A pericope itself has a structure.

Key question to answer: How is this pericope organized?

How to get there: Look for patterns

Apply some of the same skills you used to define the pericope to discern the patterning within the pericope itself. That is, look for transitions \*within\* the pericope—location, character, style, time, etc.—and for repetitions \*within\* the pericope.

Then consider whether these transitions and repetitions fall into any type of pattern. Does the speaker change? Does the pericope end with some of the same words as it began? Does there seem to be a key verse around which the pericope is organized? If the pericope is a narrative,

how does the plot develop? At what verse is the tension at its peak? At what verse does the tension resolve?

There is not a standard list of structures in the Bible into which you are trying to sort your pericope. But, here are some structures that structures that you may encounter.

**Map out the pericope on your own rather than necessarily making it fit a standard structure.**

a) Inclusio, also known as Ring Composition, or Envelope Structure

In this case, a pericope begins and ends with the same phrase or combination of words.

*Example: Psalm 118, the first and last verses are the same*

b) Chiasm

Taking its name from the Greek letter chi, which looks like an X, a chiasm also begins and ends the same, but it is even more patterned. Moving inward from the beginning and ending, one finds mirrored ideas or phrases, such as ABCCBA.

*Example: Amos 5:4-6a*

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:

"Seek me and live;	a
but do not seek Bethel,	b
and do not enter into Gilgal	c
or cross over to Beer-sheba;	d
Gilgal will surely go into exile,	c
and Bethel shall come to nought."	b
Seek the LORD and live,	a

lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,  
and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel.

c) Stairstep parallelism

In this style, one phrase or sentence verbally builds upon the next one.

This is the dog that chased the cat, this is the cat that chased the mouse, this is the mouse that ate the cheese....

*Example: John 1:1-5*

1:1 In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.  
2 He was in the beginning with God.  
3 All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.  
What has come into being 4 in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.  
5 The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.

d) Climax or zenith structures

This is a classic style of narratives, in which the action moves to a climax and then falls off.

*Example: Genesis 22*

The plot builds through 22:10, as Abraham reaches out his hand to kill his son. The climax comes in 22:11 when the angel calls to Abraham, and the action falls off from that point.

e) Progression

As in stories like the 3 Little Pigs or in the episode of fitting the glass slipper in Cinderella, a pattern is established which is then broken.

*Example: Judges 16*

f) Argument

Biblical authors sometimes develop arguments in order to persuade their audiences. Just as we do, they use diverse strategies to do so. Some arguments happen in just a few words, while others take place over large chunks of material, even spanning chapters.

*Example: In Matthew 6:25-34, what is Jesus' major point? And what reasons does he supply to support it?*

g) Compare/Contrast

One of the simplest ways to make a point is to put two characters or ideas side by side in order to create a point of comparison. Sometimes this technique is called juxtaposition.

*Example: Luke 18:11-14*

*Example: Proverbs 26:4-5*

Creating an outline or diagram of the internal structure is helpful, but you can't simply stop there. The important step is to considering how the structure helps you see where the focus is, what ideas are central, etc. In the case of the Samson and Delilah story, for example, reflect on how your impression of the characters is affected by the fact that Samson's betrayal comes after 3 previous attempts on his life.

Note: Sometimes analysis of internal structure leads you to adjust your pericope by a few verses.

### **3. Analysis of how the passage fits into the structure of larger units**

This step considers where your passage shows up in a chapter, a book, or even a larger unit. Again, the presumption is that ancient writers deliberately structured their words to produce particular effects and that by paying attention to those structures we can understand something of what writers intended to communicate. Sometimes it is called "paying attention to the literary context," since it assumes that a passage cannot be "taken out of (literary) context" and still mean the same thing.

Key question to answer: How does your passage function within the larger biblical book in which it appears?

How to get there: First, you need a good sense of the whole book in which your passage appears. What is in this book? What are its themes and purpose? You can find these kinds of overviews in a textbook, the introduction to the book in a Study Bible (such as NOAB4), the entry on the book in a one-volume Bible dictionary or commentary (such as the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*), and the introduction of a commentary devoted to the book (such as *New Interpreter's Bible* series, where entries on each biblical book begin with a description of its content and themes).

Another perspective on the book's structure can come from consulting an appropriate outline of the biblical book. Ideally it would come from the same source as the introduction you consulted, but it's essential that the outline focus on the literary features or themes of the book (not a preaching or teaching outline). The most consistently helpful outlines for this purpose are found *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary series. In the case of a few large composite biblical books you might need to look at several outlines to see the book as a whole.

Using these resources, think about how your passage fits within the book as a whole.

- What appears before and/or your passage in the chapter?
- How is the book as a whole organized? Is your passage part of a subsection of the book? Where does your passage show up in that the "program" of the book? How does the passage resonate because of where it appears in the book?
- How does your passage help the book do its "work"?

A good example of the benefits of consulting the literary context of a passage is attached. If you only looked at a single passage of the book of Jonah, you would miss the way the parts work together to make a larger theological point.

## The Structure of the Book of Jonah

Jonathan Magonet, "Jonah, Book of." Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. III, pp. 937-942.

### CHAPTER ONE

Call (Arise, Go, Call)  
(v 2)

Jonah arises—  
flees to Tar-  
shish (v 3)

God acts—storm (v 4)  
Sailors call to their gods  
(v5)

Captain identifies Elohim's power  
behind the storm (v6)  
Sailors seek *YHWH's* will  
(v. 7-13)

Sailors pray to *YHWH*: "let  
us not perish" (v 14)

Storm abates (v 15)

### CHAPTER TWO

Jonah saved  
Jonah prays  
God responds

### CHAPTER THREE

Call (Arise, Go, Call)  
(v 2)

Jonah arises—  
goes to Nineveh (v 3)

Jonah acts—prophesies  
destruction (v 4)

Ninevites believe, fast,  
and don sackcloth (v 5)

King dons sackcloth,  
issues decree, seeks  
Elohim's will (v. 6-8)

King orders Ninevites  
to pray to Elohim  
"lest we perish" (v 9)

God "relents" (v 10)

### CHAPTER

#### FOUR

Jonah angry  
Jonah prays  
God responds

In very general terms chapters 1 and 3 put Jonah in the context of the outer "pagan" world. In both cases the leader of the pagans (the captain, the king) acknowledges that there is a single divine power to whom they turn. It is important to note that two different terms for "God" are used here in quite specific ways. The Heb Elohim, usually translated as "God," is a general term for God (and also divine beings, "other gods," "angels" and powerful human beings)—it is used here as the supreme divine power. The *tetragrammaton*, *YHWH*, is Israel's name for the supreme God of the world, but with whom Israel has a special covenantal relationship. Whereas the sailors identify the "God" (Elohim) who saves them as Israel's God, and thus make vows to *YHWH*, the Ninevites make an act of repentance before "God" (Elohim) but do not make that step of acknowledging *YHWH*.

Chapters 2 and 4 contain the inner discussion between Jonah and God represented in the

language of prayer, of divine responses in words and actions, and some physical activity directed against Jonah's body. "

The symmetry of this structure helps us recognize certain elements of the story that we might otherwise overlook. The parallels between the sailors with their captain and the Ninevites with their king indicate that the former are not merely an accidental background against the story of Jonah's flight. Like the Ninevites they are representatives of the "pagan" world. Like them, they too acknowledge the hand of God in the world, but unlike them they go further in identifying that universal "God" through the name that Israel uses and may indeed come to join Israel. There is therefore a graded universalism within the book. Jonah becomes an instrument for spreading divine knowledge in the world whether consciously obedient or not.