

## **A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF JONAH/SAILORS IRONIES IN JONAH 1:1-16: AN IGWEBUIKE PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

*This article reviews the journey of Jonah, paying attention to his failings. This helps to highlight, not just the virtuousness of the pagan characters in the first chapter of the book of Jonah, but also shows an Igwebuiké theological perspective, a theology that shows the power in unity. The outcome of such theology is life, its opposite being death. The narrative is radical because it joggles so many preconceived ideas of the biblical Israel who believe that God is only interested in Israel, the elect people of God. But this assumption has not only proved to be misguided, but also completely wrong. The God of the Israelite prophet Jonah is also the God of the pagan sailors. The sailors' unity of purpose in the face of a near-death situation stands them out in the narrative in contrast to Jonah, the prophet. Their theological understanding gained them life, while Jonah opted for death. This tells us, from a theological view point, that the special relationship between YHWH and Israel does not preclude other nations and people from the mercy of God and from being used by God towards the salvation of others, for God's sovereignty is a world-wide sovereignty.*

**Keywords:** Igwebuiké Perspective, Narrative Analysis, Jonah, Sailors, Ironies

## Introduction

The book of Jonah, even though short, is theologically a very rich story about a prophet, the prophet's relation to his God, and God's relation to all His creation. The narrative is radical because it juggles so many preconceived ideas of the biblical Israel about how God operates in our world: Is it not the case that He is only interested in Israel, the elect people of God? This assumption has not only shown to be misguided, but also flat out wrong. One thing that stands out in the book is its interest in non-Israelites, which is my focus in this paper. Prophets in Israel are known, not just as the mouthpiece of YHWH, but also as those who stand in the gap on behalf of the nation. They rally the nation together for a particular salvific purpose. However, that was not the case with Jonah, son of Amittai. Jonah went counter-current to the basic principles of *prophetism*, and as such, betrays the principle of *Igwebuike*<sup>1</sup> theology, meaning, "there is

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<sup>1</sup> For the explanation of the root meaning of *Igwebuike*, see 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), 72. Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony. *Igwebuike and the Logic (Nka) of African Philosophy*, 14. Kanu, I. A. (2018). *Igwe Bu Ike* as an Igbo-African hermeneutics of national development. *Igbo Studies Review*. No. 6. pp. 59-83. Kanu, I. A. (2018). *Igwebuike* as an African integrative and progressive anthropology. *NAJOP: Nasara Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 151-161. Kanu, I. A. (2018). New Africanism: *Igwebuike* as a philosophical Attribute of Africa in portraying the Image of Life. In Mahmoud Misaeli, Sanni Yaya and Rico Sneller (Eds.). *African Perspectives on Global on Global Development* (pp. 92-103). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Kanu, I. A. (2019). Collaboration within the ecology of mission: An African cultural perspective. *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life*. Vol. 15. pp. 125-149. Kanu, I. A. (2019). *Igwebuike* research methodology: A new trend for scientific and wholistic investigation. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities (IAAJAH)*. 5. 4. pp. 95-105. Kanu, I. A. (2019).

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strength in solidarity." He preferred to stand alone and aloof from every other person, including God. His sentiments and body language preach nationalism instead of globalization or the unity of the human family. However, the sailors, even though minor characters and "pagans," confirm the strength in solidarity.

Therefore, my aim in this paper is to look at the sailors in the story of Jonah and demonstrate how their virtuousness overshadows the action of the prophet Jonah. In other words, I will be looking at the book of Jonah from the perspective of the supporting casts, with the aim of establishing that the key to unlocking the theology of Jonah chapter one lies in the actions of the sailors, even though they are supporting casts or minor characters.

To demonstrate this, I intend to use the *arts of biblical narrative* to show that the book of Jonah is one of the biblical narrations in which the supporting casts assume an important role that aids the development of the plot of the story. The narrator masterfully, through the power of words, enrobes these characters with a *virtuous garment* that makes them stand out in sharp contrast to the primary character. The literary *vehicle* through which the narrator conveys the virtuousness of these characters and highlights their importance in the plot is called *irony*. By this, the narrator, on the one hand, attributes to them certain qualities that one would have expected of a believer in YHWH; while on the other hand, he presents the prophet Jonah in a manner that appears to contradict the expected conformations of a prophet.

In the light of the above, I will sometimes refer to these supporting casts (the sailors) as pagans. This is not intended to be derogatory, but is used with the aim to bring out the ironies between them and Jonah,

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*African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3. No. 7. pp. 117-136. Kanu, I. A. (2017i). *Igwebuike* as a hermeneutic of personal autonomy in African ontology. *Journal of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars*. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 14-22.

the prophet of YHWH. After all, Israel in the Bible sees the worship of any divinity outside YHWH, the God of Israel, as paganism or idolatry (cf. Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6; 18:9-14).

Thus said, I intend to follow Jonah in his journey in this narrative unit (Jonah 1:1-16), paying attention to his failings so as to see how they help to highlight the heroism and the uprightness of the sailors. The story goes from surprise to surprise, following complications, resolutions and revelations. I intend to go into this great journey of conversion as a reader and the narrator will be my guide as I pay close attention to the finesse of his narrative art. Jonah 1:1-3 immediately throws us into the heart of the story: the call of Jonah and his flight. So let's begin our journey with Jonah as I retell the story from the point of view of the art of biblical narrative.

### **Expositio - The Call and the Flight of Jonah (1:1-3)**

From the point of view of the Hebrew verbal form,  $\text{וַיְהִי}$  begins the story, rather abruptly. No historical superscription or any other introduction preceded this first episode. The Hebrew word,  $\text{וַיְהִי}$ , normally translates as "and it happened" or "it came to pass." Among the twelve Minor Prophets, Jonah is the only book to open with the word  $\text{וַיְהִי}$ , a term that often begins narratives. Such a beginning suggests continuation; it implies that the background of the story is already known to the reader. Even though the book of Ezekiel (1:1) begins the same way, it's a first person narrative. It differs from Jonah (1:1) which is a third person narrative. Thus, Jonah is a narrative whose own beginning is elusive and whose ending remains unwritten. "And it came to pass" signals a tale told *in medias res* (*in the middle of things*).

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that Jonah is in the first place a narrative that begins prior to Jonah 1:1, making the brief description of Jonah in 2Kings 14:25 the starting point. This could mean that our

arrator assumes his audience has a previous knowledge of the prophet from 2 Kings 14.<sup>2</sup>

### **The announcement of the intervention of YHWH (Jonah 1:1)**

The story begins with a minimal description of the two interlocutors: YHWH and Jonah, "the son of Amittai." YHWH, the first protagonist to appear, addressed Jonah with the formulation of the prophetic oracle well known in the Bible. The clause קום לך אל־ (lit., "Get up and go to [...]") appears for example, in 1 Kings 17:9: "Arise and go to Zarephath [...]" (as an imperative to Elijah); also in Jeremiah 13:6, "Get up and go to the Euphrates [...]" With this formula, let's suppose, without being explicitly told, that the recipient of the word is a prophet.

Jonah, as the second protagonist, is introduced by his full name, "Jonah, son of Amittai." "Jonah" in Hebrew means "dove," a bird used to describe the folly and inconstancy of Israel (cf. Hos 7:11-12).<sup>3</sup> Our dove also goes counter-current to those of Is 60:8-9, where doves are used as a metaphor for the ship that came to Jerusalem from Tarshish. יִמְתִּי - his father's name is based on the verb יָמַן, which in the *Hiphil* means "to believe" and in *Niphal* could either mean "faithful or be certain." However, יִמְתִּי is closer in form to the noun אֱמֶת (truth or faithfulness), which is derived from the verb, יָמַן.<sup>4</sup> Based on this lexicographical dimension of the name Jonah, some authors observed that the *yod* at the end of יִמְתִּי may be regarded as a hypocoristicon (shortened form of יָהּ or יהוה), allowing *Amittai* to mean something

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Reed. R. Lessing, *Jonah*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. A. Sweeney, "Jonah" in Cotter, D.W., ed., *The Twelve Prophets*, BERIT OLAM (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 304.

<sup>4</sup> Lessing, 65.

like "YHWH is true/faithful."<sup>5</sup> So, our Jonah is *the son of one whose name means the faithfulness of YHWH*. But do his actions and inactions demonstrate this? In Jonah, we will see that the one who was surnamed "the faithfulness of YHWH" is being unfaithful to the call and mission entrusted to him by YHWH.

### **The Mission of Jonah (v.2)**

The word of YHWH involves three main verbs in imperative: "Arise; go and call or proclaim." The imperative קוּם ("arise") represents the emergence of YHWH who puts the story in motion, inviting Jonah to act. Such an order will reoccur two times in the story, always addressed to Jonah, but not always from the mouth of YHWH (cf. 1:6 and 3:2). The imperative "go" (לֵךְ) translates a dynamic mission that Jonah must follow. Finally, the expression קְרָא עָלַיָּהּ "call or proclaim against it" could imply a dimension of disapproval and reproach common in the prophetic ministry (cf. 1 kings 1:2; Jer 25:29).<sup>6</sup> It could also imply a call to repentance. However, the reader, like Jonah, already knows the recipient of the message: "Nineveh, that great city." But how would Jonah respond to these divine imperatives?

### **Inciting Moment: The Flight of Jonah (v.3)**

The first description of Jonah's reaction corresponds perfectly to the order of the Lord: קוּם "Arise" (cf. v. 2).<sup>7</sup> However, the second verb of

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Sweeney, 304. Also see J. M. Sasson, *Jonah*, Anchor Bible 24B, New York: Doubleday 1990), 69. Also see Douglas STUART, *Hosea-Jonah*. WBC (Dallas : Word, Incorporated, 2002), 447

<sup>6</sup> Cf. D. Scaiola, *Abdia, Giona, Michea: Introduzione, Traduzione e Commento*, NVBTA (Milano: San Paolo, 2012), 55.

<sup>7</sup> We do not have any word from Jonah in response to the command of the Lord; no הִנְנִי, «Here I am» typical of the response of the servants of God (cf. Gen. 37:13; 22:1; 27:18), rather we see an action on his part, an action in the wrong direction.

his response leaves the reader puzzled: לָרֹחַ ("to flee"). The Qal infinitive construct of בָּרוּחַ, "to flee" with the preposition לְ, <sup>8</sup> informs us about the purpose of his *rising*, which indicates an act of rebellion and flight. Up until this verse, the reader is expected to follow the plot of the conversion of Nineveh, which was the starting point of the book. However, with the disjunctive *waw*, the narrator introduces the *inciting moment* to the plot.<sup>9</sup> At this point, the reader would expect a sentence like: "And Jonah arose and went to Nineveh," as this is the normal response to divine instructions, but that is not the case here. A question surges immediately in the mind of the reader: "But why did Jonah not go to Nineveh in accordance to the divine injunction?"<sup>10</sup> The narrator, not telling us anything in this regard, creates a narrative *gap* which puts the reader in *suspense* and arouses his *curiosity*.<sup>11</sup> Other prophets, like Moses, Gideon, or Jeremiah, who attempted to resist a divine command, expressed their opposition in words (Ex 3:11; Jdg 6:11-19; Jer 1:6) so that it is possible for the Lord to persuade them to bow to His yoke.<sup>12</sup> Here, on the other hand, the escape from and opposition to the divine command are silent, and

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<sup>8</sup> In Jonah, every human action described by an infinitive construct verb form fails to accomplish the intention of its human subject while every divine action described by the infinitive construct verb form comes to fruition - with the sole exception of לַעֲשׂוֹת (the evil he promised *to do to* them) in 3:10. Cf. Lessing, *Jonah*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> The inciting moment is the moment in which the conflict or the problem appears for the first time and arouses the interest of the reader. Cf. Ska, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. L. Ska, "Giona sei tu! La Creazione del Lettore nel Libro di Giona," An unpublished Paper presented at a Conference in the Theological Institute of Triveneto, Italy (2013): 5-22.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985), 259.

<sup>12</sup> U. Simon, *Jonah: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translations*, Philadelphia: JPS, 1999. 3.



look very determined. Jonah goes indeed to a very specific place, described with two designations: 1) the name of the city: "Tarshish;" and 2) its position with regard to God: "away from the presence of the Lord." After this brief introduction, which moves the excitement from "where?" to "how?," we now have the description, action after action, of Jonah's flight. We read:

He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish and paid the price, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of YHWH (v. 3cd).

Four verbs punctuate the flight: ירד (twice) - "to go down," מצא - "to find" נתן - "to give" and בוא - "to enter." Jonah, who had "risen" (v. 3a), now starts a double descent, which will continue all through this narrative unit, describing the principal aspect of his attitude — first, to Joppa, the port city of Israel, and second, for which the "down" use of the verb is most unusual, in a ship. A Concatenation of verbs, in *wayyiqtol*, mostly demonstrates a certain speed in the actions of Jonah. The Hebrew text is very interesting here because it constructs a play of words between the situation that provokes the decision of God to send his prophet, namely, "the evil that *rises up* to him;" and the reaction of Jonah who *rises*, but "to go down." This verb "to go down" is a key word, particularly in the first part of this story. It does not only connote "physical or geographical movement, but most of all, the refusal of the prophet with regards to the mission entrusted to him by God."<sup>13</sup> Thus, it connotes rebelliousness on the part of Jonah. Another thing to note in this flight of Jonah is its irony couched in a chiasmic structure:

A: Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish away from the presence of YHWH.

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<sup>13</sup> Scaiola, 56.

B: He went on to Joppa and found a ship and paid its price and boarded it.

A: To go with them to Tarshish away from the presence of YHWH.<sup>14</sup>

The irony of Jonah's flight is made evident in the structure above: the presence of YHWH surrounded Jonah, even in his flight to Tarshish. Who can escape the presence of God? No wonder the Psalmist says in Ps. 139:7-10 (NJB):

Where shall I go to escape your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I scale the heavens you are there, if I lie flat in Sheol, there you are. If I speed away on the wings of the dawn, if I dwell beyond the ocean, even there your hand will be guiding me, your right hand holding me fast.

But it appears Jonah did not know this aspect of God; he is still determined to flee. The story did not end with this ironic but *inciting moment*; rather, it is only the beginning of its further complications.

### ***Complicatio* - The Storm at the Sea (1:4-16)**

In this scene, the complication of verse 4 is resolved in verses 15 and 16. The scene is structured in a concentric manner. The first half of the scene (1:4-10a) is progressively enriched by the second half (1:10b-16). The fear, tension, vain efforts and prayers all find resolution in the second half of the scene, thanks to the self-revelation of Jonah in v. 9. This self-revelation marks the epicentre of the scene and propels the story to its final resolution. This movement from complication to resolution is obviously not automatic. It goes through certain exigencies (like surprises, vain efforts, fears, prayers and revelations) that highlight the activity of the sailors and the passivity of Jonah before reaching its final resolution.

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<sup>14</sup> As noted by P. Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 129.

### **Complication I: God throws a storm that inspires fear (v. 4-5a)**

In this second scene, the narrator introduces us to another group of personages, outside the main protagonists of the story (YHWH and Jonah), namely: הַמֵּלָחִים "the sailors." However, it is remarkable that the sailors in Jonah, unlike the מְלָח in Ezekiel 27:9, are completely devoid of any ethnic or national identity (except for the fact that they are non-Israelite), while their religious identity receives comparatively ample description.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, they are non-Israelites and supposedly *pagans*, from Israel's perspective. The narrator tells us succinctly that YHWH caused the wind, which caused the storm, which caused the ship to be in danger of sinking. These complicate the story and arouse the curiosity of the reader. The reader, at this point, does not know what would become of Jonah and the divine message to Nineveh, owing to the tension caused by the storm. This complication of the story (cf. *waw* disjunctive indicating a break in the momentum of Jonah)<sup>16</sup> opens the second stage of the chapter. Here, we have a situation of *Reader-elevating position*; that is, a situation where the reader knows more than the characters in the story.<sup>17</sup> The characters do not know the cause of the storm, but thanks to the omniscient narrator, we know that it was God who threw "a great wind on the sea." Meanwhile, the sailors' response was: וַיִּרְאוּ הַמֵּלָחִים - "and the sailors were afraid." Out of fear, "they cried out, each to his god."

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Aaron J. Brody, *Each Man Cried Out to His God: The Specialized Religion of Canaanite and Phoenician* (Atlanta: Brill, 1998) 82-3.

<sup>16</sup> 1:4a is a construction of the type of *waw-x-qatal*, which is different from *wayyiqtol*, it indicates an interruption of the principal line of the narration.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J. L. Ska, *Our Father Have Told us*, (Roma: Biblical Press, 2000), 54-5.

## The Efforts of the Sailors (v. 5bc)

Their first action is religious in nature. The sailors have realized that a god can be hidden behind this mysterious storm, because among the ancients, every cosmic calamity is attributed to a divine intervention.<sup>18</sup> As such, they became afraid and cried (זעק) each to his own god. The insight of Bruna Costacurta on the relationship between "fear" and "cry" is very pertinent here. The cry of the sailors is not just a mere instinctive cry as a result of fear. Rather, it is "a cry for help which man, threatened and gripped by fear, addresses both to men and to God. In this case, fear does not paralyse the faculty, but rather expresses itself in a search to find an escape."<sup>19</sup> Thus, in their cry, the sailors made recourse, "each to his own god," in the bid to save themselves and to salvage the ship. Here, we see the unity of purpose among these sailors. They all prayed, each to his own god, for the common purpose of salvaging the situation. Their action resonates with the words of Anthony I. Kanu, that "when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful and can constitute an insurmountable force."<sup>20</sup> The second action is mechanical: throwing (with the return of the טול verb) the vessels in the sea to lighten the ship. Since the prayer does not seem to work, the sailors throw their goods overboard, without knowing yet that Jonah is the only load that puts the ship in distress. And indeed Jonah, at this time, continues his descent. He cuts off himself from the group and continues with his descent into the world of *aleness*. He forgets the popular maxim attributed to the ancient Greek storyteller, Aesop, that says: "united we stand, but divided we fall."

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Antonio Nepi, *Dal Fondale alla Ribalta: I Personaggi Secondari nella Bibbia Ebraica* (Bologna: Epinia della Parola, 2015), 86.

<sup>19</sup> Bruna Costacurta, *La Vita Minacciata: Il Tema della Paura nella Bibbia Ebraica*, AnBib 119, Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988), 236-7.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony I. Kanu, "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Hermeneutic of Globalization," in *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 2 no. 1 (March 2016), 3.

The religious identity of the sailors may not be *Yahwistic*; however, they had faith in their god(s); and they called upon them in their time of danger. Jonah, on the other hand, a prophet of YHWH, is deep asleep. In the words of Hayyim Angel, "How ironic it is that Jonah contrasts himself with the sailors: he is righteous and aware of God's plan; they are idolatrous and ignorant of God's ways. Comparatively, the reader sees that the sailors acted admirably, praying and acting to save themselves,"<sup>21</sup> and to save Jonah as well. So while the sailors move from inner emotion to outward cry to vigorous action, Jonah, below the deck, moves from action to inaction and finally to total withdrawal. As the sailors increase, Jonah decreases.

The verbs "to become afraid" (יָרָא) and "to call out" (קָרָא or קָרָעוּ) are used together only in Jonah 1:5 and Exodus 14:10, which have an almost identical expression: "They became very afraid, and they call out" (וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּקְרָאוּ).<sup>22</sup> Thus, looking at it from the point of view of Exodus 14:10, it shows that even the non-Israelite sailors did what an average Israelite should do in times of trouble, namely: "call upon the divine." However, the storm still rages. Since their prayer does not amount to a solution, they rightly conclude that the answer must lie in someone else: Jonah, of course! But he who is guilty lies indifferently fast asleep.

### **Surprise I: Jonah eclipsed (v.5d)**

"Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep."

The order of the words in Hebrew expresses a contrast to that which has just been told.<sup>23</sup> While the sailors are doing everything to survive,

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<sup>21</sup> Angel Hayyim, "The Book of Jonah: A Call to Personal Responsibility," *TRADITION* 30 (1995), 60.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Lessing, 121.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Simon, 9.

Jonah runs away even further from his responsibility and is eclipsed in his sleep, as if it were nothing. Nonchalance is emphasized here by the contrast between the three verbs that describe the action of the sailors: "fear, scream and throw," and the three used to describe the action of Jonah: "go down, lie down, and fall deep asleep." Hence, Jonah is inactive, contrary to the active sailors. According to Simon, "his ability to sleep at such a time is the first manifestation of his preferred inclination of death to life."<sup>24</sup> Scaiola observes that "the verb רדמ used here is derived from the substantive תרדמה which could imply either a profound sleep (cf. 1 Sam 26,12; Is 29,10) or a state of trance (cf. Gen 2,21; 15,12, Dan 8,18)."<sup>25</sup> Jonah sleeps profoundly, but his sleep is not a trance, but an escape from YHWH and from his prophetic responsibility. To describe the place where Jonah had gone down, the narrator makes use of an unusual term: ירצה, usually used to describe the most extreme and profound part of a place.<sup>26</sup> This Jonah's new descent, therefore, emphasizes his estrangement from God and from the stage, to the depths of the ship, in a total detachment from life and the story around him. At this stage, the reader wonders what the fate of the sailors would be, owing to the fact of their ignorance of the person responsible for the danger that had befallen them.

### **Turning Point: Jonah is found and summoned to help (v. 6)**

"The captain (of the sailors) came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Arise, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish"

This new complication of the story finds a turning point with the intervention of the captain of the ship. After a rhetorical question that

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Simon, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Scaiola, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Of a region (Judg. 19:1,18; 2Kgs 19:23; Is 37:24), of a cave (1Sam 24:4), of a house (Am 6:10), of a well (Is 14:15; Ezek 32:23), or of the land (Jer. 6:22; 25:32; 31:8; 50:41).

implies a rebuke,<sup>27</sup> the captain repeats without knowing the divine imperative: קָוִים קְרָא אֵל ("Arise, call on your god!"). Upon awakening, Jonah meets with the word from which he is fleeing. He who refuses to rebuke Nineveh is reproached with irony, and most of all, by a non-Israelite who re-proposes the word of YHWH, the God of Israel: "Arise and call." This officer is the first human character to make a direct speech. He orders Jonah to "arise" and "call" to God, whose own command, "arise ... call" Jonah had already spurned. He is thus called by a new authority to his intercessory mission to save the lives of men. He is called to align himself with the attitude of the sailors, who cried out "each to his own god" (v. 5). Perhaps his God will do something to the ship.

If YHWH, the God of Israel, found in a *pagan*, the captain, a worthy instrument for His Word, it obviously bespeaks of the place of these supporting characters in this narrative unit. It tells us something about the God of the Bible. It tells us that despite one's "otherness," in relation to Israel, he/she can still be an instrument in the hands of the creator.<sup>28</sup> The captain assumed the role of a prophet, a responsibility which the Israelite Jonah abnegated. In other words, God used a *pagan* as His mouthpiece to speak to his prophet Jonah, to remind him of his prophetic responsibility. Anyone familiar with the prophetic books of the Bible knows that the fundamental vocation of the prophet is the "word," or more specifically, דְּבַר־יְהוָה (the word of YHWH). Thus, the prophet is one who speaks.<sup>29</sup> However, ironically here, we have a prophet who refuses to speak. God, using a pagan as his

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Simon, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Theophilus, 72-92.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Pietro Bovati, *Così Parla Il Signore: Studio sul Profetismo Biblico*, Bib, (Bologna: EDB, 2008),

"mouthpiece," is not peculiar to the book of Jonah, it is found elsewhere in the Old Testament. For example, in Jeremiah 40,1-5, God used a pagan Captain, Nebuzaradan to talk to his Prophet Jeremiah. But here in Jonah, it tells us that we are before a narrative in which the supporting characters assume an important role in accordance with the theology of the book. All this makes Jonah look like a "prodigal prophet." The captain is more aware of the power of prayer than the fleeing prophet! The heathen captain seeks divine deliverance, while Jonah seeks oblivion. Prophets are often expected to intercede in a time of crisis (cf. Moses at Israel's golden calf apostasy in Exodus 32, 11-14 and Amos in the locust and fire disasters in Amos 7, 1-6). But Jonah remained adamant. His silence is deafening! He is a prophet who does not speak!<sup>30</sup> These repetitions of key words are common features throughout the book, and they convey some important ideas. קָרָא and קָרִים in both 1:2 and 1:6 reiterate the huge gulf between the active praying sailors and the sleeping disobedient *Prophet* of YHWH, who refuses to arise and call to Nineveh. Also, the repetition indicates that Jonah has not escaped the presence of God.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Revelation of the Guilty by Casting of Lots (v.7)**

"The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us". So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah."

If in v. 6 we are at the bottom of the ship, where the captain spoke to Jonah, who, uninterested in what happens and wanting to stay away from all worries, retires most probably to sleep. In v. 7, the narrator, in a dramatic way, makes evident an action that most likely took place where all the sailors were present, that is, far away from the bottom and on the deck of the ship. So, it is remarkable how the narrator

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Lessing, 122.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 122.



moves the reader from one place to another, without the reader realizing it at a first glance.

Another highlight is the curiosity that the narrator evokes from the reader by omitting the reaction of Jonah to the imperatives קָרָא קוּמ (v. 6) of the captain: What did Jonah do in response to the imperatives? Did he pray? Or did he again ignore the command to "arise and call..."? Verse 7 does not tell us what happens, but it makes us imagine what happens: Jonah's probable silence brings the sailors into focus as they propose the casting of lots to determine who among them is responsible for the evil. It is as if we are in front of theatrical action: the sailors cast lots and they talk among themselves. Not knowing the cause of the tempest, the sailors must have believed that once the culprit was found, the final destruction could be prevented. The phrase that the reader hears, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us," also has the effect of creating a little suspense and curiosity: *will the lot fall on Jonah?*

### **The Sailors' Lot Casting: Typical of Israelite's Divination**

The casting of lots is widely attested to in the ancient world<sup>32</sup> as well as in the Hebrew Bible. The precise *lots* in question vary, both within ancient Israel and outside it.<sup>33</sup> However, giving the prevalent nature of "lot casting tradition" in the ancient Near East, it wouldn't be surprising that the sailors adopted this option in such dire circumstances.<sup>34</sup> But a closer look at this, in the context of Jonah,

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<sup>32</sup>Some overviews of this may be found in C. V. Dam, *The Urim and Thummim. A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Indiana: Eisenbrauns 1997), esp. 40-44, 203-210, 215-217.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. B. A. Strawn, "Jonah's Sailors and Their Lot Casting: A Rhetorical Critical Observation," *Bib* 91 (2010): 66-76.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Brody, 83-84.

"suggests that the sailors' activity is rather unusual and, literarily-speaking, delightful."<sup>35</sup>

B. A. Strawn rightly observed that in the majority of instances where lots or lot casting are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, the language used is not of foreigners, but of Israelites. Apart from Jonah 1:7, "only five other passages speak of foreigners employing the practice: Esth 3:7; 9:24; Joel 4:3; Obad 11; and Nah 3:10. All other instances concern intra- Israelite use of lots for a rather wide variety of purposes, the majority of which are connected to YHWH (see, e.g., Josh 18:8,10; 1 Sam 10:20-24; 14:41; Prov 16:33), the cult (e.g., Lev 16:8-10; Neh 10:35), or the land of Israel itself" (Num 36:2; Josh 14:1-2; 15:1).<sup>36</sup> Even among those five additional passages (besides Jonah) that mention foreigners casting lots, at least four reflect an intra-Israelite perspective - mentioning Israel or YHWH in some fashion (cf. Esth 3,7; 9,24; Joel 4,3; Obad 11).<sup>37</sup>

The same might be said of the lot casting in the book of Jonah. Even though it involves foreigners, the situation that prompted the casting of lots was caused by YHWH, and rightly, the lot fell on YHWH's prophet. On this note, Limburg states that "Jonah's sailors 'make some theological assumptions in connection with the lot casting. One such assumption is that the storm is divine punishment; another is that God communicates through the casting of lots."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Tribble holds

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<sup>35</sup> Strawn, 68.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>37</sup> In Esth 3:7 and 9:24 the casting of the lot determines the day of the pogrom against the Jews in Persia. However, as the story proceeds, through an amazing reversal, this date turns out to be a day of great victory for the Jews, celebrated in posterity as *Purim* (see Esth 9:26-32). In Joel 4:3 and Obad 11, enemies or foreigners cast lots for Yahweh's people or for Jerusalem, respectively.

<sup>38</sup> James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, 51.

that "theologically, the use of lots to disclose the truth elevates chance to the level of divine will."<sup>39</sup> So one may say that Jonah's sailors, though not unusual in employing divination, but "the fact that they are specifically said to cast lots (גורלות + נפל); an oft-attested Israelite practice, using Israelite terminology (cf. Esth 3:7; 9:24) suggests an *Israelite* perspective on the scene."<sup>40</sup> Thus, our sailors are not just painted in Israelite garb, but more importantly, are depicted as familiar with Israelite ritual. In this, we see the sailors as supporting casts, aiding the development of the plot. Their action of casting lots leads to the discovery of the culprit and subsequently moves the story forward.

In all this, of course, as is customary in Scripture, the story is led by God, who brings into play the human freedom so as to bring man to victory over fear and the recognition of the Holy One as the God of life. So, if Jonah sought the sea that God Himself created, to escape from the face of YHWH, it is God again who guides the story by making the lot to fall on Jonah. Here, we see a significant relation between human liberty and sovereign dominion of the God of history.

### **Questions to Determine the Nature of the Crime (v. 8)**

"Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

The sailors do not automatically lash out against the guilty prophet, since they have identified the culprit. Instead, they simply ask him: "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us." This is followed by further questions. Sweeney notes that this kind of question is conventional and generally made to know the identity of a person.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Studies in the Book of Jonah*, an unpublished dissertation (Columbia University, New York), 1963. 298.

<sup>40</sup> Strawn, 71-2.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Sweeney, 313.

Here, we have a true and proper interrogation. In ancient Israel, there are different steps and processes of establishing justice. Even though the lot fell on Jonah, the sailors didn't stop at that. They went a step further. They implored the interrogative step. This step functions to ascertain facts and responsibility (cf. Gen 3:13; 4:10; Judg 18:18).<sup>42</sup> Thus, this shows that the sailors are very attentive to establishing the truth. They don't want to give anything to chance. They want to be sure beyond all reasonable doubt about what they are doing.

The first question is the most crucial. Its answer is not obvious. The crew quite naturally wonders if somehow they might have done some wrong deserving of this calamity. Have they offended Jonah? Are they helping him do something wrong? Is it guilt by association? Or is Jonah alone to blame? Are they transporting someone who has committed a great crime? They are still genuinely wondering why the lot fell on Jonah and what it means for them. The crew is also desperate to know exactly who Jonah is, because they only know that he is somehow the focus of the problem. Until they know his identity, they can't expect to know, for example, which god he has offended, and how. Thus, the sailors asked him further questions. His occupation, once they know it, will tell them much, if he is a priest, or a prophet, or an executioner, or an idol-maker, or has any one of many other religiously sensitive occupations. The final three questions all concern Jonah's origin. The answer to these would also have religious significance, since one's national god was usually the most important divinity in one's life at this point in history. During Jonah's time, people's personal destinies were inextricably linked with their national destinies, and national gods functioned increasingly as personal gods, at least in Palestine.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Cf. Pietro Bovati, *Ristabilire la Giustizia. Procedure, vocabolario, orientamenti*, AnBib 110 (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1986), 64-5.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31, (Dallas: World Inc., 1987), 460.

## **Revelation: Jonah's Self-identification and The Reaction of the Sailors (v. 9)**

"I am a Hebrew, he replied. "I fear YHWH, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land". Then the men were even more afraid"

These questions make us get into the heart of the story of the first chapter of the book of Jonah. At last, Jonah finally speaks: "I am a Hebrew ... I fear YHWH ..." James Ackerman says that this answer, taken out of context, is presented as a confession of faith.<sup>44</sup> The problem is that until now Jonah has not shown any faith in the God of Israel. So, in what sense does he fear God? Antonio Nepi observes here that Jonah's *profession of faith* in YHWH, the God of heaven, of earth and of the seas "is an example of dramatic irony, because it clashes with the claim of escaping a God who transcends the ethnic boundaries of Israel and controls the wind and waves."<sup>45</sup> In other words, if he really "fears" this omnipresent God, why does he try to escape from him?

The term עִבְרִי "Hebrew," on the other hand, is often used when contrasting Israelites with non-Israelites. In this vein, Jonah's usage of *Ivri* in 1:9 is expected, since he was contrasting himself with *pagans*. Jonah's perceived dissimilarity to the sailors is the main emphasis of Jonah 1. We are before a revelation, an important stage in the development of the plot that directs the story towards a resolution. In fact, the sailors' realization of who their interlocutor is and what he would say to them about his escape from YHWH will lead them to take a dramatic decision. This awareness takes away from the sailors

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. James S. Ackerman, *Jonah*, in R. Alter, - F. Kermode, ed., *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 234-238.

<sup>45</sup> Nepi, 87.

the initial curiosity they had about Jonah, particularly, about his identity. However, this contrast with the sailors was most important to Jonah; therefore, the narrator placed only these words in his direct quotation. This response caused a reaction from the sailors.

In all this, however, one notes that Jonah avoided the question about his occupation. He didn't say he was a prophet. This omission seems very significant. Scaiola opines that this is so "because maybe, given the situation, he finds it difficult to say he is a prophet."<sup>46</sup> But, I would rather think that this omission highlights his continuous desire to flee from his prophetic responsibility.

Our narrator tells us, "and the men feared a great fear" (1:10a). This אָרַךְ here links the preceding section to subsequent efforts by the sailors to avert disaster. According to Lessing, "the narrator uses אָרַךְ in different ways to indicate that the events in chapter 1 transform the sailors from sheer terror (1:5) to an awe at the awareness of being in YHWH's presence and finally to trust, belief, and worship of this great God."<sup>47</sup> In other words, Jonah's confession brings the sailors from fear (in verse 5) to awe (in verse 10) of the God of the heavens, who created the sea and the dry land. The sailors react in a way more indicative of faith than does the Israelite Jonah. He is reacting in a manner one would expect from an unbeliever. The sailors are unable to imagine anyone treating his deity in such a fashion. They, unlike Jonah, have fear and respect for the divine. They display greater reverence and understanding than the Israelite Jonah.

### **Flashbacks: the question about the crime (v. 10)**

"They said to him, "What is this that you have done?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the YHWH, because he had told them so."

This interrogation of Jonah by the sailors to Jonah refers us back to the past of the prophet. This tells us that we are faced with an

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<sup>46</sup> Scaiola, 61.

<sup>47</sup> Lessing, 101.

*analepsis*, or a flashback, which, in turn, echoes God's question to Eve: "What have you done?" (Gen 3:13). The narrator withheld the information on how the sailors realised that Jonah was running away from YHWH, only to let us into that knowledge now, by telling us that "the men knew because Jonah had told them." The question of the sailors is not merely intended to know what they ask, because they already knew through the express confession of Jonah, but it seems that they want to rebuke him for what he had done. It may sound like: "How could you do this to your God?" Thus, this question is not just a mere desire to seek for information. Rather, having established the truth, "because Jonah had told them so," the men, through this question, express their perplexity in the fact that a man, who "fears YHWH, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land," could attempt to flee from this same YHWH. So, it appears that with this question that expressed their perplexity, they wanted to bring Jonah into the perspective of the gravity of what he had done.

### **Jonah is called to help (v.11)**

"Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?' For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous."

There is something very interesting here. The sailors had established the truth: "Jonah is the culprit, and YHWH, the God of Jonah knows about the storm." And more still, the situation at the sea wasn't encouraging either, "For the sea was growing all the more tempestuous." But despite all this, and as upright men, the sailors do not take the law into their hands. Instead, they cordially ask Jonah: "What shall we do to you[...]?" I think Douglas Stuart captures the situation even better. In his words:

The sailors are not *Yahwists*, and certainly not prophets. Jonah is both the guilty party and the expert here. So Jonah is the only one who can tell them what YHWH would require to turn aside His wrath. They ask him what to do. There must be some punishment of Jonah which they can instigate that will stop the

storm. The sea was churning ever higher, so the lightening of the ship by throwing cargo overboard had only bought time; it had not really gotten them out of danger.<sup>48</sup>

The sailors want to save their lives. There are no elements suggestive of hostility towards the prophet; indeed, it will soon become evident in their attempt to save his life.

### **Revelation: Jonah reveals what to do to end the Storm (1,12)**

"He said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.'"

Here, the prophet is well aware of why the storm is raging: it is his disobedience to the will of YHWH that has caused all this. Thus, to avert the danger, he asks to be thrown into the sea. The sailors have done everything to avoid ending up in the sea with their ship and Jonah, but Jonah, on the contrary, asks to be thrown into the sea. Here, Ska observes that "water, from biblical point of view, is synonymous with the place of death."<sup>49</sup> This contrast is alarming. Jonah, the עֵבֶרִי, who in v. 9 made what almost looked like a confession of faith: "I fear the Lord, the God who of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land," now wants to end up in the sea, the world of death.<sup>50</sup> Jonah obviously does not want to obey anyone except his own whims. He, who bears the name of the *dove*, refuses to go to Nineveh, does not pray to his

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<sup>48</sup> Stuart, 462.

<sup>49</sup> Ska, "Giona sei tu!" 12. Throughout the Bible bodies of water are often a barrier to blessings. God had to split the Red Sea to set the Israelites free from slavery (Exodus 14:21-22). God had to stop the flow of the Jordan during flood stages so his people could enter the promise land (Joshua 3:15-16). In other parts of the Bible, bodies of water are symbols for evil, death, and chaos: But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt." (Isaiah 57:20) "You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan." (Psalms 74:13-14)

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Ibid*, 5-22.



God as the captain had asked of him, and now wants to end up in the world of the dead. While the sailors continue to make efforts to bring the prophet to focus about his mistake so he can choose life together with them instead of death, Jonah, on the other hand, prefers aloneness and death, instead of unity and life. But the sailors want none of that. They choose life instead; hence, they try to save him at all costs.

It is interesting to imagine the passivity of Jonah when he asked to be thrown into the sea. He could jump into the water by his own freewill, and assume alone all the responsibility. Instead, choosing once again passivity and running away from responsibility, he questions the freedom of the sailors themselves, and involves them in a risky and compromising operation.

### **The Efforts of the Sailors (v. 13)**

"Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them."

The Qal of the verb חתר (here third common plural imperfect with *waw* consecutive) could be translated as "to dig, burrow, hollow out." Lessing believes חתר was used metaphorically, as for example, in Amos 9:2, where YHWH speaks of people who *burrow* into *Sheol*, seeking to escape his wrath. So here it could mean the sailors *dug* into the water with their oars, which means they rowed harder.<sup>51</sup> Also, it is important to note that the verb, "to row," exists in Hebrew, and it is not חתר. In most cases, Hebrew uses the root verb שוט to represent the act of rowing, or moving to-and-fro (cf. Num 11:8; 2 Sam 24,2; Ezek 27:6,29). חתר, on the hand, is used in Hebrew to represent the act of digging, tunneling or burrowing through (cf. Job 24:16; Ezek 12:5,7). Therefore, leaning on the insightful view of Christopher Meredith, I would rather concur that, by using חתר and not שוט, "the author seems most concerned not with the motion of rowing — the action of

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Lessing, 112-3.

*digging* into the water, but with the severity of the storm and the ship's progress through it. The sailors have to tunnel through waves as the tempest swells around them."<sup>52</sup> In other words, this presents us with a picture where a terrestrial word is used to describe a marine action. This crucial strain between land and sea is what the narrator tries to underline here. "The sailors insist on being back on land, the land lubing Jonah insists on being given over to the water."<sup>53</sup>

Evidently, these sailors did their utmost best to save, not only their own lives, but also the life of the Hebrew. If Jonah seemed inclined to die, they do not want any death. In a climate of even more growing tension, due to the force of an unleashed sea, these *pagans* were going against the will of the prophet and against the stormy sea. This desire to save the unfortunate man who had disobeyed YHWH depicts obviously the *virtuousness* of these sailors. Now, given that all their efforts had proven abortive, will they succumb to the request of the *runaway prophet* of YHWH and *hurl* him into the sea? The narrator is a teacher who raises this question in the reader: *curiosity* and *suspense* pervade these lines. Worthy of note is the fact that all this underlines the place of the sailors in this story. Even though Jonah requested that he should be picked up and hurled into the sea (1:12), they still did everything to save their lives and that of the prophet from Israel. They feared killing a man, even when he requested it, and even when doing so would eventually save their lives. The ethical standard of these Gentiles is far higher than that of Jonah. They have been thrown into a life-threatening storm through no fault of theirs. They have lost their cargo, yet they still seek to save the life of the man who is responsible for all the chaos.

### **The Authentic Prayers of the Sailors (v. 14)**

"Then they cried out to the YHWH, 'Please, YHWH, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us

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<sup>52</sup> Christopher Meredith, "The Conodrum of *htr* in Jonah 1:13," VT 64 (2014), 151.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

guilty of innocent blood; for you, O YHWH, have done as it pleased you."

The journey of faith, therefore, seems to be well under way. In fact, we are not in front of people shouting at their own god (1:5), but in front of people calling YHWH, וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־יְהוָה ("They cried out to YHWH"). This is contextually similar to the expression that the Bible usually puts on the lips of the children of Israel - וַיִּזְעֻקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־ - וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־יְהוָה - "And the sons of Israel cried to YHWH [...]" (cf. Ex 14:10; Jdg 3:15; 4:3). I would like to pay particular attention to this part of the exemplary action of the sailors because, to me, it forms the climax of their progressive journey of faith and demonstrates their uprightness.

Now the sailors were in a no-win situation. If they throw him overboard, they may bring YHWH's wrath upon themselves; and if Jonah stays on board, they may perish. So, what should they do? The narrator tells us: וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־יְהוָה - "They called to YHWH." The only recourse is to plead for acquittal from YHWH. So, unlike Jonah, the sailors did not flee from YHWH (1:3) nor remain silent like Jonah who never said a single word to YHWH throughout chapter one. Rather, they prayed to God. Their prayer was a true supplication to God. In 1:5 "they called out each to his god." But here in verse 14 they invoked the name of YHWH. They have come to believe that Israel's God is the God over the universe, whose power is felt even in the stormy sea.

According to Lessing, their prayer is in the pattern of the most common Hebrew prose prayers:

1. Invocation ("O YHWH")
2. Petition ("Do not let us perish on the account of the life of this man, do not place against us innocent blood")
3. Motivation for the petition ("For you are YHWH; just as you please, you do")<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Lessing, 135.

In this prayer, as represented above, one sees that it is not only the narrator that says "they invoked YHWH," but the sailors themselves called God "YHWH." This shows a *Yhwhistic* faith. Now, let's take a closer look at this prayer pattern used by the sailors. First of all, one notices that apart from their acknowledgement of the sovereignty of YHWH, they also acknowledge that murder is a capital crime for which they could perish if YHWH holds them responsible. In fact, Theodore Laetsch writes: "These Gentiles had the fifth commandment (Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17) written in their hearts... and revolted from slaying a man."<sup>55</sup>

The sailors' second request: "Do not place against us innocent blood" echoes YHWH's instruction through Moses to the people of Israel for the expiation of untraced murder in Dt 21:8-9. In other words, if Jonah has misled them, they are not to be held responsible. Hence, they want to be sure that they are doing the will of YHWH, which Jonah the prophet never bothered about.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, they articulated the last part of their prayer in a way one would expect of Jonah or any ardent believer of YHWH: "For you are YHWH; just as you please, you do" (יְהוָה כַּאֲשֶׁר הִפְצַתָּ עֲשִׂיתְכִי־אֲתָהּ). This expression, writes Jack M. Sasson, "looks very much as if it could be used at any time that a Hebrew wanted to compare God's limitless freedom of action to the pagan god's more restricted movement."<sup>57</sup> All this confirms what Laetsch says, with regard to the word of the Lord being written in the hearts of these pagans. They, in conformity with words of the Scripture, confess that "YHWH does as he pleases" (Is 46:10; Ps 115: 3; 135: 6), while Jonah, in chapter four, expresses his frustration because YHWH does exactly as He pleases. What an irony!

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<sup>55</sup> Theodore Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 227.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Lessing, 136.

<sup>57</sup> Sasson, 136.

### **Resolution: Jonah is Hurlled into the Sea, the tempest Ceased, and the Sailors Offered Sacrifices and made Vows (vv. 15-16)**

"So they picked Jonah up and hurled him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared YHWH even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the YHWH and made vows."

After their prayers, they threw Jonah overboard; and the tempest ceased. This confirms that it is indeed YHWH, the God of Jonah (1:9), and now, the God of the sailors (1:14), who controls the seas and the waves. So, surely they are safe, the sailors and all in the ship.

Now, the narrator, playing on the verb נָצַח, tells us again: "Then the men feared a great fear (literarily) of the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" (1:16). This brings the spiritual ascent of the sailors to its climax. They moved from sheer fear of danger (1:5) to fear of the presence of YHWH in the storm (1:10) and finally to fear as a reverence to YHWH (1:14,16). The response of these sailors is striking in its simplicity and overpowering in its implications. If Jonah, in his "confession of faith," professed a reverence (couched in fear and disobedience) to the God of heaven, these sailor,s on the other hand, worshiped YHWH in an unalloyed manner. They demonstrated commitment to YHWH by offering sacrifice and making vows to him. This is almost certainly a description of whole-hearted conversion to YHWH. "Sacrifice" and "vows" mentioned in the same verse confirm this interpretation, since the Hebrew Bible elsewhere associates these actions with a permanent commitment to YHWH (cf. Ps 50:14; Is 19:21). It will not be an overstatement to conclude that, in the first and second scenes of the book of Jonah, God's true heroes are the sailors, and not the prophet.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is evident that the sailors, even though supporting casts, took the centre stage in Jonah 1. Jonah, the primary character of the story, in the light of this first chapter, can rightly be

described as a *round character*. "Round characters" have more depth and their personality often contains conflicting, even contradicting tendencies."<sup>58</sup> The complexity of Jonah's character is made evident when compared with those of the sailors. But the sailors, on the other hand, even though secondary characters, acted as main protagonists of the second scene. The sailors progressively move from "each crying to his own god" (1:5a), to lot casting: a typical Israelite divination practice, with the aim of establishing the truth.<sup>59</sup> From there, they progressed to an eloquent prayer to YHWH (1:14), which culminates in vow-making and sacrifice to YHWH (1:16). These actions of the sailors evolve the plot. After the general fear caused by the storm, they implored their gods (1:5b); and then, in a progressive manner, turned to YHWH in faith who then averted the danger. But one thing that stands out in this story is the unity of purpose with which the sailors approached their near-death situation. Their action, in most part of the story, shows an implicit understanding of *Igwebuike* theology, a theology that shows the power in unity. The outcome of such theology is life, while its opposite outcome is death. This is evident in this story. The sailors were saved because of the unity of purpose in their orientation towards the divine. But Jonah, in his quest to stand alone and faraway from God, ended up in the waters, which, symbolically, represents death.<sup>60</sup>

The narrative concludes with the offering of sacrifices and vows made by the sailors to YHWH, not in sheer fear, but in outright devotion to YHWH as a culmination of their journey of faith. Thus, it is evident that "the sailors are personages linked strictly to the scene of the tempest. They entered the scene after YHWH had unleashed the tempest on the sea, and went out of the scene when the tempest

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<sup>58</sup> Ska, *Our Father Have Told us*, 84.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Strawn, 66-76.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Gen 7:4; Ex 14:21-22; Josh 3:15-16.

ceased."<sup>61</sup> This makes them agent characters, not in the sense of flat characters who are not important in themselves, but in the sense of their functional role at the service of the plot. This tells us, from theological view point, that the special relationship between YHWH and Israel does not preclude other nations and people from the mercy of God and from being used by God towards the salvation of others, for God's sovereignty is a world-wide sovereignty. It is undisputable that Israel, in the Bible, is a "Vineyard which God himself has planted" (cf. Ps 80:7-15). But this does not exclude other nations as part of the universal family of God's children. This further shows that it is not the possession of the truth that counts, but how ready we are to live in the light of the truth we possess. Jonah, the "son of God's faithfulness," possessed the Word (cf. Jonah 1:1-2), but he wasn't faithful to the Word he possessed. The sailors, on the other hand, were supposedly ignorant of the Word, but their actions throughout the story were indicative of the fact that the Word of God was actually written in their hearts. They, rather than the prophet, are the heroes of uprightness in this story.

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<sup>61</sup> A. Niccacci – M. Pazzini – R. Tadiello, *Il Libro di Giona* (Milano: Analecta, 2013), 117.

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