

# BIBLICAL LINGUISTICS [YONAH 1:6]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

*The captain approached him and said to him, "How come you slumber. Arise and cry to your G-d! Perhaps He will give us thought and we will not perish (1:6).*

The verse that we are about to discuss represents an opportunity to take up an important question in how to interpret the book of Yonah. It is basic and intuitively accepted by anyone who had seriously studied a foreign language that one must be intimately acquainted with the idioms, turns of phrase and expressions before he can properly understand a text written in that language. Without that background, much will be missed or misinterpreted. As an example, consider a poem written in high flowing poetic language, in which suddenly one of the characters uses a colloquial or even a vulgar expression. Clearly, the author intends to make some point with that device, but it could be missed by a reader not fully fluent in the original language.

The book of Yonah is full of unusual expressions and words. Many of them are more typical of later Mishnaic rather than pure Biblical Hebrew and others appear to be imported from Arameic, a related and widely spoken language at that time, the lingua franca of the ancient world. A list of 15 of these can be found in the introduction to the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation of Yonah and three of them are in our verse.

- 1.** How come you slumber. In classical Hebrew this would be phrased as "ma lkha ki nirdamta". The form "ma lkah nirdam", without preposition and the present participle, is found only in Ezekiel 18:22 and is typical of Mishnaic Hebrew.
- 2.** Give us thought - an Arameic form of the word as found in the Arameic portion of Daniel 6:4. It is not the Hebrew form of Psalms 40:18.
- 3.** Captain - Rav Hachovel. The usage is extremely peculiar. If the chief of rope pullers is intended, as most commentators suggest, the term should be Gadol Hachovlim. Rashi in Ezekiel 27:8 suggests that this is the term used for the fellow who commands the wheel at the stern to direct the ship. Still, the word Rav is widely used in the Mishna to mean great but it is never used that way in Tanakh, where it always means numerous (See Vilna Gaon's commentary to Proverbs 3:3); this example seems to have been missed by the JPS translation).

The reader therefore is faced with a two-fold problem. First, we must account for the general tendency of the book to use unusual words or expressions. Secondly, we must determine whether

we must approach these linguistic peculiarities as examples of general tendency or as specific and intentional clues to the author's intention in that particular case.

There are three approaches that are consistent with Torah and tradition to address these problems.

**1.** Although the language of the Bible is remarkably preserved along a range of Biblical compositions spanning almost a thousand years, it is possible that a certain process of language development was taking place. Ultimately it eventuated in the form of the language that is familiar to us from the Mishna. Yonah being a late work from the end of the First Temple period reveals the beginning of this process of change; similar deviations are regularly found in other later works - Ezekiel, Esther, Ezra/ Nehemiah, Daniel and Chronicles. If so, we should not ascribe too much significance to "pure" Biblical patterns. Were we to do so, we might over-interpret and end up with meanings that the author never intended.

**2.** Yonah is written in the so-called Northern dialect (see G. A. Rendsburg, *Morphological Evidence for Regional Dialects in Ancient Hebrew*, in *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew*, ed. W. R. Bodine, Eisenbrauns, In. 1992). It has long been proposed, primarily to explain stylistic and linguistic peculiarities of the Song of Deborah, a Northern prophetess (Judges 5), that the language of the Northern tribes differed somewhat from the reigning dialect of Judea. The linguistic maps of the ancient Middle East show multiple overlapping language belts stretching from the Summerian in the far North-East to Amharic in Ethiopia. The middle of the map is dominated by Arameic as it slowly transitions into Hebrew. There are indications from the Tanach itself (see Judges 12:5-6) to the existence of this putative Northern dialect. In this view, we should also not ascribe too much significance to linguistic deviations in the book of Yonah, a prophet from the North.

**3.** As in our English, there may have been a distinction between literary and colloquial language, often termed di-glossia. It is reasonable to suppose that both co-existed during the Biblical period. Professor Steven (not Saul) Lieberman suggested that the elite spoke and wrote Biblical language while the common-folk spoke a variety of Mishnaic Hebrew (Response, *Jewish Languages*, 1978, 21-8). The discovery of the pure Biblical inscription in the Siloam aqueduct constructed at the time of Hezekiah appears to argue against this theory (See <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jspartid=713&letter=S&search=aqueduct>) . However, if true, use of colloquial expressions within the literary matrix would be intentional and must be noted and interpreted.

What could the use of colloquialisms and Arameisms signify in this verse? It could, of course, serve to characterize the Gentile captain as speaking a foreign language (even a non-Jew recognized that the storm came from G-d while Yonah continued to resist Him) or to call attention to Yonah's Northern origins at this critical juncture.

The deliberate use of Arameic expressions may, however, also remind us that Yonah faced a real choice. He could, indeed he must have, accepted his destiny, turn the ship toward Nineveh and

spend the rest of the trip polishing his Arameic, the language of the Assyrian empire (see Isaiah 36:11-12). There a number of passages that suggest that the prophets delivered their message to the non-Jews in Arameic, for example Yirmiah 10:11. It is because he chose not to do at this critical point that we have the rest of the book.

---

Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin and **Torah.org**.