

# Jonah 1:7-9

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/jonah/jonah-1/jonah-17-9/>

*Jonah arrives on deck. The sailors cast lots to isolate the individual who is responsible for the storm. The lot falls on Jonah. The sailors ask him about his identity.*

In the previous section, Jonah received a command from the LORD to go to Nineveh. But Jonah took a ship to sail the opposite way, to Tarshish, in order to escape his mission, and seemingly in an attempt to see Assyria destroyed for its wickedness (Jonah 4:2). The LORD intervened to discipline Jonah. He hurled a mighty windstorm on the sea, causing great fear and terror among the sailors. The sailors prayed to their gods and unloaded the cargo to lighten the ship and prevent it from sinking. All this happened while Jonah was sleeping below deck. The captain aroused Jonah from his sleep and asked him to pray to his god (vv. 4–6).

Now Jonah arrived on deck and joined the prayer meeting. But as the situation worsened, the sailors believed that it was the result of divine anger at someone aboard. So, they moved from talking to their gods to talking among themselves to determine who was responsible for the misfortune. *Thus, each man said to his mate, ‘Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us.’*

The term translated as *calamity* is “ra‘ah” in Hebrew. It has a wide range of meanings, depending on the context. In verse 2, it was translated as “wickedness” and referred to moral sin such as injustice, violence, and crime (Hosea 10:15; Jeremiah 41:11). Here, however, it has to do with disaster or misfortune (Amos 3:6; Obadiah 13).

The term for *lots* refers to stones that are thrown to get a decision. In the Ancient Near Eastern world, people widely practiced lot casting because they thought the result reflected the divine will. In the Old Testament, the Israelites *cast lots* in a variety of circumstances such as to determine who would go first in an attack (Judges 20:9), to divide a land (Numbers 26:55-56) or garment (Psalm 22:18), to determine the order of the priests and their duties, etc. (1 Chronicles 24:5-19; Nehemiah 10:34). In our passage, the sailors *cast lots* to determine who was responsible for the *calamity* (Joshua 7:14). Although the casting of *lots* is normally a matter of chance, the LORD intervened and saw to it that *the lot fell on Jonah*.

Since the drawing of lots showed that *Jonah* was responsible for the storm, all eyes suddenly focused on him. The sailors asked him several questions to better evaluate the situation and come up with a plan. *They said to him, ‘Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?’* The sailors had already identified *Jonah* as the guilty person, but they did not want to do anything without allowing him to speak to confirm what the lots indicated. So, they first asked him his background.

The second question was, *what is your occupation?* The term for *occupation* has to do with someone’s business or work. Proverbs 18:9 uses the term to describe someone who is “slack in

his work” and Proverbs 22:29 uses it for someone who is “skillful” at his work. By asking this question, the sailors may have suspected that Jonah’s work displeased his god. The sailors asked him three more questions: *Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?*

In the Bible, someone’s *country* was in some sense his identity. The story of Naaman implicitly makes this assertion by associating all its leading characters with specific locales —Naaman with Syria (Aram), the maid with Israel, and Elisha with Samaria (2 Kings 5:1–19). In a similar vein, the sailors asked *Jonah* about his *country* to determine his identity.

Jonah replied to the questions by first revealing his ethnic association. He said to them, *I am a Hebrew*. The term *Hebrew* [“‘ibri”] comes from the root “‘abar,” which means to pass over or to cross over. In earlier texts in the Old Testament, some foreigners used the term *Hebrew* as a designation for the Israelites. For instance, in Genesis 39, a wealthy Egyptian named Potiphar purchased Joseph as a household servant. Potiphar enjoyed Joseph’s work and entrusted to his care everything he owned. However, the relationship of Joseph with his master changed drastically when his wife asked Joseph to sleep with her. Because Joseph refused, “she called to the men of her household and said to them, ‘See, he [her husband] has brought in a *Hebrew* to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed’” (Genesis 39:14, 17). Jonah used the same term (*Hebrew*) to show that he was one of the people of Israel.

Second, *Jonah* identified the God he served. He said, *I fear the LORD*. The term translated as *LORD* is the Hebrew word Yahweh, the covenant name of God. In the Hebrew text, it comes first in the sentence (literally, *the LORD I fear*). By placing *the LORD* first, Jonah sought to demonstrate that he knew *the LORD* and had a relationship with Him.

The verb to *fear* in this verse refers to an attitude of reverence and awe to the LORD (v. 16). It also indicates that Jonah recognizes the commands of the LORD, and further recognizes that there are real adverse consequences associated with disobeying the commands of the LORD. This is ironic in this case because Jonah says *I fear the LORD* while he is running from the LORD’s command. However, given Jonah’s reasoning in Jonah 4:2, it seems likely that Jonah’s *fear* of God includes him trusting God to judge wickedness, and he has decided that if he runs from his assigned task of preaching repentance to Nineveh, they will not be spared, but will perish. So in a sense, it could be that Jonah considers himself to be a sacrifice on behalf of his country.

Perhaps this is why Jonah seems somewhat indifferent to his own demise when he told the sailors to throw him overboard.

Jonah further described the LORD as the *God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land*. The sea and the dry land are two extremes. Jonah used them to convey the idea of totality. In other words, the LORD is the creator of everything. Both *the sea and the dry land* belong to the LORD because He made them (Genesis 1:9–10). As the cosmic, creator deity, the LORD is the God who would be able to send the storm and calm it. The *God of heaven* has the power to kill and heal, to create and destroy (Deuteronomy 32:39). He alone could see the sailors through the

storm on *the sea* and return them to *the dry land*. How great is the LORD, the God of heaven and earth!

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>7</sup> Each man said to his mate, “Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity *has struck* us.” So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup> Then they said to him, “Tell us, now! On whose account *has* this calamity *struck* us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” <sup>9</sup> He said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”