

## **THE VIRTUOUS NINEVITES: ECHOES OF *IGWEBUIKE* THEOLOGY IN THE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF JONAH 3:1-10**

**Malachi Udochukwu Theophilus, OSA, PhD**  
Santa Clara University  
California, United States of America  
[theophilusmalachy@gmail.com](mailto:theophilusmalachy@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*This article argues that the Ninevites' reaction to Jonah's preaching of doom echoes an Igwebuiké perspective. The text (Jonah 3:1-10) shows how, even animals, acted in solidarity with their human patrons to avert an impending danger. While Jonah would have preferred an outright extermination of his pagan enemy nation, the penitential solidarity of the people of Nineveh, man and beast alike, elicited the mercy of God. Thus, in this narrative, just as in Jonah chapter one, we see a God who is not only interested in Israel, the elect people of God, but also One whose mercy and love supersedes national and religious boundaries. While the attitude of the people of Nineveh shows unity of purpose and a deeper understanding of how God works in human history, Jonah's attitude shows the opposite. He couldn't see beyond his prejudice against Nineveh and its inhabitants to a deeper understanding of our common humanity and how God acts from the same point of view. The Ninevites seemed to understand this better, and as such, did not allow their religious difference or political history with Israel prevent them from drinking from the common ocean of divine mercy.*

## Introduction

At the close of chapter one of the book of Jonah, certain issues found resolutions, but, certainly, not the command of YHWH to Jonah in 1:1; a command that instructs Jonah to proclaim the word of YHWH to the people of Nineveh. This brings us to the second part of the book. In this part, the words of YHWH came to the prophet a second time. These divine words elicited different reactions from the different characters. Reactions like obedience, anger, repentance and dispute. But one thing that is significant in this part of the book of Jonah is the reaction of the Ninevites, even though they are a pagan nation, to the preaching of Jonah. In their acts of penitence, we see echoes of *Igwebuike* theology, for even the animals acted in solidarity with their human patrons to avert an impending danger. While Jonah would have preferred an outright extermination of his pagan enemy nation, the penitential solidarity of the people of Nineveh, man and beast alike, elicited the mercy of God. Thus, in this narrative, just as in Jonah chapter one, we see a God who is not only interested in Israel, the elect people of God, but also One whose mercy and love supersedes national and religious boundaries.

Thus said, employing the art of biblical narrative, this article will do a close reading of Jonah 3:1-10, concentrating on the response of the Ninevites and their king to the preaching of Jonah. The aim is to show, not just the virtuousness of the Ninevites, but also how their actions echo *Igwebuike* theology. To do this, I will be contrasting the prophet Jonah with the pagan Ninevites. In Jonah 3:1-3a, the divine injunction, which seems to be interrupted by the scenes at the sea (cf. Jonah 1:4-2:11), is now taken up anew through what I may call "a second chance to the prophet" (cf. Jonah 3:1). The end of chapter two breaks the downward movement, which had characterised the plot, so that Jonah could emerge from within the belly of the fish to the dry ground. Again we have the change of the *compositio loci*, no more in the belly of the fish, but on the dry ground. However, the major protagonists remain the same: YHWH and Jonah. Thus, chapter three can be divided into two: first, Jonah 3:1- 3a relates to the reiteration of

the divine order, the reaction of Jonah and his execution of the order. In the second part, Jonah 3: 3b-10, the narrative becomes centred on Nineveh and its inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Second Chance to the Prophet (3:1-3a)**

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD

I would like to divide this first part into two segments: the reiteration of the divine command (vv1-2) and the reaction of Jonah to this command (v. 3a).

### **The Reiteration of the divine Command (3:1-2)**

Jonah 3:1 is reminiscent of Jonah 1:1 as shown in the table below:

JONAH 1:1

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה בֶן־אָמֵת  
לְאִמֶּר:

JONAH 3:1

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה שֵׁנִית  
לְאִמֶּר:

**Now the word of YHWH came to Jonah, son of Amittai**

saying:

**Now the word of YHWH came to Jonah a second time**

saying:

Almost word for word, in a *telling* mode, the prophetic formula of the call of YHWH to his prophets is repeated: "Then the word of YHWH came to Jonah...saying" (3:1). The slight difference lies in the omission of the paternal identification: "son of Amittai" (cf.1:1), and the addition of a temporal specification: "a second time" (3:1). Our protagonists remain YHWH and Jonah.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. D. Scaiola, *Abdia, Giona, Michea: Introduzione, Traduzione e Commento*, NVBTA (Milano: San Paolo, 2012), 45.

Among the differences between Jonah 1:1-3 and 3:1-3 is the adverb תִּנְיָן that replaces the prophet's patronym. Some scholars see this as an indication of the hand of the redactor who wants to knit together the two parts of the book (chapters 1-2 and 3-4).<sup>2</sup> However, Jack Sasson disagrees. For him, this purpose is too heavy a burden for an adverb. There is a construction in Haggai that is reminiscent of Jonah's. That book opens with "time setting" + "the word of the Lord came by Haggai [...]" + "to Zerubbabel" (cf. Hag 2:1-2). Subsequent occurrences (between 2:1 and 2:10) drop the *'el* clause and address the message directly. But in Hag 2:20, the book's introductory sentence is reformulated as follows: "then the word of the Lord came to Haggai *a second time* (תִּנְיָן) [...]" Here, *šēnît* does not necessarily imply repetition of the previously received message, or a deliberate paralleling the two messages; rather, it emphasizes that this particular message is the second one to be delivered on that same day. Thus, Sasson concludes that in Jonah, the narrator knowingly used *šēnît* to belittle the passage of time as a dominant factor in this tale, possibly to have us concentrate on the renewed opportunity given to Jonah to make amend his disobedience.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, without denying the possibility of a redactional process outright, I would rather say that this phenomenon of repetition marks, from the narrative point of view, a second chance for Jonah. Besides the reference to Jonah 1:1, the verb תִּנְיָן also connects chapter three with chapter two, thus, continuing the plot. At the end of chapter two, the plot of the story is left pending: What will happen after the fish has vomited Jonah onto dry land? What about the message of God for the people of Nineveh? The reiteration of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Build-up and Climax," in Y. Avishur – J. Blau, ed., *Creation, Genesis and Flood*, (Jerusalem: Rubinstein, 1978), 30; Phyllis Trible, *Studies in the Book of Jonah*, un published dissertation (Columbia University, New York, 1963), 185.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah*. Anchor Bible 24B (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 225.

the divine command answers these questions and continues the plot of the story. YHWH's words carry no rebuke for Jonah and no warning of what would happen if he once again fails to obey. So, in this merciful manner, the plot rewinds and begins anew.

### **The Divine Command (3:2)**

After the narrative introduction of the divine speech, the narrator represents YHWH's command to Jonah in direct speech:

"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you" (v.2).

This verse again resumes the beginning of the book of Jonah (1:2), that is, the mission formula. The divine command to Jonah consists of three imperatives in direct speech. However, one notes a slight difference in the wording of this mission injunction in comparison with the first in Jonah 1:2. The table below highlights the difference:

JON 1:2

JON 3:2

**Arise,**

**Arise,**

**Go to Nineveh, the great city,** and *proclaim against* (עַל) *it* for their wickedness has come up before me.

**Go to Nineveh, the great city,** and *proclaim to* (לְ) *it* the message that I tell you

If the first two imperatives קוּם וּלְךָ ("Arise, go") in 1:2 and 3:2 are the same, the third imperatives: וּקְרָא עָלָיָהּ ("proclaim against it") in 1:2 and וּקְרָא לָהּ ("proclaim to it") in 3:2 show a notable variation in the change of prepositions from עַל in 1:2 to לְ in 3:2. These two prepositions often seem to be used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous and, consequently, not interchangeable. The LXX

translates 1:2 and 3:2 identically and neutrally: κήρυξον ἐν αὐτῇ "preach in it."<sup>4</sup>

However, לָאֵ is most commonly translated as "to" while לְעַ could be translated as "against, above, over, upon" in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, Wolff observes that the change of prepositions from לְעַ to לָאֵ may be connected with the modification of the divine command given to Jonah in 3:2. In 1:2 the wickedness of Nineveh is the reason Jonah is to speak "against" the city (לְעַ). But in 3:2, it appears that the emphasis is on the message itself which has to be *carried to* (לָאֵ) the city.<sup>5</sup> Giving this understanding, Jonah 1:2 is rightly translated as "proclaim or call out against it" and 3:2 as "proclaim to it." But does this variation in repetition have any narrative significance? According to Lessing:

The literary technique of repetition is a common feature of the Old Testament narrative. Often there is some minor but significant change in the repeated version, reflecting a different standpoint or interpretation of events between the first and the second texts.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in the case of Jonah 1:2 and 3:2, one notes that the content of what Jonah was to preach was not made clear in 1:2; but from the context, one could deduce that it was meant to be a message of judgement. However, the change from לְעַ in 1:2 to לָאֵ in 3:2 suggests a more neutral directive. Thus, it is plausible that the shift from לְעַ to לָאֵ involves a change in YHWH's instruction to his prophet. Whereas in 1:2 YHWH instructed Jonah to preach "against the city," now in 3:2

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<sup>4</sup> Reed R. Lessing, *Jonah*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 270.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Walter H. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 139.

<sup>6</sup> Lessing, 271. For example, compare Gen 24:1-22 with Gen 24:34-49 (especially 24:3-4 with 24:41). Also compare the three versions of the interaction between Potiphar's wife and Joseph in Gen. 39 (especially 39:12-13 and 39:17-18).

YHWH commands him to "proclaim to it the message *which I am going to tell you.*" This means that the message is yet to be specified;<sup>7</sup> it will not be revealed to Jonah until he enters the city. Furthermore, this shift from על to אל tells us something about the prophetic status of Jonah. In 1:2 he had every freedom to word the content of the message the way he wanted; but 3:2 specifies that Jonah is to be completely dependent on YHWH for the wording of his prophetic statement, which will not be given to him until it is time to proclaim it.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it appears, with this prepositional variation, the narrator without explicitly saying it, lets us into the mind of YHWH, who, owing to Jonah's rebellious tendencies, decides to personally word the content of his prophetic message this time around. As if, knowing His prophet well, God decides to directly put on his lips an *ad hoc* announcement. So, Jonah must proclaim to Nineveh what has been proclaimed by God.

The expression: "proclaim to it the message that I tell you" uses an unusual *qal* participle of the root verb דבר, usually in *piel* form. This form, insisting on the present form of the verb "to say,"<sup>9</sup> is found 31 times in the Old Testament,<sup>10</sup> but of note is in Ex 6:29, where YHWH instructed Moses to tell Pharaoh what He (YHWH) says. In this context, the prophet is obliged to say what he has been told by God. If Moses obeyed the divine order, will it also be so with Jonah?

In addition to the participle *qal*, the proclamation formula is also expressed through the repetition of the root word קרא, but this time with a definite article: אֶת־הַקְּרִיאָה. This cognate accusative construction is a *hapax*,<sup>11</sup> which may be translated as "message." The word is also a

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-71.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>9</sup> Uriel Simon, *Jonah: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translations* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 26.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Scaiola, 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Hapax* is a word or an expression that appears only in one place in the Bible, in this case, in the Old Testament.

neutral term, in that it does not indicate whether the message is a message of salvation or a message of judgement. So, with this unspecified message, the narrator, therefore, creates a *gap* here through the techniques of reticence, leaving the reader with a blank space for his imagination. In this first part, the phenomena of repetition enter into a common dynamic, thus indicating that it is a new principle. Then it creates a suspenseful effect that raises the question: Will Jonah seize the opportunity offered by God as a second chance? Or will he again flee (cf. Jonah 1:3)?

### **The Obedience of the Prophet (v.3a)**

Once again, the word of YHWH sets everything in motion, but this time in the mode of obedience rather than flight:

"So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD" (3: 3a)

After rising, Jonah does not flee "to Tarshish away from the face of Yahweh" (cf. 1: 3), but he goes "to Nineveh according to the word of Yahweh" (3:3). This connotes obedience. The difference is made word for word using verbs of motion. While "He arose to escape," at the first instance, (1:3); now, "He arose," "and went" (3:3). While the *waw* in 1:3 is disjunctive, in 3:3 it is consecutive, emphasising Jonah's obedience to the word of YHWH. At the level of the city, we have Nineveh (3:3), as opposed to Tarshish (1:3); and from the point of view of relationship to YHWH, we have: "according to the word of YHWH" (3:3) as opposed to "away from the face of YHWH" in 1:3. These whole variations in the expressions, as noted above, show a total change on the part of Jonah. His movement becomes in conformity with the word of the Lord who instructed him to go to Nineveh. The last word: "according to the word of the Lord," summarizes this conformity to the divine command, and characterizes the prophetic obedience.

Thus, at this point, the first two imperatives ("Arise, go") of the divine command immediately find their fulfilment, but the third ("proclaim") delays. Uriel Simon notes that, even though Jonah had been subdued to "arise and go in accordance to the word of YHWH," he has not



been persuaded. His silence still conceals the content of his heart.<sup>12</sup> This makes the lector suspect: *will he obey and proclaim the message which is about to be given to him?* However, we know nothing of how soon he left, how the trip went, when he arrived in Nineveh, or any such detail. At present, we can only assume that he recognizes the futility of further disobedience to his God and would attempt no further rebellion, at least in terms of his actions.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Ninevite's Response to Jonah's Preaching (3:3b-10)**

"Now Nineveh was a great city to God, a three days' walk across" (3:3b).

In 3:3b, the narrator interrupts the narrative catena with a *waw-x-qatal*,<sup>14</sup> and using a delay tactic, he seizes the opportunity to present something concerning the city of Nineveh. The opening of a narrative unit with the circumstantial *waw* is not unusual (e.g., "Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro" (cf. Ex 3:1); "now King David was old, advanced in years" (cf. 1 Kg 1:1). Even though here it comes in the middle of a verse, there is no doubt that the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Simon, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31, (Dallas: Thomas Nelson Inc. 1987), 482.

<sup>14</sup> Although the Hebrew verbal system can be categorized into tenses (the perfect and the imperfect, technically referred to as *Qatal* and *Yiqtol* respectively), the precise implication of these tenses is complex, but suffice it to know that the Hebrew Perfect does not necessarily indicate tense (does not have tense or time of action) apart from context and issues of syntax. It rather signifies type of action (Aspect). It designates a verbal action with its conclusion envisioned in the mind of the speaker or writer. Likewise the Hebrew Imperfect, it does not necessarily denote tense. It has predominantly an indicative meaning. It is used to denote incomplete action, whether in the past, present or future. Which means it does not have tense or time of action apart from context and syntactical considerations. The *waw*-prefixed forms: *wayyiqtol* and *weqatal* are sequential forms, used in clauses depicting sequential events, while the free-standing forms *qatal* and *iqtol* are non-sequential

circumstantial clause is anticipatory, since it serves as an exposition that gives us an insight into the city.<sup>15</sup>

The expression: "Nineveh was a great city to God" has generated different interpretations among scholars. Some see it as expressing a superlative. For example, according to Simon, the expression "a great city to God" is placed on a godly scale: "Everything that [an author] wishes to present as being very large is associated with God as a way of magnifying it."<sup>16</sup> Thus, Simon sees the expression as a superlative. However, Hebrew has several customary ways of expressing a superlative.<sup>17</sup> This is not a common way, nor do all grammarians agree that the phrase here should be regarded as a superlative. Sasson objects to this superlative interpretation of the expression. He argues that if it is indeed a superlative, then it will be very unique to Scripture because such superlatives normally have a noun in construct with *elōhîm/’ēl*. So, the text in question should read something like *’îr ’elōhîm* or even *’îr-’elōhîm gedôlâ*. But here, what we have is *lē’lōhîm*.<sup>18</sup>

Winton D. Thomas discusses eight passages in which either  $\text{גָּדוֹל}$  or  $\text{גָּדוֹל לַיהוָה}$  is allegedly used to form a superlative. He concludes that "the divine names have a superlative force so long as we understand that the superlative force is imparted, not by the addition of the divine names as intensifying epithets, but by the fact that a person or thing is brought into a relationship with God."<sup>19</sup> In the case of Jonah 3:3, Thomas argues that Nineveh was "great to God," that is, *even to God*, who has a different standard of greatness from men.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Simon, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. B. K. Waltke - M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990), § § 14.3.3b; 14.5; P. Joüon - T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. SB 27 (Rome: GB Press, 2011), § 141 j.

<sup>18</sup> Sasson, 228.

<sup>19</sup> W. D. Thomas, "A Consideration of Some Universal Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew," *Vetus Testamentum* 3 (1953), 216.

In seven of the eight passages considered by Thomas, a noun is in construct with a term for "God." Jonah 3:3 is the only one of the eight passages in which a superlative is allegedly formed by "God" in a prepositional phrase.<sup>20</sup> So for him, the greatness of Nineveh is not just a mere superlative; rather, the narrator meant to let us know that "Nineveh is great to God," as rightly captured by the LXX: *μεγάλη τῷ θεῷ* (3:3). A city which is a symbol of enmity to Israel is great to God. This is a theological affirmation.

However, I think the addition of the preposition *לְ* in the expression, *לְגַאֲלֵי*, is not just superfluous; it must be taken seriously. It is a circumlocution for a genitive, as such, "the greatness of Nineveh" could be said "to belong to God." So, Nineveh belongs to God, just as Israel belongs to God. This suggests a divine perspective that readily explains God's merciful disposition towards Nineveh. Even though this merciful attribute is part of the nature of God, but its disposition towards mankind is not always automatic; it must be activated by human actions or response to the divine (cf. 2 Chron 7:14; Jer 15:9; Zech 1:3; Mal 3:7). Therefore, the greatness of Nineveh exceeds a mere superlative; it suggests divine ownership: Nineveh is a city that belongs to God.

This theological interpretation of Nineveh has a significant narrative implication in the plot of Jonah. The affirmation here that Nineveh is a great city *belonging to God* fits with Jonah's confession in 1:9 that YHWH is the God "who made the sea and the dry land," since all creation belongs to Him. It is also consistent with what YHWH Himself would say about the city in Jonah 4:10-11, where YHWH compares Nineveh to the *qiqayon* plant. Using the verbs "to labour" and "make grow" for the plant in 4:10, YHWH implies in 4:11 that He Himself cultivated the city, just as He did the plant. As earlier noted, the author of Jonah repeats key words and phrases, which take on added significance with each new repetition, until the climactic one reveals the full import. In this way, the narrative progresses towards

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Ibid*, 209-24.

its goal. Lessing captures the progressive descriptions of Nineveh as follows:

1. "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city" (1:2).
2. "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city" (3:2).
3. "Now Nineveh is a great city (*belonging*) to God"(3:3)  
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Thus, the fourth climactic description of Nineveh confirms the interpretation that 3:3 declares that Nineveh is great and that it belongs to God, even though the full extent of YHWH's compassion for the city is not revealed until 4:11.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, from the literary point of view, 3:3b is an unusual circumstantial sentence (cf. Ex 3:1), the value of which is *proleptic*.<sup>23</sup> The narrator makes this information on the city an essential element in order to understand the rest of the narrative plot centred on Jonah's entrance into the city. This information shows how the narrator uses the technique of repetition to build up and give a deeper meaning to a particular word or concept. In this case, the information about the theological greatness of Nineveh is carefully given to grow the plot. Therefore, in addition to the repetition of the expression: "the great city," we now know that the city has a relationship "to YHWH." Finally, we are given a spatial expression with respect to the city: "a journey of three days." Without going into mathematical reflections of the width and circumference of the city, I think this spatial information is intended to draw the attention of the reader to something very important, because the biblical narrator does not say something just for the sake of it.

### Jonah's Obedience (v.4)

Jonah began to go into the city, going a **day's walk**. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 280.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ibid, 281.

<sup>23</sup> Cf Scaiola, 69.

In fact, Jonah did not go through the city in three days, but he begins to enter the city only "for a day's journey" (3:4). So, Jonah finds himself outside the gates of Nineveh. The longest period of *narrated* time, the journey, is reported in the briefest of *narrative* time.<sup>24</sup> This imperfect parallelism shows a difference of temporal order: "only a day's journey" (3:4) connoting a readiness that contrasts with the reluctance and slowness of Jonah in fulfilling his mission. Even though he obeyed to go to Nineveh after a near-death experience in the belly of the fish (see Jonah 2), his body language, as evident in his one day preaching instead of three days, shows his inner disposition. Jonah does not want the salvation of Nineveh; he would rather prefer they are destroyed. This is even more obvious in the way he worded his preaching. It makes one wonder: what will happen after the proclamation of a single day's walk in a city that takes a three-day walk? The slowness of the narration created by the description of the city, and the slow entrance of Jonah in Nineveh, accentuates the suspense, but leads to the fulfilment of the divine order by Jonah.

In verse 4b, which tells the story of the proclamation of Jonah to Nineveh for a journey of one day, the reader enters the realm of direct discourse: "And he called and said [...]" The introduction to it relieves the suspense about Jonah's response to YHWH's third imperative: "call."<sup>25</sup> And the content of the proclamation that the reader has been expecting from the first two chapters of the book is now about to be made known. The pace of the narrative after the slowdown is now accelerated. Before now, I noted that only two of the three divine commands given to Jonah in 3:2 were fulfilled. But now we have a perfect correspondence, word for word, of the three divine commands (in three *wayyiqtol*s), as shown in the table below: This completes the obedience of the prophet to the divine command.

#### **YHWH'S INSTRUCTION**

#### **JONAH'S OBEDIENCE**

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Golka W. Friedemann, *The Revelations of God: A Commentary on the Books of Song of Songs and Jonah*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Tribble, 179.

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קום "Arise" (3:2)

וַיָּקָם "And he Arose" (3:3)

לֵךְ "Go" (3:2)

וַיֵּלֶךְ "And he went" (3:3)

וַיִּקְרָא "And Call" (3:2)

וַיִּקְרָא "And he called" (3:4b)

In the earlier command (1:2), God does not specify the message for Jonah to transmit, as we have already seen; God shows faith that Jonah will know what to say. In chapter three, however, God dictates a message to Jonah, thereby making it more difficult for him to deviate from his renewed assignment. Moreover, let's recall that the wording of this divine command to Jonah in chapter three ("proclaim/call to it") is different from what we have in chapter one ("call out against it"). The former connotes a message of repentance and not condemnation. But does Jonah understand the theological implication of the divine instruction: "to proclaim to it (Nineveh)?"

### Jonah's Call to The Ninevites

He cried and said, "Another forty days, and Nineveh shall be overturned!" (3:4)

Instead of urging the people to repent, Jonah announces their imminent doom, reverting to the original command: "call out against it." Jonah does not want the people of Nineveh to repent; on the contrary, he prefers to witness their demise. Jonah begins to preach his message: "Forty days and Nineveh would be הִפָּךְ (destroyed or overturned?)." In the Bible, the number forty indicates a time of trial or testing that leads to renewal and salvation. Thus, the duration of "forty" here is reminiscent of Noah's flood (Gen 7:4.12.17; 8:6), the forty days of Moses on Sinai (Ex 24:18; 34:28), of Ezekiel bearing the iniquity of Judah for forty days (Ezek 4:6). Most pragmatic is Israel's forty years in the wilderness.<sup>26</sup> Yet, these events relate to an elapsed time during which the actions take place. But in our case, it is rather a

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Philip Cary, *Jonah: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008), 108.

*tuned delay*: A postponement of execution that provides opportunity to escape destruction, and to give room for efforts to earn God's forgiveness. In the words of Uriel Simon:

Forty days is a typological number that indicates a relatively long period of time (cf. Dt 9:18; also 1 Kgs 19:8). Here it is the period of grace until it comes due. This stay of execution presents an opportunity to escape the impending destruction.<sup>27</sup>

I think the narrator's choice of the *Niphal* participle of the verb הָפַךְ to describe the fate of Nineveh, as proclaimed by Jonah, is very deliberate. The verb is the same used in the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:21,25,29). As such, it becomes part of biblical cliché used to describe wrath and destruction that is as bad as *when the Lord overturned Sodom and Gomorrah*. Evidently, Jonah finds comfort in this word. If Nineveh's fate is like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, he will of all, be very happy.<sup>28</sup> The temporal force of the *Niphal* participial verb: הֹפֵךְ can be determined from the context. Participles, generally, are mostly used for imminent actions that will take place soon.<sup>29</sup> Hence, Jonah may well have hoped that no change would take place in Nineveh until it is destroyed in forty days' time. This may as well explain the lethargic attitude with which he approached the message: "Yet in forty days, and Nineveh would be destroyed" (3:4). In a day, Jonah was done with his message to a city that takes three days walk (3:3b-4a). But, will the Ninevites be really destroyed in "forty days' time?"

It suffices to say, though, that the verb הָפַךְ for certain recalls what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, but it also has certain subtlety in its nuance. The verb, which is usually translated as "destroy," also means "upset, overturn, or change." The verb can refer to a radical reversal from one extreme to another, including a change of heart. For example, In Dt 23:6, Moses reminded the sons of Israel that "YHWH your God turned [וַיִּפְּךָ, Qal imperfect] for you the curse [of Balaam]

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<sup>27</sup>Simon, 29.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Cary, 108.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. P. Joüon – T. Muraoka, § 121 e.

into a blessing, because YHWH your God loves you."<sup>30</sup> Hence, this double sense of the verb calls the reader to expect the unexpected. J-P Sonnet opines that the verb appropriate to this logic of "overturning" is הפך, because it represents the *overturning* of *all in all*, which only God is capable of doing.<sup>31</sup> As such, the question that confronts the lector at this point is: will the city be reversed or overturned in the sense of being ruined, or will it be reversed in the sense of repentance? But we must also wonder whether Jonah is really aware of the double sense of that word. Therefore, it appears as if the narrator, using the forty days of respite for the upheaval of the city, creates a verbal irony of the double sense of the verb, הפך. This further creates the effect of suspense that opens up the future of the narration and makes conversion possible. "Yet, forty days Nineveh will be overturned" could refer to its destruction like Sodom and Gomorrah or to its change from impenitent wickedness to repentance and faith. Either way, Nineveh will be changed!<sup>32</sup> Jonah likely would have understood his message to be one of impending doom of the sort that befell Sodom, and the Ninevites clearly took it as a warning that they would perish, if they did not repent.<sup>33</sup>

And as such, they overturned their way of life to avert the overturning of their city and its inhabitants. The two possible meanings of the verb allow for a fact that YHWH seeks a change in the people's hearts (see 3:9-10), while Jonah longs for their destruction (see 4:1,5). Jonah's distress in chapter four is partly because he does not realize that his sermon came true in the sense YHWH intended. How ironic!<sup>34</sup> However, at the macro level of the story, this verse marks the

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<sup>30</sup> Lessing, 283.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. J.-P., Sonnet, "Jonas est-il parmi les prophètes? Une réécriture narrative sur les attributs divins," in C. Clivaz - al ed., *Écritures réécriture. BETHL* 247 Leuven (2012) 137-157.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Lessing, 283.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Donald J. Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," *Tyndale Bulletin* 30 (1979): 29-51.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Lessing, 283.



resolution, not only of the divine command of 3:2, but also the plot that had begun in 1:3 with the first complication, that is; of Jonah fleeing to Tarshish. Finally, he obeys and proclaims, not minding his reluctance and desire for the doom of Nineveh.

### **The Reaction of the Ninevites**

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth (3:5).

In 3:4, we see God's words as reported by Jonah, "yet forty days and Nineveh will be overturned/destroyed." Jonah never claimed divine authority for this statement, however, the people of Nineveh gave a theological response to it: "they believed God" (3:5). Coming from the Hebrew root  $\text{אמנ}$ , this verb has never been used in the course of our story; it forms a play on words with the name of the father of Jonah, Amittai, which is derived from the same root and therefore connotes trust or faith. Hence, the announcement to the Ninevites by Jonah, the son of one whose name means "God's faithfulness or trust in God," inspires the Ninevites to trust in God.<sup>35</sup> Scaiola observes that the swiftness of their belief in God contrasts ironically with the slowness of Jonah, who only accepted his divine commission towards Nineveh after a three-day and three-night ordeal in the belly of the fish.<sup>36</sup> Even when he finally accepts to preach to the Ninevites, he presents it lethargically in five Hebrew words, translated: "Yet, forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed." But, despite Jonah's seemingly nonchalant attitude towards the preaching, the people of Nineveh all believed in God. Phillip Cary said that it will be difficult to resist adding: "And it was counted to them as righteousness,"<sup>37</sup> just as it was said of Abraham (cf. Gen 15:6). The loftiness of the repentance of the people of Nineveh to the preaching of the Israelite prophet shines out when compared with the attitude of the Israelites given the same circumstances. A close look at certain biblical passages shows that the very response of faith that Israel could not give without signs and

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Tribble, 513.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Scaiola, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Cary, 110.

wonders (cf. Ex 4:9) or even refused to give despite miracles (Isaiah 7), the pagan Ninevites gave after a sermon of a reluctant preacher.<sup>38</sup>

"Calling a fast and putting on sackcloth" is the same language used for calling a solemn assembly in order to sanctify a fast in Israel (cf. Joel 1:14; 2:15). The first word comes from the root verb קרא (they *call* or *proclaim* a fast) which is the same verb that Jonah used to announce to the people of Nineveh the words of God in 3:4. The second comes from the root verb לבש (they *put-on* sackcloth). This is a new word thus far in the story. However, both phrases are used to express penitential acts. But it is not used for a non-Israelite, except in Jonah. The expression: "from the largest to the smallest of them" gives an emphatic character to the absolute repentance of the people of Nineveh. Uriel Simon observes here that "in the Sodom periscope, it is the all-inclusive scope of the guilt that is emphasized, 'from young to old' (Gen. 19:4). Here, however, the comprehensive guilt is overcome by the all-inclusive scope of the repentance."<sup>39</sup>

One thing that surprises the reader is the ease and immediacy with which they believed in the message of a foreign prophet, or better still, "an enemy prophet." Also, they were not in any concrete danger at the moment, like the sailors in chapter one,<sup>40</sup> whose conversion was occasioned in the midst of an actual peril. Thus, the repentance of these pagan characters appears surprising. This raises the curiosity of the reader: is there an element of the past that escapes us? This narrative *blank*, which is never filled-up in the story, keeps the lector in tension and pushes him to formulate for himself a *reading key*, a key which J.-P. Sonnet supplies. He says that this *blank* exists "so that the project of God, which constitutes the substratum of the narrated story, acts through the spring of curiosity."<sup>41</sup> In the reaction of the

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<sup>38</sup> Lessing, 284-85.

<sup>39</sup> Simon, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Tribble, 513.

<sup>41</sup> J.-P. Sonnet, "L'analisi Narrativa dei Racconti Biblici," in M. Bauks – C.

Nihan, ed., *Manuale di Esegese dell'Antico Testamento. Testi e Commenti* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 2015), 65-6.

people of Nineveh, we see how a minimum means (Jonah's five-words-preaching) produced a maximum effect. As if one should say, like *Yesua ben David*, "Nowhere in Israel have I seen a *repentance* like this" (cf. Matthew 8:10).

### **The Reaction of the King of Nineveh**

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes (3:6).

The news reaches the king of Nineveh, and now it's the subjects who dictate the order of the day, pushing the king by their example to make penitential acts. The King's appearance on the scene, who is also not named in the story, matches the appearance of the captain of the ship in 1:6; but this instance is even more insightful. He is exemplary, both in his response to the word of God and in his actions. With no storm blowing, no boat about to sink, just one brief and ambiguous message, he realizes the city is in great danger and that something has to be done to save it. Learning that his people have called a fast and put on sackcloth, he follows suit. He formalises their effort of penitence with a decree. In the words of Phillip Cary: "It seems he is not above following his own people (how many kings are this wise?), jumping on the bandwagon when he sees it carrying them toward life, not death."<sup>42</sup> He doesn't merely follow the example of his subjects, but he acts even further: he strips himself of his regalia, making a journey back from the royal dignity to penitential humility.<sup>43</sup> Or better still, according to Lessing, "in response to Jonah's message that Nineveh would "be changed" (3:4), the king himself changed, both in dwelling, in dress, and in dignity."<sup>44</sup> This portrays, not just contrition, but true repentance. His action begins with his rising from his throne, and ends with his sitting in ashes.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cary, 113.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Tribble, 514.

<sup>44</sup> Lessing, 309.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 309.

A He rose from his throne

B removed his royal robe

B' covered himself with sackcloth

A' and sat upon the ash heap.

The narrator probably represented the action of the king in this chiasmic summary, to underline the change the king underwent in an effort to show his repentance. Unlike Jonah's descent which was in disobedience, the king descends in humility before the word of God, from his throne to an ash heap. Thus, while Jonah in 1:3 arises *to go down in disobedience*, the king of Nineveh arises and *sat down in humble obedience* to the word of YHWH preached by Jonah. God did not speak directly to the king of Nineveh, as he did to Jonah. But even at that, the king responds in a humble and ready way, as if the word of God had been given to him without mediation. The king's response to the דבר (word) YHWH is quite exemplary and this is exactly what Jonah could not get around to, until he finds himself helpless in the deep waters. So, the king and Jonah are antitypes. Jonah's first response to the דבר YHWH was to flee, but the king's immediate reaction was to abase himself in obedient response to the word of God.

It is interesting to see how the king spontaneously steps away from his regal status as he arises from his throne to sit down in ashes and exchanges his royal regalia for sackcloth.<sup>46</sup> The action of the king does not surprise the reader, who has already been prepared by the narrator in the previous verse, when he learned that the people of Nineveh believed God and they immediately performed penitential acts; but what surprises the reader here is that the actors follow inverse paths which one would not ordinarily expect of them: a king, rather

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. D. Timmer, "Jonah's Theology Of The Nations: The Interface Of Religious And Ethnic Identity," *RivBib* 120 (2013): 13-23.

than controlling, follows the example of his subjects; and instead of the normal course: "from grass to grace," he follows an opposite route: "from grace to grass." All this points to the genuineness of the repentance of the king and his people.

Furthermore, the reaction of the king of Nineveh is all the more very remarkable in that, elsewhere in the Old Testament, Assyrian kings are portrayed as arrogant, boasting monarchs who not only defy YHWH and threaten Jerusalem, but also argue that their power is greater than YHWH's because they have been able to *defeat* the God of Israel/Judah just as they defeated the gods of other nations (cf. Is 10:5-34; 2Kgs 18-19; Nahum 2-3).<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, the king in Jonah (3:6) acted, not in the manner one would expect from an Assyrian ruler, but in a way one would expect from a king after God's own heart, like David (cf. 2 Sam 12:16). In fact, the king is not only distinctive among Assyrian rulers, his actions also dwarf that of many kings in Israel. For example, Jer 36:9-31 makes clear that Jehoiakim of Jerusalem was notably unmoved by Jeremiah's words and, therefore, was denounced for his obstinacy. But this pagan king of Nineveh, acted quite differently.

### **The Decree of the King (vv. 7-9)**

Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water ..." (3:7-9).

In 3:7, the focus shifts from the king's personal response back to the city's communal response. Only after humbling himself does the king issue an edict to institutionalise the "overturning." There is something very striking here. The edict issued by the king has almost a prophetic function. Normally, when the word of God comes to the prophet, as regards an impending doom, the prophet either intercedes on behalf of the people, or calls the people to repentance (cf. Abraham in Gen

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Lessing, 309.

18:23-32; and Moses in Ex 32). Jonah obviously acted like the opposite of Abraham and Moses. However, since Jonah did not behave like a prophet, the king of Nineveh filled the gap, playing the role of a prophet and calling his people to repentance.<sup>48</sup>

More so, even the process by which the Ninevites arrive at their particular form of repentance is a kind of overturning for Nineveh's social status: the highs (the king and his nobles) following the lows (the common people of Nineveh).<sup>49</sup> Scaiola observes that there is a play on words based on the term טעם, which means decree only in ancient Hebrew, while, customarily, it assumes the sense of "taste," "judgment" or "discernment." As such, it recalls the content of the decree through the root verb טעם; which indicates the prohibition to taste food. The interesting thing here, though, is that the verb that is normally used with respect to human beings now affects also animals.<sup>50</sup> Scaiola further observes that this vocabulary has a broader resonance in wisdom literature. It has a sensual nuance. So here it could indicate that men and animals have to give up any form of pleasure.<sup>51</sup> The king's decree involves both men and animals, emphasising that the penitence comprises the totality of Nineveh. The entire city has to make a penitential movement, or rather should refrain from all the normal actions that serve life and, moreover, produce a gratification of the senses.

It may seem an ironic trait that even animals are involved in fasting, but we find a similar nuance elsewhere in Scripture (cf. Joel 1:18-20; Judt 4:9-10). Thus, this simply shows that, even the animals are more responsive to YHWH than the Israelite prophet, Jonah. The animals are in solidarity with their human patrons in the effort to avert the impending doom. Animals participate in fast when they are not

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Yair Zakovitch, "Through the Looking Glass," *BI* 12 (1993): 139-152.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Cary, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Scaiola, 72.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

pastured or watered (cf. Judith 4,9-11). In this way, they call on God in their hunger and thirst, for even the bellowing of animals is a sort of prayer, as attested to by the prophet Joel: "The very beasts of the field cry out to You; for the watercourses are dried up" (Joel 1:20).

The King's decree continues. After the three negative commands in the previous verse follows the three positive commands here. And at the beginning of each of this part, the phrase 'men and animals' is repeated. Therefore, with this strong call to repentance, addressed to each and every one (man and beast alike), without exception, we see the true contrition of the inhabitants of Nineveh, man and beast alike. The force of this radical change is seen in the last decree of the king: "Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in their hands;" the people of Nineveh have to turn, that is, convert. The verb used is from the root שׁוּב. Interestingly, the expression: "They must turn, each from his evil ways" is prevalent in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Jeremiah (cf. Jer 18:11; 23:14,22; 25:5; 26:3; 35:15; 36:3,7). However, here in the book of Jonah, this expression is made, not by an Israelite prophet, but by a pagan king. As such, Lessing succinctly observes:

That this king speaks the same words YHWH utters through his prophet Jeremiah recalls the similar situation in Jonah 1, where the pagan captain used commands spoken earlier by YHWH: "Arise, ... call" (1:2). When the captain and the king quote God, the satire is evident: the Israelite Jonah is unfaithful to YHWH's Word, but the pagan Gentiles are converted to faith in accord with YHWH's Word.<sup>52</sup>

Here, the Israelite prophet is *out propheted* by Gentile converts. In fact, this pagan king showed a knowledge of God that outclassed Jonah's understanding of the way God works. The King said in his decree: "Who knows? God may repent and change his mind ..." (v.9). The fact that the king of Nineveh expressed a certain kind of

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<sup>52</sup> Lessing, 314.

uncertainty regarding the reaction of God to their repentance, with a question full of hope, but without any real certainty, indicates his awareness of how God works. God's compassion and mercy are not to be taken for granted; they come solely from the love of God. God alone will decide the fate of Nineveh. The citizens of Nineveh can believe and repent, but sincerity alone cannot control what God is free to do for them or against them. They can hope for deliverance, but cannot surely expect it (3:9). The hearer/reader does not know what will happen either. This understanding of God's activity that the king of Nineveh has is quite different from the one that Jonah shows in his behaviour (cf. 4:2). The expression highlights the fact that in the Bible, the culprit has no right to redress. In other words, "who knows if God may repent?" (3:9) does not denote lack of faith; rather, it is an expression of the discrete hope<sup>53</sup> of one who knows that He (God) will be gracious to whom He intends to be gracious to, and will show compassion on whom He wills to show compassion (cf. Ex. 34:19).

The *Nifal* verb נָחַם ("to repent") semantically defines the retraction of a judgment already issued or to a previously planned action; but more deeply, it expresses the divine freedom that can move without restriction from one attribute to another, from justice to mercy, mercy to justice, without being accused of caprice or inconstancy. It's a reversibility appropriate to the God who, in Exodus 3:14, reveals Himself to Moses as "I am who I am." In other words, "I can be whoever and whatever I want to be," claiming the possibility of alternation of His attributes.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Pietro Bovati, *Così Parla Il Signore: Studio sul Profetismo Biblico*, Bib, (Bologna: EDB, 2008), 138-9. For other texts in which נָחַם is used cf. 2 Sam 12:22; Joel 2:13-14.

<sup>54</sup> For the theological import of נָחַם as an attribute of God, see the concluding section of this work which is dedicated to some theological reflections; also cf. Cf. J.-P., Sonnet, "God's Repentance and "False Starts" in Biblical History," *Congress Volume Ljubljana* (2007): 469-494.



Jonah, uttering the oracle in 3:4 "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overturned," had perhaps intended it as a terrible announcement of punishment which will definitely come to pass, but the people of Nineveh interpreted differently; for them, it was an urgent call to repentance, and as such, they entered in the dynamic of divine reversibility that they now wonder if God would turn back from His anger and repent: It's not a certainty, but a trust in the love of God. Even *Yesua ben David* recognised the remarkable significance of the attitude of the people of Nineveh towards the preaching of Jonah that he accorded them the right to condemn his generation (cf. Luke 11:32). Thus, he makes the people of Nineveh models of true repentance and calls his followers to emulate it.

### **God's Response to the "Who Knows?"**

"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind/repented ... " (3:10)

In vv. 8-9, one notes the connection between the action and the decree of the king in vv. 8-9, on one hand, and God's reaction, on the other. The king's exhortation: "and let everyone return from his evil way" (v. 8) is confirmed in the conduct of the people of Nineveh: "and God saw that they had all returned from their evil way" (v. 10). The king had hoped: "who knows, God will return and repent, and return from the fierce of his wrath" (v. 9); and now it is assured: "and God repented of the evil" (v. 10). This underlines the substantial difference between the divine and the human responses: God's answer comes in the way of God, in an unpredictable way. Thus, just as Tribble rightly observed, "human action does not dictate divine response."<sup>55</sup> The "Who knows," of the king of Nineveh confirms this dictum. God, in His own way, overturns the dreaded harm into salvation.

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<sup>55</sup> Tribble, 516.

## Echoes of Igwebuiké<sup>56</sup> Theology in Jonah 3:1-10

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<sup>56</sup> Kanu I. A. (2015b). *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications. Kanu I. A. (2017). *Igwebuikéconomics: Towards an inclusive economy for economic development*. *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3. No. 6. 113-140. Kanu I. A. (2017). Sources of Igwebuiké philosophy. *International Journal of Religion and Human Relations*. 9. 1. pp. 1-23. Kanu, A. I. (2016a). *Igwebuiké as a trend in African philosophy*. *IGWEBUIKÉ: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 2. 1. 97-101. Kanu, A. I. (2017c). *Igwebuiké as an Igbo-African philosophy of inclusive leadership*. *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3 No 7. pp. 165-183. Kanu, A. I. (2017d). *Igwebuiké philosophy and the issue of national development*. *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3 No 6. pp. 16-50. Kanu, A. I. (2017f). *Igwebuiké as an Igbo-African ethic of reciprocity*. *IGWEBUIKÉ: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 2. pp. 153-160. Kanu, I. A. (2010). *Towards an African cultural renaissance*. *Professor Bassey Andah Journal of Cultural Studies*. Volume 3, pp. 146-155. Kanu, I. A. (2012). *A metaphysical epistemological study of African Medical practitioners*. In O. E. Ezenweke and I. A. Kanu (2012). *Issues in African traditional religion and philosophy* (pp. 227-240). Nigeria: Augustinian Publications. Kanu, I. A. (2012). *Being qua belongingness: The Provenance and Implications of Pantaleon's redefinition of being*. *Uche: Journal of the Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka*. Vol. 17. pp. 57-58. Kanu, I. A. (2012). *From 'Onye' to 'Ife' hypothesis: The contribution of Edeh to the development of the concept of being*. *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research*. 9, 4. 218-223. Kanu, I. A. (2012). *Inculturation and Christianity in Africa*. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. Vol. 2. No. 17. pp. 236-244. Kanu, I. A. (2012). *The functionality of being in Pantaleon's operative metaphysics vis-a-vis the Niger Delta conflict*. *African Research Review: An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal*. Vol.6. No.1. pp. 212-222. Kanu, I. A. (2012). *Towards an Igbo Christology*, In Ezenweke, E.O and Kanu, A.I. (Eds) *Issues in African traditional religion and philosophy*, Jos: Augustinian Publications. Kanu, I. A. (2012). *The problem of being in metaphysics*. *African Research Review: An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal*. Vol.6. No.2. April. pp. 113-122. Kanu, I. A. (2012). *The problem of personal identity in metaphysics*. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol.1. No.2. pp.1-13. Kanu, I. A. (2012a). *The concept of life and person in African anthropology*. In E. Ezenweke and I. A. Kanu (Eds.). *Issues in African traditional religion and philosophy* (pp. 61-71). Nigeria:

From this close reading of Jonah chapter three, two things stand out: Jonah's attitude towards an enemy nation and the Ninevites uprightness, despite being an "other" in this narrative. The Other against whom Israel's identity is forged is abhorred, abject, impure, and in the *Old Testament*, a vast number of them obliterated, while in the *New Testament*, vast numbers are colonized. *Igwebuike* theology erases the line between "Us" and "Them," a line which Jonah, by his attitude, tries to maintain. His reluctance to go and preach the message of repentance to an enemy nation and the lethargic attitude with which he eventually does it show his ill disposition towards Nineveh. Jonah would rather God destroys Nineveh; this explains why he was greatly distressed when God showed His gracious mercy towards the people of Nineveh (cf. Jonah 4:1).

However, the *adonai* of Israel (יהוה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל) is also God the most High (אֵל עֶלְיוֹן), who created the heavens and the earth (cf. Gen 14:22). This is an aspect of God that Jonah didn't want to accept. He acted as if to say the enemy of Israel should also be the enemy of YHWH; the nation which Israel hates, God should also hate. The narrator did not tell us of the antecedent relationship between Nineveh and Israel, nor did he let us into the reason why Jonah was particularly angry at the mercy of God towards the people of Nineveh. But from biblical evidence, we could suppose that Jonah was reluctant to go to Nineveh, owing to the antecedent hostile relationship between the two nations (Israel and Assyria). Secondly, Jonah knew that God is rich in mercy (cf. Jonah 4:2) and will eventually forgive Nineveh, the arch enemy of Israel, should it repent. But, Jonah would not want such mercy over a

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Augustinian. Kanu, I. A. (2012b). Towards an Igbo Christology. In E. Ezenweke and I. A. Kanu (Eds.). *Issues in African traditional religion and philosophy* (pp. 75-98). Nigeria: Augustinian. Kanu, I. A. (2013). African identity and the emergence of globalization. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*. Vol. 3. No. 6. pp. 34-42. Kanu, I. A. (2013). Globalisation, globalism and African philosophy. C. Umezina (Ed.). *African philosophy: A pragmatic approach to African problems* (pp. 151-165). Germany: Lambert.

city like Nineveh. The city, apart from being mentioned in an etiology concerning the origin of several Mesopotamian cities in Gen 10:8-12; is also mentioned in 2 Kgs 19:36; Is 37:37; and in Nahum and Zephaniah. Both of those prophetic books emphasize Nineveh's role as the symbol of the Assyrian Empire, the mortal enemy of Israel, renowned for brutal conquest and butchery.<sup>57</sup> However, God's mercy towards Nineveh "challenges every separatist theology that tries to exclude people based on religion, tribe, ethnicity, nationality or moral ideology. It tells us from biblical perspective that "to belong" does not necessarily mean conformity to a particular standard or people. It simply means "to be" — to be available for the divine as part of the global human family."<sup>58</sup>

More so, this sovereign God, who alone is *Good* (cf. Mk 10,18) by His very nature, reacts to evil, no matter who commits it, whether Israel or any other nation of the earth. The predicament of man is the predicament of God who has a stake in human situation. Sin, guilt and suffering cannot be separated from the divine situation. The life of sin is more than a failure of man; it is a frustration to God who is involved in human history.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the YHWH of Israel is the sovereign Lord over all nations. He is the God of Jonah, the God of the sailors and the God of the Ninevites. This understanding calls us to rise above our differences which, in themselves, should not constitute a threat or be a factor that divides us; rather, they can be basic notes for a beautiful musical symphony.

Furthermore, God seemed to be drawn by the beautiful solidarity in the penitential acts of the inhabitants of Nineveh. For even the animals, through their bellowing, were in solidarity with their human patrons in seeking for divine mercy. Nineveh's repentance manifests

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Lessing, 85.

<sup>58</sup> Malachy Theophilus, "The Role of Rehab in the Conquest Story of Joshua as a Manifestation of Igwebuike Theology: A Narrative Analysis of Joshua 2," in *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 5, no. 8 (2019), 91.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 291.

itself in a form that rivals even the most pious Israelite times of repentance. Not only the king, but all the people and even the livestock put on sackcloth and fasted (Jonah 3:5-8). Jonah 3:8 is worded to suggest that just like the people, the livestock too, cover themselves with sackcloth! In that way, the Ninevites' penitence exceeds any recorded for Israel. This powerful unity in their penitential gestures appeared to move God, in His sovereign freedom, to act in favour of Nineveh and its inhabitants.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, we see how Jonah, urged repeatedly by God's command, went to Nineveh, proclaimed the word of YHWH, and then left the scene for the people of Nineveh, the king of Nineveh and of course YHWH. The Ninevites and their king performed penitential acts and made a real change of direction. While the attitude of the people of Nineveh shows unity of purpose and a deeper understanding of how God works in human history, Jonah's attitude shows the opposite. He couldn't see beyond his prejudice against Nineveh and its inhabitants to a deeper understanding of our common humanity, and how God acts from the same point of view. The Ninevites seemed to understand this better and, as such, did not allow their religious difference or political history with Israel prevent them from drinking from the common ocean of divine mercy.

Of course, the reader would be wondering what happened to Jonah; what will his reaction be to this unexpected and positive action of the Ninevites, on one hand, and God's mercy, on the other: Will he really *grow up* and avail himself to the ways of God, who "shows favour to whom he wants, and grants mercy to whom he wants" (cf. Ex 34:19)? Will he really realise that just as Israel is "a people of God," so too Nineveh is "a great city unto God" (Jonah 3:3b)? I do not have the answers to these questions. But it suffices to say that the book of Jonah is the only biblical book that ends with a question mark. Through such ending, the narrator calls us, not just to participate in the conflict between Jonah and God's ways, but more importantly, to participate in

the theology of the book and confront our own inclination that assumes salvation is only for us.

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