



JONAH (1-3) IN DIALOGUE WITH JUDAIC NATIONALISTIC VIEW OF YAHWEH: THE UNIVERSAL ISSUE

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Abstract:

The objective of Jonah's dialogue with Judaic nationalistic view of Yahweh is to widen the spiritual horizon of his co-religionists. Jonah questions their religious and racist prejudices and finally makes them aware that God cannot be the monopoly or the property of any single religion or race. Jonah makes these important prophetic points about the nature of God without ever losing his sense of humor while creating his outrageous and outlandish story with its many separate plots. One outcome of the dialogue shows that no one has the capability at any point in time to run away from or stay outside God's presence. To be outside God's cultic presence means to be trapped more within his structural presence. The universality of God's presence is an incontestable certainty. Another result of the dialogue reveals that God's powerful deeds, salvation included, cannot be limited by what is customary in human behavior and tradition. Deliverance belongs to God. Deliverance was offered to Jonah, a self-conceited unrepentant Jew, irrespective of his vain proud attitude and why would it be denied self-reflective Assyrians, non-Jews, who actually are penitently self-flagellating. The study further discovers that obedience to God is the highest currency in prophetic service. Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish did great magic in accentuating his lesson on obedience and understanding of the universality of God to all people. Obedience to God is maturity in spirituality that engenders, amplifies and teaches universalism, as opposed to bigotry and narrow-mindedness.

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1. Introduction

Jewish understanding of Yahweh has undergone many changes over the course of time. One major interpretation of Yahweh in Jewish religious understanding and expression is found in the book of Deuteronomy. Here the people of Israel perceived themselves as a privileged group. Basically, they considered themselves as the people chosen by Yahweh while non-Jews or other races are designated as Gentiles (people or nations outside Jewish faith who are not chosen). The Israelites believed they were truly wise and intelligent people whose God is so close to them than to other nations (Deut. 4:6-7). This Deuteronomic author presumably had forgotten the exceptional nobility and religious tolerance of the Persian king Cyrus, a non-Jew who had sometime in 539 BC released the Jews and some other nations from exile.

The universalism of salvation proclaimed in this section of Jewish sacred book of Ezra as stated in the case of Cyrus above is opposed to the deuteronomic view. Opposed to the deuteronomic view also is the position of second Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1; 49:6; 51:4). It is perhaps in this context of opposition that some biblical books such as the book of Jonah along with that of Ruth arose as a protest against the nationalistic and narrow Jewish mindedness of the time. Authors of these books give a different Jewish understanding of Yahweh. They proclaim that Yahweh is God not only for and of the Jews but of the Gentiles as well (Menezes, 2005).

The person behind the book of Jonah is unknown. However, what seems clear is that his tale of reluctance, self-pity, and narrow-mindedness are meant to counter particularistic tendencies current in postexilic Judaism. A point to be made here is that the author of the book of Jonah knew that his audience would enjoy the story and not be forced to choose if it could actually have happened or not or if the fish was a shark or whale. He makes some important points about prophecy and the nature of God without ever losing his sense of humor while creating his awful and bizarre story with its various detached schemes.

Jonah is best seen as an interpretative development of history (*midrash*) in the form of a short story pervasively instructive and carefully structured. Jonah himself symbolizes certain pious Israelites whose theological perspective is problematic. For Von Rad (1965) Jonah is a story with strong tutorial content. Modern scholars in the last century have regarded Jonah as a work of imagination. Some call it myth, allegory, didactic story etc. concerning the nation of Israel who at a point in their history was narrow-minded with regard to Yahweh's choice of them as his special people.

At this certain point in their history they believed in a God that only cares for Israelites and has no regard for other nations. The question put frankly is whether Yahweh is God of Israel or God of all the earth. In an attempt to construct their history over time through fine-tuning their culture, the Jews answered this question by developing false sense of superiority over other nations. Menezes (2009) is of the opinion that Jonah's intention is to widen the sphere of his co-religionists. His aim is to question their religious and bigoted intolerance and finally make them aware that God cannot be the control or the property of any single faith or race. Jonah's dialogue with

Judaic nationalistic view of Yahweh today is still very important to us as heirs, legatees, beneficiaries and practitioners of some sort of the Judaic faith.

Off-shoots of Judaic religion and their custodians still claim possessive ownership of Yahweh and his mighty powers and deeds. For them God's power and deeds could be manifested only in their religion, branches, values etc to the exclusion of other faiths. The kind of intolerable nationalism prevalent in post-exilic Israel's community is not far from the narrow tribalism that we see, not only in faith groups in many African nations, but the world at large. This is as a result of cultural prejudice and a false sense of superiority. Sometimes it is based on differentiation in colour, advancement in science and development, colonialism, and on memories of inter-tribal wars that took place in the past or ordinary theological hubris of the faith leadership.

Intolerance and narrow mindedness constitute a problem to the modern society just the same way it contributed in fuelling anti-Semitic behaviours in the past. Jonah's dialogue remains relevant in addressing particularistic tendencies and parochial spirit of exclusivity in our modern faith world. Among believing communities of the Jews, Prophetic books were used to educate and socialize the communities that accepted them as authoritative texts. We still derive inspiration from prophetic books today because they are sacred to us. The linkage and relational spirit between God of Israel and god (s) of other nations of the universe are still current issues in modern biblical religion. The book Jonah is short, memorable and timeless in teaching and socializing people in this all important issue of God's universalism and his theoretical monotheistic nature through Israel to other religions and races.

2. Yahweh in Postexilic Judaism

The people of Israel as a covenant people of God have both universalistic as well as particularistic dimensions of the understanding of Yahweh. We see more clearly an example of universal view of Yahweh in chapter nine of Genesis where God is said to have entered into a covenant with all humankind after the great flood (Gen 9:9-11). The particularistic side follows upon the covenant with Noah and his sons. At Mount Sinai God seals a special covenant relationship with the people of Israel. Pawlikowski (2004) in an attempt to downplay the difference between the two notes that God's special covenant between Abraham and Israel does not invalidate the earlier covenant with all mankind; rather it imposes a set of new responsibilities upon the Israelites in the areas of worship and ethics.

The mission here is clearly marked namely to bring the knowledge of one loving, caring God to all mankind through Israel. Israelites on the other side received an assurance of blessings and protection once they pursue the set mission. However, there is a warning attached to the covenant - that failure to fulfill the obligations would bring severe consequences upon the people of Israel.

Jewish exile was perceived as the direct consequence of this failure to fulfill the obligations or infraction of the covenant rules. The Jews returning from exile were convinced about this and were more than prepared not to disobey their God again to

avoid a repeat occurrence. Nowell (2001) referring to the outcome of this downing knowledge to the returning Jews has this to say *“as a result, they developed an attitude of exclusivity and religious observance of the law. They avoided anything that might lead them away from God, such as foreign customs or even foreign wives”* (p.7) (Ezra 9:1-3; 10:10-15; Neh 13:23-30). This was the time narrow nationalism, particularism, or exclusivity was rampant among the Jews. For instance Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the high priest would not accept the collaboration of the Samaritans in rebuilding the second Temple (Ezr 4:1-5). In addition Nehemiah discouraged Jews from marrying foreign women (Neh 10:31; 13:23-27). The high priest Ezra went to the extreme by forcing the Jews to divorce their foreign married partners (Ezra 9-10).

Hebrew Scripture reaches a climax with the Ezra-Nehemiah post exilic reconstruction/reform of life and institutions in Jerusalem. The need to purify the newly emerging community of returned exile from unwholesome influences from, and contacts with the foreigners, endogamy (marriage from within one's ethnic group), became the cardinal instrument for the reform. Marriage of Jews outside the Jewish race became elevated to the status of treachery against God. Gradually, an understanding grew among the Jews that association with their neighbours would corrupt them and pollute their faith. This understanding was to lead the Jews to an exclusivist attitude to life with large scale discrimination and segregation. The Jews developed a superior notion of themselves as a holy race, which tended to belittle everyone else in their sight. Obviously the redactors of the text of Ezra-Nehemiah with other reformers who came back from Babylonian exile thought that Jewish community would become better without associating with their non-Jewish neighbors. Ezra-Nehemiah may be described as messengers of God but the books are products of human thought and creativity. The redactors, authors or writers of the text determined and controlled the state of their human society then through interpretation of their sacred writing as God-given and God-sanctioned. Anti-Semitism and wide scale discrimination against the Jews came as a resultant consequence of this (Ugwueye & Uzuegbunam, 2014).

Redaction of sacred scripture is a dynamic phenomenon that is on-going, constantly adapting the demands of faith to the challenges of society for the comfort and ultimate survival of mankind. This is the reason why interpreters of sacred books who are 'redactors' of the text today interpret ancient documents in the light of fresh challenges of current time. This has been a regular exercise in the writing and interpretation of scripture. No sooner had the redactors of Ezra-Nehemiah polarized their world than the redactors of Jonah came around about two hundred years after to redress the imbalance. The book of Jonah is among the list of Old Testament books which were the products of the situation of the Jewish faith confronting new challenges in post-exilic period. The canonical books of Esther, Ruth and the apocryphal books of Judith and Tobit are likewise noted for espousing the universalism of God and deep intimate inter faith relationship. The general purpose of Jonah is very clear. It is not, as some have maintained, to explain why the judgments of God and the predictions of his prophet on Nineveh did not come to pass - though this also becomes clear by the way. The purpose of the book and it is out-and-out from first to last, is to point up the

operation of prophecy to the Gentiles, God's care for them, and their disclosure to his word. In brief and to the point, it is to put into effect all this verity upon an opinionated and diffident psyche – Jonah and the entire Israelites.

In Israel following the Exile there were several diverse ways of thinking with regard to the future and the huge barrier which heathendom positioned involving Israel and the future. There was the frame of mind of goaded justice, coupled with the strong certainty that God's dominion may perhaps not be put in place except by the defeat of the malicious agents of that human race. Among many reactions of this period Jonah represents the vexed and reluctant prophet picturing Jews as willing to proclaim the destruction of the enemies of Israel, and yet not without the skulking dread that God in his tolerance may give other nations room for penitence. Actually God had severally in history spared Israel's enemies and the author of Jonah knew this but wished to exploit it to show the universal theology behind this divine act of God's genuine resolve for peoples other than Israel.

3. Judaic Nationalistic View of Yahweh in Dialogue with Jonah

The story begins with the Hebrew word *וַיְהִי*, just as seen in many Old Testament passages (Ruth (1:1), 1 Samuel (1:1), Nehemiah (1:1b) and others). This was the standing communicative formula with which historical events were linked on to one another so far as every occurrence follows another in chronological sequence. This opening word *וַיְהִי* is a signal that what follows will be a narrative, a story. The *ו* means 'and' which is 'waw consecutive' simply attached to a series of events which are assumed to be well known. However, this by no means warrants the assumption that the narrative which follows is merely a fragment of a larger work like in Joshua 1:1.

The opening phrase of the book, *וַיְהִי דְבַר יְהוָה* "Now the word of the Lord came..." is identical to that which is commonly found elsewhere as an introduction to a prophetic book (Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1). Limburg (1993) holds that the opening words of Jonah 1.1 make up a formula that is typical in the Deuteronomistic History. Jonah *וַיְהִי* is the Hebrew word for "dove". Jonah's name 'Dove' suggests the notion of "flight" and "passivity" both of which characterize the prophet at least in the first two chapters. Jonah "dove" is compared to Israel in Hosea as "a dove, silly and without sense" (Hosea 7:11).

The additional information in the opening phrase "son of Amittai" (meaning son of truthfulness, worthy son) provides the first hint of the irony that pervades the narrative and identifies the main character of this book with the prophet mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. That prophet would have been a familiar figure to the first hearers and readers of the book of Jonah. This Deuteronomistic historian mentions Jonah in a report on the accomplishments of King Jeroboam (786-746 B.C).

The dove is sent by the Lord, according to Eynikel (1998), with a message having two possible meanings: either to proclaim against Nineveh that their wickedness has gone up to God or proclaim the message because they needed salvation. In the first meaning, v.2b refers to what Jonah has to proclaim in Nineveh; in the second meaning, why he has to proclaim it against Nineveh. Since ambiguity is a characteristic feature in

the book, we may assume that both are meaningful for our reading. Jonah, the “dove” (a symbol for peace) is sent with this message to Nineveh, which is called “*the city of bloodshed*” in Nahum 3:1 and to the Assyrian King whose name is “*King Warlike*” (Hosea 5:13).

The command that is given (“Arise, go”) is, however parallel only in the Elijah-Elisha narratives (1 Kings 17:9; 21:18). The word of the Lord which came to Jonah was this: “*Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out against it*” (Green, 2007, p. 709). It is even more closely related to the formula with which Elijah receives his divine message (1 Kings 17:8; 18:1; 19:9; 21:17, 28). However, this call formula is used only after Elijah had been introduced to the readers. Therefore, we must interpret this formula as a reference to 2 Kings 14:25, since in Jonah 1:1 the prophet has not yet been introduced to the readers. In *עַל־יָגֵד* meaning “against it”, *עַל* does not stand for *אֵל* (Jonah 3:2), but retains its proper meaning, ‘against’, indicating the threatening nature of the preaching, as the explanatory clause which follows clearly.

Jonah was asked to go to Nineveh the great city. While prophets had commonly been called upon to speak against the nations, no other prophet had been commissioned to put in a personal appearance (Jeremiah 46-51, Ezekiel 25-32). It was one thing to speak, and another thing to actually go there and personally deliver the message. Other Old Testament prophets denounced foreign nations from a safe distance. If proclamation were merely prediction, it could have been made equally well from Galilee (Griffiths, 1979). Hertz in Griffiths (1979) is of the opinion that the fact that Jonah had to go into the actual situation to Nineveh and announce the overthrow to the inhabitants could only mean that God wished to give them the opportunity of repentance and redemption.

We begin here to understand Yahweh’s possible intention in dialogue with Judaic nationalistic view represented by the personality of Jonah. *נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה* This phrase tolls like a bell through the book of Jonah (1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:11). This is one of the two things said about Nineveh as the narrative opens. The designation *גְּדוֹל* (great) for a city is rare in the Bible. Jerusalem is named “*the great city*” in the prediction of its destruction (Jeremiah 22:8). The second thing used also to describe Nineveh is that *כִּי־עָלְתָה רָעָתָם לִפְנֵי* (their wickedness has come up before the Lord). Historical and archaeological investigations help one to understand the first attribute of the city. The biblical writers shed light on the second one. Several biblical passages express the attitude of the prophets towards Nineveh and Assyrians.

Both Zephaniah and Nahum spoke against Nineveh a couple of decades before its destruction in 612 B.C. Zephaniah hints at Nineveh’s pride (2:15). According to prophet Nahum, Nineveh’s flagrant sins included plotting evil against the Lord, cruelty and plundering in war, prostitution, witchcraft and commercial exploitation (Nahum 1:11, 14; 2:11-13; 3:1,4,16,19).

The command to Jonah, “Arise, go to Nineveh”, should be heard against the background of this picture of Nineveh painted by these prophets. If God in the minds of the returning Jews punished Israel because of their sins and infidelity to him, therefore they would expect and anticipate similar, even graver punishment for a foreign wicked

nation, Assyria, which once dealt with the Jews. As such here is their time of destruction.

As a matter of fact Yahweh's instruction did not outline the forms of their wickedness. It simply states *כי-עלתה רעתם לפני* - for their wickedness has come before me. Neither the content of the cry nor the nature of the evil is specified. It could be presumed that Jonah knew their wickedness just like others around. A reader of the story for the first time would anticipate what comes next. Jonah sets out upon his journey. This verse begins with a conjunction and verb *qal* imperfect third person *ויקם*. Jonah's response is in action rather than speech. But Jonah rose *ויקם יונה* to flee to Tarshish. The word *תרשיש* is repeated three times here. The repetition at the beginning, middle, and end of this verse 3 serves as a stress emphasizing Jonah's flight in the opposite direction of Nineveh (Ceresko, 2007).

While Nineveh lay East, Tarshish, a Phoenician port in Spain, represents the farthest known point to the West. What could possibly be his intention? Additional information is given *מלפני יהוה* (fleeing - from the presence of the Lord). This phrase is used twice here. It is used at the beginning of the verse and ends the verse as well.

It is necessary to make a distinction between two possible types of God's presence in the Old Testament namely God's cultic presence which focuses on Israel's life of worship and God's structural presence which dwells on his presence everywhere in the world as a whole. Israel believed that God had graciously condescended to make his dwelling place among them in a way he has not done for other people (Exodus 33:14-16). In this sense, Yahweh's word was articulated and his will made known in Israel such as it was in no other place. As far as Yahweh's rule and authority were concerned, that was believed to be worldwide. Cain for instance went away (*מלפני יהוה*) from the presence of the Lord (Genesis 4:16). The other instances are in 2 Kings 17: 18 where God removed Israel out of his presence because the lord was very angry with them. Only the tribe of Judah remained. In 2 kings 24: 20 Judah and Jerusalem had to be thrust from God's presence because of the Lord's anger against the people.

From this understanding then, when Jonah resolves to flee from the presence of the Lord, he is not intending to cut himself off completely from God. He clearly knows from his confession in 1:9 that there is no such place (Jonah 1:12) without God's presence. When one goes out from God's cultic presence, he is entrapped more in God's structural presence that fills and defines everywhere. However, Jonah decides to sever his connections with that context where God's word and will are clearly made known, namely Israel. He seeks a place where he would not have to continue hearing the word of God commissioning him to Nineveh (Fretheim, 2000). For Griffiths (1979) the phrase could mean "*experimentally he is trying to evade the Lord (2:4), and especially running away from the dramatic stage where God is working out his purpose and judgments*" (p. 922).

Following this line of thought, Jonah's flight is not from God, but from the Word of God and in a particular way flight from articulation of the Word: *לך אל-נינבה* (Go to Nineveh). However, there is another nuance that may be present in this phrase. Prophet Elijah made reference that he stands in the presence of the Lord (1 Kings 17:1; 18:15). Jeremiah 15:19 also made use of same word. This has reference to one's readiness to

serve another (1 Kings 10:8). In Jonah's case, he does not stand, he flees. Thus, unlike Elijah he abandons his service to God. Therefore, Allen (1976) in the words of Calvin put it that Jonah puts a distance as possible between himself and the place where Yahweh revealed his word to him, *"that he might withdraw himself from the service of God"* (p. 205).

One fact is clear to Jonah that he cannot escape from God. God followed him across the sea and down to the very gate of *Sheol* (Jonah 2:1-11). The presence of God is further expressed in Jonah 2:7b-10. The word *שֶׁחַת*, pit in the Old Testament often signifies the realm of the dead. "The Pit" is the place where one goes at death (Isaiah 51:14; Psalm 30:9). It may be used synonymously with *sheol*: *"For thou dost not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit"* (Psalm 16:10). One who lives forever would never see the Pit (Psalm 49:9). Yahweh kept the soul of Hezekiah from the pit of nothingness (Isaiah 38:17). He also redeems the life from the pit (Psalm 103:4; Job 33:18; Proverb 26:27).

Jonah's descent into the underworld does not remove him from the sphere of Yahweh's action. The reading of Psalm 139:8-10 is implied here: *"if I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there; if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me"*. This line therefore, stresses and expands the action of Yahweh's deliverance already hinted in 2:3 and hoped for in 2:5.

Jonah's testimony in 2:10b functions as the conclusion of the psalm. It summarizes the message of the psalm. The term *יְשׁוּעָה* can be rendered "deliverance" or "salvation". This means salvation *"is in His power, so that He only can grant salvation"* (Keil & Delitzsch, 2006, p. 272). Jonah thus gains his perspective and clarifies his message here: *יְשׁוּעָה לַיהוָה*: Deliverance belongs to the Lord. This statement is striking and may serve as a key verse of the dialogue. This acclamation recalls Jonah's declaration in 1:9 in which Yahweh is acclaimed the maker of sea and the dry land (*אֱתֵרֵם וְאֶת־הַיָּבֵשָׁה*). While chapter 1:9 asserts Yahweh's creative power, 2:10 asserts his redemptive power. When Jonah is delivered by Yahweh, both in this verse and in 4:6, he reacts with thanksgiving and praise. However, it stands in sharp contrast to his reaction to the deliverance of Nineveh. Deliverance was offered to Jonah irrespective of his unrepentant attitude and why would it be denied to those who have actually repented. The dialogue questions the scorn and sadness exhibited at the deliverance of Assyria boorishly considered to be unworthy in contrast to the expression of praise and thanksgiving accompanying deliverance to an Israelite conceitedly considered being worthy.

Fretheim (2000) puts it this way *"his confession, 'Deliverance belongs to the Lord!' stands in brilliant incongruity to the limitation which Jonah places on the very deliverance when it comes to the Ninevites"* (p.103). In this sense then for Jonah God's deliverance should be limited and not extended to whoever he pleases. This is at the centre of the dialogue between God and Jonah: why must the wicked go unpunished. Why must the non Jews share same favour of God with the Jews? Obviously these two questions represent Jonah on one side of the dialogue. On the other side of the dialogue these questions and

answers keep going: whose duty is it to punish or forgive offence? Who made the Jew and the gentile? The choice of the Jews by God is for the sake of other nations, not necessarily that they are God's favorites. The distinction between Jew and gentile is manmade and artificial. God's deliverance, favour and mercy shine impartially on all mankind as God desires.

The good disposition of the sailors appear in sharp relief to Jonah, a supposed pious Jew. On the sea the sailors cried to their god while Jonah was deeply asleep (Jonah I: 5). They learnt from his lips during their dialogue with him that he serves the living God who made the earth and the tempestuous sea, yet he was fleeing from the same God. Only with great reluctance did they cast him into the sea which is a sharp contrast to Jonah's attitude of unwillingness to have dialogue at all with nonbelievers in 4:1-3. The dialogue criticizes Jonah's questioning of God's compassionate grace. Here Jonah, a typical Israelite, undergoes a great lesson experience on God's grace and its availability to everyone irrespective of religion, rank or nationality.

Had the sailors other viable alternatives in midst of threatening danger, they would not have thrown him overboard. The lot they cast by which means Jonah was detected as the reason for the storm was a non-Jewish prophetic insight and device that served God's intention. God in his universal nature had already before Jonah's mission and message prepared a spiritual non-Jewish method of coaxing Jonah through the sailors to advance God's plan in Nineveh. This is exceptionally remarkable for the dialogue because it stirs up our consciousness to the presence of God in the presence and availability of non-Jewish institutions, ideas, functionaries and methods in our respective cultures and traditions placed there by the universal God to advance his course and plan at the appointed time. God provides means of knowing him and serving his course in every culture. This speaks volume of the essence of inculturation and intercultural hermeneutics in biblical study to advance universalism in interpreting God's work and conception.

However, Yahweh is free in his action of deliverance. Deliverance belongs to the Lord. His ways cannot be limited by what is customary in human behavior and tradition. For Limburg (1993) if the theological significance of 1:4-16 came to focus in the confession in 1:9 with its declaration about Yahweh who creates, *"the theological centre of this scene is most clearly expressed in this statement that God delivers, rescues, saves those who call upon God in a time of trouble"* (p.71)

At this declaration, acceptance and complete obedience with its added promised fulfillment of vow already made, a new stage is set. Jonah having gained the correct universal theology and understanding changed the course of his movement, thus put an end to his problems. With this turning both in actions, thought, faith, vision, and anticipated fulfillment of promised vow, the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land *וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְדָג וַיִּקַּא אֶת־יֹנָה אֶל־הַיַּבֵּשָׁה* (1:11). Now the journey is over and Jonah's learning experience over. We can ask what could have happened if Jonah had not turned towards Yahweh when he was close to death? Could it be that Yahweh was waiting to deliver him once he turns to him? These questions and their possible

answers give us more clue to understanding the ongoing dialogue – narrow minded view of Yahweh against universal concept of God and his mercy to mankind.

The fish obediently vomited Jonah who realizes then that he could not avoid the task. He had no option but to resign himself to his faith. His experience in the belly of the fish could have done great magic to his obedience and understanding of the universality of God to all people. Moreover, it is within the fish that Jonah had close dialogue with God, on a deeper level than when he declared his faith, identity and nationality to the captain and sailors. Ramon (2007) says that *“In the course of the prophet’s maturing and development he undergoes a religious reversal: from a cerebral recognition of God as the Lord of creation, ‘who made the sea and the land’ (1:9), to an intimacy with God”* (p.3).

If Jonah’s intention was to run away from the place where God’s words were most active in Israel’s belief, then he has made a grave mistake. God’s cultic presence is not altogether absent in his structural presence. The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time saying *“Arise, go to Nineveh...”* (Jonah 3:1). The universality of God’s presence is steadily unfolding the more. His words could not only be heard in Israel but also in non Israelite nation, one adjudged as the greatest enemy of the people of God. The reader who followed Yahweh’s instruction in 1:1-3 and Jonah’s silent movement in the opposite direction would be relieved that this time he moves not far from the city and possibly from presence of God but goes into the city (וַיֵּקַל יוֹנָה לָבוֹא בַעִיר).

Some authors made speculations concerning his state of mind, his unresolved theological conflict, and his determination to fail in his prophecy. However, this passage does not tell us that, nor suggest such. There is no evidence in this context. The last verse 3:3 has it that – So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Thus he goes into the city כַּדְבַר יְהוָה (according to word of the Lord). One of the high points of the dialogue is that Jonah now obeyed the word of the Lord. It is presumed that he is working with God (standing before him in service) and working according to God’s desired goal. Obedience is the highest currency in prophetic service. When Jonah announced the message *עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וַיִּנְהַרְסוּ נִינְוֶה*, *“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overturned”*, the people of Nineveh believed in God and turned from their evil ways. As a matter of fact, the pagan Ninevites were obedient in contrast to Jonah the prophet from the ranks of the chosen people who disobeyed God and fled from his presence (Jonah 1:3). The king of Nineveh removed his royal purple, put on sack cloth and covered his head with ashes as a sign of penance. Even the animals must be part of the fasting (Menezes, 2005).

From the dialogue the message of Jonah to the people of Nineveh and all people of God becomes clearer - no time is too late for a sinner to turn to God. God desires to save all mankind. He does not desire the death of the wicked man, rather that he may turn to him and be saved (Ezekiel 18:23). God is very patient with sinners and cares for all. Limburg (1993) articulates it saying:

“As one reflects on the theological significance of this short scene, the Lord’s patience immediately comes to mind. Without exhortations, without carping or harping, the Lord

reissues the charge that was given to Jonah in the first place...Second, behind this reassignment is the Lord's urgent concern for the people of the non-Israelites world, in this case the people of Nineveh...The repeating of this assignment, unique among prophetic commissioning, hammers the point home: God cares about the peoples of the world, be they Ethiopia, Philistine." (Amos 9:7), Egyptians-or Assyrians (Isaiah 19:23-24) (p. 76).

The people of Nineveh heard the message and turned from their wicked ways. However, Jonah was not happy. Why then does Jonah again sink into bitterness and withdraws into the shade? After all, if the people of Nineveh indeed *"repented of their evil ways"* (Jonah 3:10), they apparently did not mock his reproof but respected him and his prophecy. Ramon (2007) gave the possible opinion that:

"Jonah's alienation from the public does not stem from the fact that they escaped punishment, but that their repentance was not absolute. True, the people of Nineveh left their evil ways, but not totally. Had their repentance been untarnished, Jonah would not have been troubled by the terrible prophecy going unfulfilled. He would then become a hero in the eyes of those who repented because of him. However, as it seems in this story, the mundane, everyday wickedness continued. The people of Nineveh may have ceased to murder, pillage and rape, but they persisted in the small injustices in everyday life that are due to petty and weak nature of mankind" (p. 2).

Whatever be the case, it is not the work of Jonah to judge the people if their repentance is absolute or not. Yahweh called him (*וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיָהּ כִּי־עָלְתָהּ הָעָתָם לָפָנַי*) to cry out against the wickedness which has reached his attention. Some are of the opinion that the Ninevite's repentance is a camouflage and as such short lived. Although the city's inhabitants repented, there is no evidence that their repentance did not last long, nor does evidence exist of a conversion to Yahwism (Torre, 2007). For *"God cannot judge the Assyrians by the future but only by the present, since human beings have free will to act or to change their actions. Just as Nineveh could repent, so could Israel"* (Shuchat, 2009, p.50). From conclusion in spirituality it would seem that even the animals of Nineveh had clearer understanding of repentance and obedience to Yahweh's words than the self-conceited humans who resided in Israel of Jonah's time (Torre, 2007), hence the need for the redactors of the book of Jonah to change the picture for better.

5. Conclusion

Jonah is a typical example of a written piece created by redaction critics. Redactors took up the factual narrow mindedness of the post exilic Jews and crafted a theological position of the universalism of God out of it. This is the leading power some broad minded authors of sacred literature have in making society stable by accentuating themes that promote peace, love and reciprocal acceptance of one another instead of the ones that cause war, anti-Semitism, terrorism and general hatred. Real redactors may

have done their work in producing the Hebrew scripture but every sacred scripture has its ever living redactors in its readers, interpreters, theologians and scholars. To this later group, like the authors of Jonah, falls the burden of breaking the jinx of narrow mindedness and exclusive interpretation of God's grace to humanity by any race or religion.

By interrogating, conversing and having dialogue with themes that oppose the universalism of God in listening humility to God, one is like arrogant Jonah who realized after sometime in obedience that being with God is genuine all-inclusive education itself. Universal expansion of Deuteronomic repentance theology cannot wait to be underscored if the society should have peace. A true dialogue is the practice of discovering something in cooperation with God or another person or mutually with something said or written. It is an open exercise involving many beings looking at particular things together talking, sharing views and finding out things.

Dialogue in and about sacred scripture is an ongoing process. Jonah, his heritage, the Ninevites, the sailors, the fish, the tempest, plant, worm and God are all involved in the dialogue. You are in it too, I am in it, agreement is in it, disagreement is in it, everything is in it but most importantly God is in it. It is because God is in it that brings about always the creative synthesis of opposites into fruitful harmony. Deliverance belongs to him. His ways cannot be limited by what is customary in human tradition and culture. He cares for all his creatures. No one claims monopoly over his love and grace. His divine mercy supersedes his judgment. His prophets' obedience to him is the highest currency in prophetic service. He is universal and not narrow-minded.

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