

1. Introduction

It is a relatively well-known mystery, at least among biblical scholars, that the fish in the book of Jonah apparently changes biological sex or at least grammatical gender.¹ The fish is referred to three times as דג: Jonah 2:1 (Eng. 1:17) (וימן ה' דג גדול לבלע את יונה ויהי יונה במעי) (הדג שלשה ימים ושלשה לילות (ויאמר ה' לדג ויקא את יונה אל היבשה) and Jonah 2:11 (Eng. 2:10). As the number and gender agreement with the adjective in 2:1 (גדול) and the verb in 2:11 (ויקא) makes clear, the fish is definitely male. In parallel, the fish is once referred to as דגה: Jonah 2:2 (Eng. 2:1) (ויתפלל יונה אל ה' אלהיו ממעי הדגה). This intricate textual situation has led to a wide range of more or less fanciful interpretations. Is this a matter of a biological oddity, grammatical gender ambiguity, literary style, multiple fish, or—as I shall argue here—something totally different?

The LXX and the Vulgate do not and, in fact, cannot, reflect the shift from דג to דגה and then back again to דג, given that neither Greek nor Latin differentiates between male and female fish. Turning to the Aramaic translations, Targum Jonathan follows the MT closely, employing the m.sg. term נונא to denote the fish in Jonah 2:1, 11 whilst using the f.sg. term נונתא in 2:2.² In contrast, the Peshitta attests to the m.sg. form ܢܘܢܐ throughout all three verses.³

2. (Grammatical) Gender Ambiguity Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible

Jonah's fish is not alone among animals depicted in the Hebrew Bible to display a certain ambiguity with regard to their biological sex / grammatical gender. Most pertinently, the expression שתים דבים, which refers to the two bears in the Elisha story (2 Kgs 2:24), shows at

¹ I am grateful to Prof. Hugh Williamson and Dr Aaron Hornkohl who have given helpful critique throughout the process of writing this article.

² Reading based on Alexander Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic, III. The Latter Prophets According to Targum Jonathan* (Leiden, 1962), pp. 437-438. The Aramaic word נונא / נון denotes a fish. See Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Jerusalem, 1926), p. 888a.

³ J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford, 1903), p. 333, does not record a feminine form.

least some form of gender ambiguity, given the feminine form of the numeral (שתים) in conjunction with the masculine plural noun (דבים). Yet, in view of the accompanying 3f.pl. verb ותצאנה, the text speaks about female bears. In contrast, the LXX uses the non-specific ἄρκος and accordingly does not differentiate between masculine and feminine bears.⁴ Looking at the function of the bears within the narrative of 2 Kgs 2:23–25, Julie Faith Parker detects in their feminine sex a potential ironic twist “as mother bears who protect their own cubs now tear apart human offspring”.⁵

In addition to animals, other sentient beings in the Hebrew Bible are sometimes described alternately as masculine and feminine. Notably, there is a curious parallel in Ecclesiastes where the key-word קהלת is treated three times as a m.sg noun (1:1, 2; 12:10) and once as a f.sg. noun (7:27) (אמרַה קהלת).⁶ In this case a relatively simple text-critical solution exists. As more than one scholar has argued, the expression אמרַה קהלת is probably a case of erroneous word-division. The final ה of the verb is in all likelihood the definite article of the following noun: אמרַה קהלת.⁷ A masculine reading is further supported by the textual evidence in the LXX (εἶπεν ὁ Ἐκκλησιαστικὸς) and, in a slightly different way, in the Peshitta (ܐܡܪܗܘܩܗܠܬ).

3. Modern Scholarly Suggestions

In their endeavour to explain the sex/gender shift of the fish, modern scholars have come up with a wide variety of suggestions. Before examining these suggestions, however, let us begin by ruling out any kind of ‘biological’ explanation. It is improbable that Jonah’s fish would have been understood as some kind of reef fish— like the clownfish or parrotfish— that can change biological sex. An ancient Israelite author is unlikely to have known of

⁴ The form ἄρκος is an unusual form of ἄρκτος. The shorter form is the result of consonantal collapse (“Konsonantenschwund”). See further Friedrich Blass/Albert Debrunner/Friedrich Rehkopf, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch* (Göttingen, 17th edition, 1990), §34, 4.

⁵ Julie Faith Parker, *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elisha Cycle* (Brown Judaic Studies 355; Providence, RI, 2013), p. 95.

⁶ As noted by T.A. Perry, *Jonah’s Argument with God: The Honeymoon is Over!* (Peabody, MA, 2006), p. 219, including fn. 16.

⁷ See, e.g., Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18C; New York, NY, 1997), p. 264.

hermaphroditic fish.⁸ The solution must be located in the narrative itself, either in its textual history or in its morphology, syntax, or literary style.

3.1. Text-critical Solutions

Beginning with text-critical options, one painless way out of the conundrum of a male and a female fish would be to postulate that the final ה on the form הדגה in Jonah 2:2b is the unfortunate result of a scribal error. Yet, as no attested manuscript preserves a text without the ה, this proposition rests on no textual evidence.⁹ Another easy solution might be to treat the whole expression ממעי הדגה in 2:2b as a scribal mistake, a move that can be supported by the fact that it contains the same general information as 2:1bα (במעִי הדג), of course with the crucial difference of the ending ה. The resulting reading states that Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days (2:1) and there he prayed (2:2). Again, however, whilst in theory this is a possible mistake, it is unclear how such a scribal mistake would have arisen.

3.2. Redaction-critical Solutions

Turning to redaction-critical theories, the current text of Jonah may be based on two originally independent sources. The sections in Jonah 2:1, 11 (which feature the male fish) may belong to one textual layer while Jonah 2:2 (which features the female fish) may belong to another textual layer. The ambiguity of the fish with regard to its sex/gender in the extant text would thus point to careless editorial work when the two sources were being combined.¹⁰

This suggestion brings up matters of structure and authorship. If we argue for two different sources, where exactly is the seam between the prose narrative and the psalm? Furthermore, did the scribe responsible for the final form of the book of Jonah take an existing (older) psalm and incorporate it into his narrative, or did he write a psalm for the purpose of fitting it

⁸ The clownfish, for example, is a so-called sequential hermaphrodite. See further http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sequential_hermaphroditism.

⁹ For example, the Hebrew text found in the Murabba'at Caves at Qumran attests to the reading of the MT vis-à-vis the fish. It has דג twice in 2:1, דגה in 2:2, and דג again in 2:11. See P. Benoit, J.T. Milik, and R. de Vaux (eds.), *Les Grottes de Murabba'at* (DJD II; Oxford, 1961), pp. 190–191 (Mur88, Col. X, lines 26–28).

¹⁰ Cf. J.S. Ackerman, “Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah”, in Baruch Halpern and Jon D. Levinson (eds.), *Tradition and Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith. Festschrift Frank Moore Cross* (Winona Lake, IN, 1981), pp. 213–246 (213).

into the (older) narrative? Alternatively, did a third author/editor join two originally independent sources together? In short, do the male and the female fish belong to the same or to different textual strands?

Beginning with the structure, Sasson and Limburg maintain that the prose section breaks off after Jonah 2:1–3aα (v. 3 after the first word וַיֹּאמֶר) and recommences in Jonah 2:11.¹¹ According to this division, both the male (2:1, 11) and the female (2:2) fish are located in the prose narrative while the intermediate psalm never mentions the fish. Other scholars, among them Wolff, argue that all of Jonah 2:2–10 constitutes the psalm. In the present context, it is circular to appeal to Wolff’s first argument, namely the change from דג to דגה between Jonah 2:1 and 2:2. His second point, i.e., that God is being referred to as ה' אלהיו / ה' אלהי only in 2:2 and 2:7 but nowhere else in the book of Jonah, makes a stronger case for seeing Jonah 2:2 as the beginning of the psalm. Likewise, Wolff’s third claim that the repetition of the name Jonah in 2:1 and 2:2 is incongruent with the author’s spare style elsewhere is also convincing. In sum, Wolff assigns Jonah 2:1, 11 (and 3:1–3a) to the primary narrative while regarding the intermediate psalm in 2:2–10 as a later addition.¹² It follows, *per* Wolff, that the male fish is original while the female fish is secondary.

Most scholars adhere to this relative chronology,¹³ yet the opposite view also exists. Hunter and, more recently, Pyper consider the psalm in Jonah 2 to be the impetus for the composition

¹¹ E.g. Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah* (AB 24B; New York, NY, 1990), pp. 144, 160–161, and James Limburg, *Jonah* (OTL; London, 1993), p. 63.

¹² Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (transl. Margaret Kohl; Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis, MN: 1986), pp. 128–131 (especially p. 130). Slightly differently, see also K. Marti, *Dodekapropheton* (KHAT 13; Tübingen, 1904), p. 253, who argues that v. 2 was written by the redactor responsible for adding the psalm (vv. 3–10).

¹³ See, e.g., Athalya Brenner, “Jonah’s Poem Out of and Within Context”, in Philip R. Davies and David J.A. Clines (eds), *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings* (JSOTSup 144; Sheffield, 1993), pp. 183–192 (189–190). From a different perspective, see also Wolff, *Jonah*, p. 129, who states that the psalm, although showing affinity with older psalms, expands the imagery with an eye towards the surrounding narrative.

of the surrounding prose narrative.¹⁴ According to Pyper, chapters 1, 3–4 are the “narrative outworking of the metaphors of the psalms”.¹⁵ Reading the Jonah story from the perspective of its diachronic history of composition, Jonah is (metaphorically) in the belly of Sheol (בִּטְן שְׂאוּל [f.sg.] Jonah 2:2–10) *before* ending up (physically) in the fish (Jonah 2:1, 11). This suggested textual development may, in turn, explain the feminine grammatical gender of the fish in Jonah 2:2: the feminine expression בִּטְן שְׂאוּל in the psalm (2:3) gave rise to the female sex of the fish (דגה, 2:2).¹⁶

The matters of structure and origin are interrelated and this is neither the time nor the place to reach the ultimate solution. Even so, a few comments are in order. First, the limited cohesion between the psalm and the surrounding prose narrative suggests two distinct authors.

Secondly, the differences in style and vocabulary, as well as the considerable overlap in content between verses 1 and 2, indicate that Jonah 2:1, 11 were penned by one author and Jonah 2:2 (headline) and 3–10 (body of the psalm) by another. Thirdly, Hunter’s and Pyper’s proposition that the psalm is the older text which inspired the surrounding *midrash* should be given the consideration that it deserves. Together, these arguments pave the way for a possible, yet not ideal, solution to the conundrum of Jonah’s fish: the fish began its (textual) life in the poetic text as female and became male only in the subsequent prose text. I shall revisit this matter towards the end of the article.

3.3. Stylistic Solutions

Alternatively, several scholars have sought to explain the ostensible sex change of the fish as a matter of literary style. McKenzie, for example, sees the change as an indication of the literary genre of the book of Jonah: it is one of many elements in the book which alert the readers to the fact that they are reading a *satire*. The sex change of the fish would thus be one of many deliberately farcical or exaggerated and nonsensical features of the story: “the whole

¹⁴ Alastair Hunter, “Jonah from the Whale: Exodus Motifs in Jonah 2”, in Johannes C. de Moor (ed.), *The Elusive Prophet: The Prophet as a Historical Person, Literary Character and Anonymous Artist* (OTS 45; Leiden, 2001), pp. 142–158 (especially p. 155).

¹⁵ Hugh S. Pyper, “Swallowed by a Song: Jonah and the Jonah-Psalm Through the Looking-Glass”, in Robert Rezetko, Timothy H. Lim, and W. Brian Aucker (eds), *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld* (VTSup 113; Leiden, 2007), pp. 337–358 (345–346).

¹⁶ Pyper, “Swallowed by a Song”, p. 347.

story is intended to be preposterous because its very purpose is to make fun of Jonah and his attitude”.¹⁷ In response, there are definitely humorous elements in the book of Jonah, yet I am not fully convinced that the sex-change of the fish is one of them.

From a different perspective, Sasson suggests that the blurring of the biological sex of the fish is a narratological issue. A story can use either sex (or both at once) for an animal in such cases where its sex is of no importance for the story. In support of his theory, Sasson cites two letters from Mari, written by the same person and describing the same incident. One letter uses the Akkadian term for ‘lion’ and the other employs the term for ‘lioness’. According to Sasson, these two instances are parallel to the situation in Jonah 2.¹⁸ Yet, even though this comparison offers a possible explanation, the two cases are not fully parallel in that the book of Jonah contains *one and the same account* of the event.

One aspect which supports seeing Jonah’s fish as female is the fact that Jonah is found in its מעים (Jonah 2:1, 2). The term מעים (always attested in the plural) has a wide semantic range and can refer to any kind of internal organs. Notably, the word ממעיד is parallel with בטן ‘stomach’ in Gen 25:23 and refers in both instances to Rebecca’s womb. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Ps 139:13 (תסכני בבטן אמי), the word בטן can mean ‘womb’. These ‘womb-like’ connotations of Jonah’s temporary place of respite may have contributed to the ‘feminization’ of Jonah’s fish in two ways. They may have caused the author of Jonah 2:2 to use the feminine form of the word for ‘fish’.¹⁹ This, however, is not a fully satisfying solution as it raises the obvious question as to why this ‘slip of the subconscious’ happened only in 2:2 (ממעי הדגה) and not in the preceding 2:1 (במעו הדג). Alternatively, and in my view more likely, the notion of Jonah sojourning in the fish’s ‘womb’ led to the idea, prevalent in both mediaeval and modern scholarship, that Jonah’s fish was, at least at some stage, a female fish.

¹⁷ Steven L. McKenzie, *How to Read the Bible: History, Prophecy, Literature—Why Modern Readers Need to Know the Difference, and What It Means for Faith Today* (New York, 2005), pp. 1–21 (7).

¹⁸ Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 156.

¹⁹ A variant of this interpretation has been voiced by Karin Almladh, *Studies in the Book of Jonah* (*Studia Semitica Upsaliensia* 7; Lund, 1986), p. 25, including fn. 52. She compares the instance in Jonah 2:2 with Ps 27:3 where the noun מחנה (elsewhere m.sg.) is treated as a f.sg. noun due to the parallelism with the f.sg. noun מלחמה in the next line.

Finally, Tribble has explored the notion of feminine imagery in the book of Jonah from a narratological perspective. She connects the feminine form of the fish (דגה) with the grammatical feminine gender of the ship (אניה), evident also in the possessive suffix in the expression “its fare” (שכרה) in Jonah 1:3. In her view, this nuance, alongside the female fish in Jonah 2:2, contributes to the feminine imagery of the story.²⁰ Along similar lines, Ackerman argues that the gender change is a focusing device which serves to parallel Jonah’s experience on board the ship and inside the fish. Jonah moves from the innermost of the ship (f.) (ירכתי הספינה) to the innermost of the fish (f.) (ממעי הדגה).²¹ These suggestions explain well why the fish is feminine in Jonah 2:2; they fail to explicate why it is masculine in Jonah 2:1 and 2:11. If the author sought to connect the fish with the ship and to parallel Jonah’s experience inside both entities, I would have expected the fish to be feminine throughout chapter 2.

3.4. Morphological Explanations

Yet other scholars have sought an explanation in morphology. Abraham Ibn Ezra suggested that the noun ‘fish’ has one masculine and one feminine grammatical form, parallel to such nouns as ‘righteousness’ (צדק / צדקה). The two forms can be used interchangeably, thus eliminating the need to postulate two different fish.²² Ibn Ezra’s comparison with צדק / צדקה is not fully apt, however, in that the word צדקה is not a feminine form of the masculine צדק.²³

Alternatively, scholars have appealed to the collective sense of the f.sg. form דגה. Already Radak pointed out that דגה in Exod 7:18 refers to *all* fish (in the Nile), not only to the female

²⁰ Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Old Testament Series; Minneapolis, MN, 1994), p. 130, fn. 27.

²¹ Ackerman, “Satire and Symbolism”, p. 232.

²² Ibn Ezra, *Rabbinic Bible*, Commentary to Jonah 2:2.

²³ Pointed out by Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 155.

ones.²⁴ This insight does not contribute much to the situation in Jonah, however, which is clearly not about a shoal of fish.²⁵

4. Midrashic Suggestions

Finally, turning to midrash, the change from דג to דגה has given rise to some truly marvellous solutions. So far, I have referred to Jonah's fish in the singular. Maybe, however, we are dealing with two fish—one male and one female? This line of interpretation has been advocated by *Midrash Jonah* and several other classical Jewish texts. According to this midrash, Jonah was first swallowed by a male fish. Deep inside the fish, there was sufficient place for Jonah to stand up comfortably. As this was an unsatisfactory situation from God's perspective, God appointed a pregnant (female) fish that had 365,000 small fish in her. With the help of Leviathan, this female fish convinced the male fish to spit out Jonah, only so that she herself could subsequently swallow him. Inside the female fish, Jonah was very cramped and also very afraid that he would die from all the refuse of the baby fish. This fear and discomfort motivated him to turn to God in prayer.²⁶

Many mediaeval Jewish exegetes, among them Rashi, follow suit.²⁷ The midrashic interpretation focusing on two fish is given further attention in the nineteenth-century commentary by Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel. Like Rashi, Malbim maintains that Jonah saw the need to pray only in the narrow belly of the female fish. In support of this interpretation, Malbim refers to the abovementioned fact that the f.sg. form דגה is used collectively to denote a *group* of items. Developing this thought in a new direction, Malbim

²⁴ Radak, *Rabbinic Bible*, Commentary to Jonah 2:2. See further BDB, p. 185b. The opposite phenomenon is also attested in the Hebrew Bible, whereby the masculine form denotes the collective. See, e.g., אגיה (f.sg.) = 'ship' (Jonah 1:5) whereas the m.sg. denotes a 'fleet' (1 Kgs 9:26, אג). Cf. Sasson, *Jonah*, p. 156, drawing on GKC §122, s, t.

²⁵ The occurrence of דגה in Jonah 2:2 is the only case where דגה refers to a single fish (see further below).

²⁶ The full Hebrew text of Midrash Yona can be found at

http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/trayasar/midrash_yona.pdf. The specific passage referred to above has been translated into English by James Limburg, *Jonah* (OTL; London, 1993), pp. 110–111. For an English translation of the whole midrash, see Judah David Eisenstein (ed.) אגוז מדרשים: *A Library of Two Hundred Minor Midrashim* II (New York, NY, 1915), pp. 218–222.

²⁷ Rashi, *Rabbinic Bible*, Commentary to Jonah 2:1.

argues that the female fish in Jonah 2:2 is collective in the sense that she is in the time of reproduction and thus contains multitudes of eggs, i.e., many fish.²⁸ The main problem with this interpretation from a narratological perspective, notwithstanding its fantastic aspects, is the reappearance of the m.sg. form in Jonah 2:11. To my knowledge, no midrashic retelling of the Jonah story explains satisfactorily how Jonah ended up in the male fish a second time.

To sum up, the MT cannot be properly understood according to its Masoretic pointing: a male fish which turns female is just plain silly and the ingenious stylistic attempts to explain this sex-change are ultimately unconvincing.

5. A New Suggestion

Is there a solution in sight? I believe there is, yet it is located neither in multiple fish nor in literary style, but in solid grammar. Two interrelated issues need to be clarified first, however: (1) the function of the letter ה on דגה and (2) the Masoretic accentuation.

5.1. *Alternative Ways of Interpreting a Final ה*

As noted above, the f.sg. form דגה elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible denotes a shoal of fish.²⁹ In fact, Jonah 2:2 is the only instance where the f.sg. form does not. In addition, there is no other evidence to suggest that people in ancient Israel differentiated between biologically male and female fish: between (a select few) male and female mammals, yes, but not between male and female fish. This raises the question whether the final ה of the term דגה in Jonah 2:2 really is a feminine marker.

A final ה on a word can indicate several things. It can function as a *mater lectionis* for a final vowel /a/,³⁰ notably when the final ה on a noun indicate the f.sg. form. In such cases, the accent is on the ultimate syllable. Alternatively, a final ה can function as an adverbial adjunct marking direction or destination. This ה may at one point have been a genuine consonant

²⁸ Malbim, *Mikra'ei Kodesh*, Commentary on Jonah 2:2. For an English translation, see Steven Bob, *Go to Nineveh: Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Book of Jonah* (Eugene, OR, 2013), pp. 123–124.

²⁹ The other 14 instances of the form דגה are attested in Gen 1:26, 28; Exod 7:18, 21; Numb 11:5; Deut 4:18; Isa 50:2; Ezek 29:4 (x2), 5; 47:9, 10 (x2); and Ps 105:29.

³⁰ Cf. for example, the Qumran orthographical practice of writing a final ה at the end of the 2m.sg. *qatal* verb. See further Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN / Assen, 1992), p. 109.

rather than a *mater lectionis*.³¹ This ה does not normally carry the stress; rather the stress is on the penultimate syllable. In addition to these two scenarios, there are a few instances in biblical Hebrew where a final ה cannot be explained satisfactorily. To quote Gesenius-Kautzsch, a final ה can be a “meaningless appendage [...] expressing poetic emphasis”.³² Slightly differently, Joüon and Muraoka concede that the function of a final ה may be “purely rhythmic”.³³ It is my contention that the final ה on the word דגה in Jonah 2:2 falls into this elusive category, as neither a feminine marker nor a locative fits the context.

5.2. A Matter of Stress

In Jonah 2:2, the *silluq* is positioned under the ג which indicates that the word דגה was read as a f.sg. form.³⁴ Had the final ה on the דגה functioned as an adverbial adjunct, the stress would have been on the penultimate syllable.³⁵ It is therefore clear that, by the time of the Masoretic pointing, this word was read and understood as a f.s. noun. This accentuation does not necessarily represent the author’s original intention, however, only the later understanding of the Masoretes. I suggest that the Masoretes, being at a loss how to interpret the final ה, opted to treat it in line with the other attested examples of דגה, namely as a feminine marker. After all, an author could, at least hypothetically, wish to differentiate between female and male fish, even if the word דגה never elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible denotes a single female fish. Moreover, the Masoretes might have sought to harmonize the pronunciation of all the occurrences of דגה: as all examples of the absolute form דגה (Exod 7:18, 21; Numb 11:5; Deut 4:18; Ezek 47:9) have the stress on the ultimate syllable, so also the occurrence in Jonah 2:2.³⁶ If my suggestion is correct, namely that the present position of the *silluq* below the ג

³¹ Aaron D. Hornkohl, *Ancient Hebrew Periodization and the Language of the Book of Jeremiah: The Case for a Sixth-Century Date of Composition* (SSLL 74; Leiden, 2014), pp. 203–204.

³² GK §90f.

³³ Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Volume 1. Part One: *Orthography and Phonetics* (Translated and Revised by T. Muraoka; Subsidia Biblica 14/I; Rome, 1991), §93i.

³⁴ GK §94a.

³⁵ GK §90c.

³⁶ Isa 5:11b provides a comparable example where the Masoretes reinterpreted a little-understood phenomenon in the light of a more common and better understood one. Following Chaim Cohen, “The Enclitic-mem in Biblical Hebrew: Its Existence and Initial Discovery”, in Chaim Cohen, Avi Hurvitz, and Shalom M. Paul (eds.), *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume* (Winona Lake, IN, 2004), pp. 231–260 (248–250), the

reflects the Masoretic understanding, but not necessarily the intention of the original author, it is methodologically possible to compare the final ה on the word דגה in Jonah 2:2 with other words which contain an unexpected final ה, regardless of the positioning of the accent in the MT.

There are other cases where the Masoretic accentuation is unlikely to convey the original author's intention. In 1 Sam 3:3, for instance, the *ethnachta* is placed under the participle שכב, even though the sentence is more naturally read with its main pause after the word יכבה.³⁷ The accentuation thus creates a counter-intuitive reading which serves the theological purpose of assuring the readers that Samuel was *not* sleeping in the temple (where only priests and Davidic kings were allowed to sleep).³⁸ The book of Jonah may testify to another case where the Masoretic accents disagree with the more straight-forward understanding of a verse. The words ישוב ווחם ה' האלהים ושב מחרון אפו in Jonah 3:9 are best read as a single clause meaning “may YHWH God turn and change his mind and turn from his fierce anger”.³⁹ The Masoretic accents, however, break up this clause in order to disassociate God from repentance and instead to emphasize the human need to turn to God.⁴⁰

Even closer to the case in Jonah 2:2, Gen 20:12 and Josh 7:20 contain the word אמנה ‘truly’ which is accentuated on the last syllable, thus suggesting that it is a feminine form. If we understand this word as an adverbial form of the root אמן, however, we would expect the penultimate syllable to be stressed.⁴¹ Last, but not the least, there are seven cases where the

Masoretic vocalized the enclitic mem in ידליקם erroneously as a 3m.pl. verbal object suffix, thus creating a clause that is not parallel to the preceding one in v. 11a. See also the examples discussed by Cohen on pp. 251–254.

³⁷ Cf. the recent translation by A. Graham Auld, *I and II Samuel* (OTL; Louisville, KY, 2011), p. 43.

³⁸ The reading according to the accents is supported by TJ. See further the discussion in Eveline van Staaldoune-Sulman, *The Targum of Samuel* (SAIS 1; Leiden, 2002), pp. 229–230. I am indebted to Aaron Hornkohl for drawing attention to this passage and the one in Jonah 3:9.

³⁹ This reading is further supported by the LXX.

⁴⁰ TJ agrees with the accents rather than with the syntax of the Hebrew text. See further Kevin J. Cathcart and Robert P. Gordon, *The Targum of the Minor Prophets* (The Aramaic Bible 14; Edinburgh, 1989), p. 108, fn. 11.

⁴¹ Cf. the discussion by Theophile James Meek, “The Hebrew Accusative of Time and Place”, *JAOS* 60 (1940), pp. 224–233 (231). Meek sees this as a f.sg. form but does not elaborate further. See also Hornkohl, *Ancient Hebrew Periodization*, pp. 206–207.

definite f.sg. participle form of a ע"ו verb is accentuated as if it were a *qaṭal* verb.⁴² Gen 18:21, for example, contains the verb הבאה which, due to its definite article, must be a participle. The accent under the penultimate syllable, however, suggests a *qaṭal* form.⁴³

To sum up, the Masoretic accentuation does not always reflect the original author's intention.

5.3. *Pausal Forms*

What, then, is the final ה in דגה in Jonah 2:2? I wish to propose here that the form דגה is a rare example of a longer nominal form which often, but not always, appears at the end of a clause. Notably, in contrast to Jonah 2:1 and 2:11 where the term דג appears in the middle of the verse (but note that the term דג appears in a pausal position in 2:11, see further below), the term דגה in Jonah 2:2 appears in the end of the verse.

It has long been noted that pausal forms in biblical Hebrew tend to be longer than their corresponding contextual counterparts.⁴⁴ Often, this longer form is revealed only in its pronunciation. There are, however, several cases that suggest that a longer consonantal form was preferred in pausal positions. For instance, the long imperative, indicated orthographically by a suffixed ה,⁴⁵ often (but not always) appears in a pausal position, as evidenced in, among other places, Deut 33:23b (וּדְרוּם יִרְשָׁה) = “inherit! the south”.⁴⁶ Along similar lines, ע"ו verbs tend to retain the *nun* in *yiqṭol* when appearing in pause.⁴⁷ Likewise, the longer plural *yiqṭol* forms with *nun-paragogicum* occur most commonly at the end of sentences in pausal positions.⁴⁸

⁴² See also Gen 46:27 (הבאה); Isa 51:10 (השמה); Job 2:11 (הבאה); Ruth 1:22 (השבה); 2:6 (השבה); and 4:3 (השבה). I am indebted to Aaron Hornkohl for drawing attention to this phenomenon.

⁴³ The participle of ע"ו verb has the stress on the ultimate syllable while the *qaṭal* form of the same type of verbs has the stress on the penultimate syllable. See further GK §72b.

⁴⁴ Cf. Joüon-Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §32g.

⁴⁵ See GK §48k. For its uses and semantic significance, see Steven E. Fassberg, “Imperatives and Prohibitive: Pre-Modern”, in Geoffrey Khan (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*. Vol. 2 (Leiden, 2013), pp. 242–245 (243).

⁴⁶ GK §48i (cf. GK §46b). GK calls it a *heh paragogicum*.

⁴⁷ Joüon-Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §32g.

⁴⁸ See further GK §47m.

These types of longer pausal forms might be remnants of genuine archaic or pseudo-archaic forms. As argued by Fassberg, pausal forms, occurring in both nouns and verbs, preserve a pronunciation that is older than the one reflected by the corresponding contextual forms. Furthermore, pausal forms tend to be attested in concluding positions, brought out by the natural slowing down at the end of a clause.⁴⁹ At the same time, several examples show that pausal forms are not always accompanied by an *ethnachta* or a *silluq*. Following Revell, these examples suggest that the system of pausal forms in Biblical Hebrew reflects a system of text division which was independent of and probably older than the Masoretic system of accent signs.⁵⁰

In parallel, long forms are frequently attested in the Qumran scrolls in both contextual and pausal positions. Notably, many scholars understand the *plene* orthography of forms like יכתובו (rather than BH יכתבו) as reflecting similar forms to those preserved in pause in the Tiberian tradition.⁵¹ According to Kutscher, this spelling probably testifies to a different pronunciation where the stress was placed on the penultimate rather than the ultimate syllable, i.e., in line with the standard Masoretic accents on pausal forms.⁵² Tangentially relevant is also the fact that the Qumran Scrolls sometimes employ a long form of the particle מאודה (“very”, BH מאד) which may reflect an archaic pronunciation.⁵³

5.4. Examples of Nouns with Final ה

At least three examples in the Hebrew Bible support my proposition that a final ה on a noun can be a rare remnant of a longer consonantal form that often, but not always, appears at the end of a sentence, namely Job 34:13; 37:12; and Ezek 8:2. In addition, the appearance of the

⁴⁹ Steven E. Fassberg, “Pausal Forms”, in Geoffrey Khan (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*. Vol. 3 (Leiden, 2013), pp. 54–55 (54). See also E.J. Revell, “Pausal Forms in Biblical Hebrew: Their Function, Origin and Significance”, *JSS* 25 (1980), pp. 165–179.

⁵⁰ Revell, “Pausal Forms”, p. 169.

⁵¹ Fassberg, “Pausal Forms”, p. 54, with listed bibliography.

⁵² Eduard Yechezkel Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (ed. Raphael Kutscher; Jerusalem / Leiden, 1982), §158 (p. 97). For the shift of stress, see GK §290.

⁵³ Kutscher, *History of the Hebrew Language*, §160 (p. 99).

long form יהצה in some pausal positions, combined with the fact that the short form is attested only in non-pausal positions, strengthens my case.

1. Job 34:13 attests to the word ארצה in a pausal position, as indicated by the *ethnachta* under the א. This ה is unlikely to be either a feminine marker or a locative ה.
2. Job 37:12 contains the construct phrase תבל ארצה in the final position in the verse. The noun ארץ has an added ה in the final position that cannot be explained satisfactorily as either a feminine marker or a locative ה. Significantly, this example is syntactically parallel with the construct phrase ממעי הדגה in Jonah 2:2.
3. Likewise, Ezek 8:2 contains the construct phrase בעין החשמלה in the final position of the verse. Again, the noun חשמל has an added ה in the final position which is neither a feminine marker nor a locative ה. This example is also syntactically parallel with the construct phrase ממעי הדגה in Jonah 2:2.
4. Two variants of the geographical name Jahaz (יהץ) / Jahza (יהצה) are attested in BH. The longer variant is attested three times in pausal position: Numb 21:23 (with *ethnachta*); Deut 2:32 (with *silluq*); and Judg 11:20 (with *ethnachta*). It appears another four times in non-pausal positions: Josh 13:18; 21:36; Jer 48:21; and 1 Chron 6:63 (Eng. 6:78). In contrast, the short form occurs in Isa 15:4 (non-pause) and Jer 48:34 (non-pause). In two of these cases, the final ה may indicate direction (Numb 21:23; Jer 48:21 [together with preposition אל]) while the other five cases convey no movement (Deut 2:32; Judg 11:20; Josh 13:18; 21:36; 1 Chron 6:63). Furthermore, and contrary to expectation, the two shorter forms in Isa 15:4 (עד יהץ) and Jer 48:34 (עד יהץ) do express direction. The long form of יהצה is thus better understood as a frozen expression,⁵⁴ which often (but not always) appears in pausal positions.

It should finally also be noted that the psalm in Jonah 2:2–10 contains another example of a noun with a final ה that is not a feminine marker, namely the word ישועתה (2:10).⁵⁵ Although not in pause, its occurrence nevertheless testifies to another example of the author employing archaic long forms.

⁵⁴ Cf. Hornkohl, *Ancient Hebrew Periodization*, pp. 213–16, including fn. 114.

⁵⁵ See further GK §90g.

5.4. *Playing the Devil's Advocate*

There are two obvious problems with the suggested proposition. First, in addition to the abovementioned examples, GK §90f lists six other examples where a word, which ends in a seemingly superfluous ה, is attested in non-pausal position. As we shall see, however, only the first three instances pose any real difficulty.

1. In Isa 8:23 (Eng. 9:1), the long form ארצה appears twice in the middle of the construct chain נפתלי זבלון ארצה ארצה נפתלי 'in the past, he humbled the land of Zebulon and the land of Naphtali'. GK §90f treats this ה as an old accusative ending and many earlier scholars saw it as having a directive sense. Yet Emerton challenges both views and treats it instead as yet another case where the ה *locale* has lost its distinctive force.⁵⁶ The long form ארצה appears in pause in Job 34:13 and 37:12, as noted above. It should be noted, however, that the *nomen regens* often preserves an archaic form, the f.sg. form ending with ת- being a case in point.⁵⁷
2. Ps 116:15 contains the expression המותה לחסידיו 'the death of his pious ones'. The final /a/ ending in המותה has no obvious semantic significance. To cite Goldingay, it serves "simply to lengthen the word".⁵⁸ In contrast, Anderson regards it as a unique feminine form of the m.sg. word מות.⁵⁹ It is likely that we are yet again seeing a longer archaic construct form.⁶⁰
3. There is also no satisfactory explanation to the similar occurrence in Ps 124:4 where the final ה in the word נחלה עבר על נפשנו 'the stream had gone

⁵⁶ John A. Emerton, "Some Linguistic and Historical Problems in Isaiah VIII 23", *JSS* 14 (1969), pp. 151–175 (152–153). He interacts with a long list of scholars who have sought to explain / amend the form ארצה in various other ways.

⁵⁷ From a different perspective, note that the Samaritan Pentateuch attests to 11 cases of a construct chain of *nomen regens* + directional ה + *nomen rectum* (e.g. ארצה כנען). See further Hornkohl, *Ancient Hebrew Periodization*, p. 211.

⁵⁸ John Goldingay, *Psalms. Volume 3: Psalms 90–150* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, MI, 2008), p. 337, fn. 11.

⁵⁹ A.A. Anderson, *Psalms (73–150)* (NCBC; London, 1972), p. 794.

⁶⁰ For construct form preceding a preposition, see Magnar Kartveit, *Rejoice, Dear Zion: Hebrew Construct Phrases with "Daughter" and "Virgin" as Nomen Regens* (BZAW 447; Leiden, 2013), pp. 97–99.

over our soul', has no obvious function. The term נחלה is clearly masculine, as indicated by the following verb עבר.

At most, we can highlight that, like Jonah 2:2, these three instances all appear in poetic texts.

The other three cases listed by GK §90f are easier to explain, either by textual emendations (Josh 15:12; Judg 14:18) or by assuming an old poetic form (Hos 8:7):

4. Josh 15:12 opens with the phrase וגבול ים הימה הגדול 'and the western border was the great sea'. As GK §90f suggests, however, this is probably a case of dittography where the ה of the word הגדול has mistakenly been replicated also at the end of the word ים.
5. In Judg 14:18, the men of the town asked Samson a riddle בטרם יבא החרסה. This phrase is normally translated as "before the sun went down" (AV). The word חרס, the subject of the sentence, is attested elsewhere only in Job 9:7, where it appears in the same context as 'stars'. The rareness of this word caused GK §90f to suggest emending it to החדרה, i.e., "to the (bridal) chamber" (cf. Judg 15:1).⁶¹ If this emendation is correct, then the phrase in Judg 14:18 would read "before [Samson] went *towards* the chamber" and the final ה would have directional force.
6. Hos 8:7a contains yet another noun with an unexplainable final ה. It reads: כי רוח יזרעו וסופתה יקצרו 'because they sow wind and reap whirlwind'. GK §90f explains the final ה as an old accusative ending, as does Macintosh.⁶² The LXX understands the final ה as a possessive suffix (ἡ καταστροφῆ αὐτῶν = 'her destruction' [presumably referring to the people]) and treats the word as the subject of the following 3sg. verb ἐκδέξεται (which does not correspond to יקצרו of the MT; it appears instead to presuppose a form of the Hebrew root יקה). While the LXX may preserve a different Hebrew *Vorlage*, it is in my view preferable to understand the ending תה- as a poetic form, on par with forms such as ישועתה (e.g., Jonah 2:10).⁶³

In view of these occurrences, it is fair to say that a final ה can sometimes (but not always) be explained as a longer pausal form. What is clear, however, is that a non-directional final ה on

⁶¹ Cf. BDB, p. 357a, who also suggest amending to החדרה. See also John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (NCBC; Basingstoke, England, 1986), p. 331.

⁶² A.A. Macintosh, *Hosea* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1997), p. 312.

⁶³ See further GK §90f.

a noun does not necessarily change the grammatical gender of an item, let alone its biological sex.

Second, the word דג in Jonah 2:11a is in pausal position, yet there is no final ה. Are we dealing with an inconsistent author? The answer is “yes” if we assume that the same author composed the material in Jonah 2:1 and 11 (the prose narrative) and Jonah 2:2 (the heading of the psalm). If we do not, as contended above, the answer is “no”. Rather, Jonah 2:2, 3–10 stem from a different author who, composing a poetic text, employed unusual forms (e.g. דגה, ישועתה) with additional final ה.⁶⁴

6. Conclusion

There is no easy conclusion to the conundrum of the gender / sex change of Jonah’s fish. Is it grammatical or biological? Is it simply a scribal error or does it reflect a conscious scribal decision? Is it a stylistic device that hints at the genre of the book? In this article, I have challenged these interpretations and instead sought to demonstrate that it is a morphological matter. The word דגה in Jonah 2:2 is not a feminine form of the word ‘fish’. Instead, it is an archaic lengthened nominal form. The final ה can be attached to either a masculine (e.g. חשמל, מות, נחל) or a feminine (ארץ) noun, and it does not change its semantic range. This type of nominal lengthening is extremely rare and occurs mostly at the end of a clause. If this interpretation is correct, it follows that Jonah’s fish does not display gender ambiguity and it does not change its biological sex. Instead, it stays a (male) fish the whole time.

⁶⁴ Alternatively, as suggested to me by Prof. Bezalel Porten (private communication), we are dealing with a case of synonymy. The same author employed two different forms in order to vary his language.