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Daniela Scialabba. Creation and Salvation: models of relationship between the God of Israel and the Nations in the book of Jonah, in Psalm 33 (MT and LXX) and the novel Joseph and Aseneth. Religions. Université de Strasbourg, 2017. English. NNT : 2017STRAK012 . tel-02954346

HAL Id: tel-02954346

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ÉCOLE DOCTORALE 270

**Equipe d'accueil de Théologie catholique et de sciences religieuses
(EA 4377)**

THÈSE présentée par :

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soutenue le : **30 novembre 2017**

pour obtenir le grade de : **Docteur de l'université de Strasbourg**

Discipline/ Spécialité : **Théologie catholique**

Creation and Salvation

**Models of Relationship between the God of Israel
and the Nations in the Book of Jonah, in Psalm
33 (MT and LXX) and in the Novel *Joseph and
Aseneth***

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*Alla mia famiglia,
Giuseppe e Graziella,
Elisa, Valentina, Emanuele e Gabriella*

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Introduction

1. The starting point of this study

The starting point of this study is the current debate on monotheism and religious pluralism. In recent decades, this debate has been strongly influenced by some authors such as Jan Assmann for whom the monotheism originating in the Old Testament is the root of the intolerance and violence of the three monotheistic religions.¹ This theory has provoked a multitude of debates among biblical scholars too. In this study, we do not wish to be concerned with Assmann's theory by justifying or challenging its basic premises, namely those which are to do with the theory that Israel developed a clear distinction between the true and the false in the sphere of religion. What seems more interesting for our study is, rather, another question: beyond the phenomena of intolerance and violence which can be attributed to biblical monotheism², one can ask: did it not also produce inclusive tendencies, ones that allow the conceiving of a positive relationship between YHWH, Israel and the non-Israelites? Following from this, what could be the theological assumptions permitting the elaboration of ideas able to justify such a relationship? What role does the idea of creation play in this process?

2. The broader scientific context

The questions we have cited have been treated, at least in part, in the studies of the development of Israel's theology in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman periods, above all in relation to the real contacts between Israelites and non-Israelites, and the gradual evolution of this relationship which was nourished by the attraction which over time Israel's faith exercised on the so-called "others".³ In this connection, the theological reflection of recent decades has been influenced by some categories which have taken hold in the exegetical debates but which, at the same time, have given rise to reservations about their sufficiency and legitimacy. Among these, it is necessary to mention the categories which have their roots in the biblical texts, such as those of election and conversion, and others, of more recent origin, such as those of particularism and universalism. In the face of this, we ask in a general way: to what degree do all these categories,

¹ See e.g. J. ASSMANN, *The Price of Monotheism*, chapter 1.

² We cite here Assmann's theory and his language without going into detail into all its problematic nature.

³ For a brief study of the problem, see e.g. J. MAIER, *Zwischen den Testamenten*, 297–299; J.J. COLLINS, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, chapter 7; see also the still worthwhile book by A.D. NOCK, *Conversion*, 61–64, and the recent monograph by M.Z. SIMKOWICH, *The Making of Jewish Universalism*, chapters 3–4.

ancient and modern, allow for the better understanding of biblical and non-biblical texts of Jewish origin? What are the debates from which these themselves originated? To what degree are these categories the bearers of concepts and prejudices which belong to more recent developments of philosophical and theological thought without their doing justice to the ideas present in the texts themselves and the circumstances in which they arose? In what way do these categories risk locking up the ancient texts in notions which are foreign to them and which, in the final analysis, reflect elements which Christian theology developed in more recent times?

In fact, the debate of recent decades has shown some scruples about employing these categories without a critical spirit. In this regard, for example, we cite the two categories of “particularism” and “universalism” which both go back to the period of the Enlightenment.⁴ These categories turn out to be inadequate by virtue of the fact that they are part of more general theories about the history of the development of the Jewish and/or Christian religions. In particular, the latter was conceived of as universal right from its beginnings, while Judaism was supposed to have known strong particularist tendencies which Christianity overcame. Thus, one understands how the two categories, “particularism” and “universalism”, imply a valuation: a universalistic religion would transcend the limits of a certain ethnocentrism, that is, of the specific traditions and particular religious history of a people. Religious particularism, on the other hand, would be associated with exclusivist tendencies and phenomena of intolerance. Because of the problematic nature of these categories, we ask, therefore, if they bear misleading preconceptions and if they are really suitable for an adequate enquiry into the biblical texts and/or the texts developed in the Jewish *milieu* of the Hellenistic-Roman period. Finally, it is not to be taken for granted that these generic categories are the *passe-partout* for texts which often present facets and realities that are a good deal more complex.

Mutatis mutandis, although the categories of election and conversion have biblical roots⁵, they cannot be applied *tout court* as pre-set concepts to texts in which they do not appear explicitly. There is a particular risk in speaking of the election of Israel as a category opposed *a priori* to those tendencies which allow us to conceive of a reciprocal relationship between the God of Israel and the non-Israelites.⁶ Doing this would create a real opposition between election

⁴ For a more detailed study of the problems dealt with in this paragraph, see e.g. the following articles: U. RÜTERSWORDEN, art. “Universalismus/Partikularismus. II. AT”, 774–775; J. BLENKINSOPP, “Yahweh and Other Deities. Conflict and Accommodation in the Religion of Israel”, 360–361; J.S. KAMINSKY, “Election Theology and the Problem of Universalism”, 35–39.

⁵ See e.g. F.A. SPINA, *The Faith of the Outsider*; V. HAARMANN, *JHWH-Verehrer der Völker*.

⁶ See F.A. SPINA, *The Faith of the Outsider*, 6: “God did not choose Israel in order to preserve Israelites while condemning all others. That is not the way either election or exclusion works in the Old Testament. Israel was not chosen to keep everyone else out of God’s fold; Israel was chosen to make it

and those tendencies of openness to the “others”.⁷ Such an opposition, however, is not in harmony with the biblical texts in which the theme of election is mentioned; on the contrary, it does not seem impossible for the biblical authors to reconcile the election of Israel with the approach of others to the faith of Israel (e.g. Isa 14:1).

With regard to the category of conversion, it should be noted first of all that the use of this word has no equivalent in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Hence, there is actually no technical term to designate the conversion of non-Israelites to the God of Israel.⁸ In fact, where the verb שׁוּב, for example, has a religious connotation, it refers mainly to those Israelites who “return” to their God after being separated from him (e.g. Hos 6:1; Amos 4:6, 8–11). Or else, it is employed in relation to God who changes his decision about a punishment to inflict on those who have made themselves guilty before him (e.g. Jonah 3:10; Joel 2:14). However, it is unquestionable that, in some texts of the Hebrew Bible and the so-called intertestamental literature, there is mention of the cases of non-Israelites entering into a close relationship with the God of Israel. In this connection, one asks if the concept of conversion is an adequate common denominator with which to encompass all these examples of a positive relationship between non-Israelites and the God of Israel to which scholars refer. Thus, we ask, for example, if a so-called “conversion” necessarily implies inclusion within the people of Israel? If the answer is positive, would this also involve the observance of the Law for those who are not Israelites by birth? Finally, would conversion to the God of Israel be translated into the exclusion of every other cult? To give a concrete example, could one speak of a case of conversion when the Aramaean official Naaman recognises that there is no God in all the earth except the God of Israel (2 Kgs 5:15) since he asks the prophet Elisha’s permission to be able to prostrate himself at the same time in the temple of Rimmon (2 Kgs 5:18)?⁹ Clearly, the answer to this question depends on the idea one has of “conversion”. It is for this reason that, in recent decades, scholars have sought to differentiate more neatly among the various categories of those non-Israelites

possible for everyone else eventually to be included. Remember that YHWH selected Abraham and Sarah in the first place for the express purpose of blessing *all the families of the earth* (Gen. 12:3).”

⁷ For a more thorough study of the implications of election, especially the relationship between election and behaviour towards non-Israelites, see e.g. J.S. KAMINSKY, “Did Election Imply the Mistreatment of Non-Israelites?” 398–399.

⁸ For a brief survey of the Hebrew and Greek vocabulary concerning this topic, see D. SCIALABBA, “The Vocabulary of Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth and in the Acts of the Apostles”, 502–504.

⁹ For this text, see e.g. F.A. SPINA, *The Faith of the Outsider*, 86.

who seem to display “sympathy” toward the people of Israel, its way of life and its God.¹⁰ These studies have led to employing the category of conversion *tout court* only with great caution.

The situation of research at the beginning of the third millennium allows us to examine in depth and in various ways the themes we have mentioned. For example, we could ask about the legitimacy of the traditional categories and seek to differentiate them better or to fine-tune them according to the historical and literary data.¹¹ Another approach would consist in investigating the historical evolution of these phenomena by tracing their various stages and influences. Yet another approach could even be occupied with the reciprocal relations between the Hellenistic-Roman historico-cultural sphere and the society in which some non-Israelites ‘sympathised’ in some ways with the Jewish world and its religion.

3. The scope of the present study

Far from going in the direction of one of the approaches just mentioned or examining the historical research into the relationships between the non-Israelites and the Jewish communities in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, our work is aimed at looking into the *theological principles motivating and supporting the possibility of an approach by individuals and peoples to the God of Israel*. With this aim, our objective is to analyse some texts where the relationship between YHWH, Israel and the non-Israelites is examined. In particular, our analysis will deal with two Old Testament texts, the book of Jonah and Psalm 33, and an intertestamental text belonging to the Hellenistic-Jewish literature, the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*. Through the analysis of and exegetical comment on these texts, our study aims at understanding their position towards those who, although not Israelites by birth, come to know and/or find a relationship with the God professed by the people of Israel. The present study looks at three texts of different genres, periods and provenance in order to observe what ideas and theological themes they adopt in order to speak of the relationship between YHWH, Israel and the non-Israelites. In this way, we shall seek to identify the common ideas in the texts and to study how each text intended to present them in order to provide possible theological concepts for the argument.

For a first step, then, we shall investigate how the book of Jonah, with its didactic message, places both the sailors and the Ninevites before the message which God sends to each of them

¹⁰ For seven different categories and a large number of examples quoted in the Hebrew Bible, in the intertestamental literature and in non-Jewish texts, see S.J.D. COHEN, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew”, *passim*.

¹¹ See the approach of S.J.D. COHEN, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew”; D.L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER, “Between Esdra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion of the ‘Foreigner’ in Post-Exilic Biblical Theology”, *passim*.

through his prophet and how all the characters in the story react in their relations to one another. In this connection, it will be our aim to identify and analyse the key theological *motifs* implied by the text and to investigate how coherent they are and how warranted by the narrative frame in which they are presented. Even if some questions remain open on account of the enigmatic character of certain passages, it seems interesting to point out and scrutinise two aspects: the *motifs* of creation and the mercy of God which, on close examination, constitute the threads with which the whole narrative is woven.

In a second stage, we shall look at Psalm 33 (MT and LXX). It is a hymn and so presents its arguments not through a narrative or a more or less clear allusion to historical facts or precise biblical episodes; rather, in it, the theme of the relationship between God and the nations is established according to more general ideas and principles which refer explicitly to the theme of YHWH as creator and Lord of history and as one who is merciful to those who trust in him. In this connection, we shall indicate particularly the implications of these themes in relation to all those who dwell on the earth and who are called on to fear and trust in YHWH.

In the third step of this study, we shall examine some passages we think important in *Joseph and Aseneth*. In its account of the story of the transformation of Aseneth who from being a pagan, repents in order to embrace the Jewish faith in full, it constitutes an example of a narrative in which there emerge on several occasions some fundamental *theologumena* of Israel's creed which the author uses to give theological legitimacy to the fact that a foreigner not only can have access to the salvation prepared by God for his people in the beginning but that, by becoming the wife of Joseph, she will have a not unimportant role for the descent of this people in the future. The aim of our enquiry in this case will once again be that of investigating exegetically those concepts and principles which the text adopts so that the prayer of a foreign woman who wishes to embrace the Jewish faith and her repentance can be accepted by the God of the patriarchs and by those who have been called to follow him right from the beginning.

It is our view that the combined analysis of these three texts will offer new perspectives for understanding how the relationship between God and the non-Israelites matured in the development of Israel's theology and with regard to its relationship with its God. In this way, the present study is an example of research which, by bringing together three different texts, aims to identify some central theological considerations which, although formulated differently in the respective texts, lie at the basis of a theology which seeks to conceive of a positive relationship between God and the non-Israelites. In this respect, we shall pay particular attention to the possible models of relationship which each text offers.

4. Methodological approach

a) The book of Jonah

The starting point of the present study will be the analysis and exegesis of chapters 1, 3 and 4 of the book of Jonah. As has been said, this analysis aims to investigate the text starting from the question as to the way in which it delineates the dynamic of the relationships between Israel, God and the nations. In this connection, we must clarify immediately that, even if our analysis is carried out carefully on the basis of a reading as close as possible to the text, it is not our business here to provide a systematic commentary on the book of Jonah as a whole. Thus, we shall not be considering chapter 2, and in particular, the so-called “Psalm of Jonah” (Jonah 2:3–10) since it is our belief that, in the overall scheme of the book, it is not an important passage for answering our basic question. The analysis of the chapters examined will be carried out on the basis of a “close-reading” of the Hebrew text which will make use of all the important grammatical and philological observations on the Hebrew text and take into consideration the narrative characteristics of the account. We do not aim to provide a criticism of the sources or to investigate the literary strata which such research could hypothesise; rather, we intend to take the text just as it is, in its final Masoretic redaction, in order to understand how it established the basic ideas concerning the theological concept of Israel regarding its relationship with the nations. It is clear that the text of Jonah is distinguished from others by its parabolic character; it has no interest in transmitting historical facts. Rather, the genre of the book is close to what could be described as a didactic narrative. In this way, as will be indicated in the introduction to the book in question, which will mention the main matters belonging to the composition of the text, the book of Jonah is not a linear account which presents events in a definite chronology and furnishes precise and exhaustive information on the change of places or scenes or characters. Therefore, working precisely from its didactic character, we shall seek to understand better the fundamental message which the text intends to transmit by focusing our attention on some questions which are often neglected by exegetical studies on the book of Jonah, even by recent commentaries, or which have been interpreted according to concepts which seem problematic today, as we have seen above, for example, “conversion” or “universalism”. In particular, we shall consider some aspects which in our opinion are of decisive importance for a better understanding of the status of the non-Israelites within this account in relation to Israel and its God. In this way, this study will be especially concerned to investigate the implications of the vows and sacrifices which the sailors offer to YHWH at the end of chapter 1; the “believing” of the Ninevites in chapter 3; the difference between the sailors’ “fearing” and the

Ninevites' "believing"; "God's seeing", as well as the vocabulary of mercy in chapter 4 and the interweaving of discourses and actions in it. Investigation into these elements will allow us to reconsider the book of Jonah by throwing new light on those aspects which have sometimes entangled its interpretation in conventional schemes such as that which offers a vision of the person of Jonah as a negative type of the Judaism of his time.¹²

b) Psalm 33 (MT and LXX)

The second text examined is Psalm 33. This psalm will help us to understand better how a poetic-hymnological composition intended to establish some theological ideas which gravitate around the question of God's action on the cosmos and his relation with all humanity of which Israel is a part. In a first stage, our exposition will focus on providing some guidelines which locate the psalm within the panorama of existing studies on the psalter. In this connection, we shall not fail to highlight that the interpretation of Psalm 33, above all, that developed in the course of the twentieth century, was largely influenced by *Formgeschichte* and its ramifications. We shall thus seek to throw new light on some characteristics proper to the psalm which, rather than having been read in a more universal interpretative key, which the text provides on several occasions, have been pigeon-holed, sometimes in a highly arguable way, for example, in a liturgical *Sitz im Leben* proper to Israel. This has prevented the studies from taking account of some important characteristics of the psalm which, instead, does not, for example, give any clear and explicit reference to Israel and its history. In this connection, it will be our business to try to understand what human qualities this composition is addressing and if it is treating solely of Israel. After presenting Psalm 33 within the framework of existing exegetical studies, we shall look first at the Masoretic Text followed by an interpretative reading of each verse taking account of the theological development of the psalm which we think to be unitary. In this connection, in fact, it will seem appropriate to consider the elements which figure in it within the overall frame of the theological ideas which structure the composition as a whole, giving it a harmonious hymnological shape, despite its superficial alphabetical structure. For this reason it will be necessary to study in detail some distinctive elements of Psalm 33, above all those of mercy and creation which play a role of fundamental importance for understanding to what degree and why all the people on earth are being called on to fear YHWH and trust in his יְהוָה. In relation to the latter, we shall not neglect to try to understand the significance which

¹² See e.g. W.H. VAN WIJK-BOS, "No Small Thing: The 'Overturning' of Nineveh in the Third Chapter of Jonah", 218–219, who argues against such an understanding of the book of Jonah and the prophet.

the macarism in verse 12 assumes in the entire structure of the psalm. In addition, we shall compare the Masoretic Text of the whole psalm with that of the LXX which is characterised by some considerable differences precisely in relation to the main themes just mentioned. In the last step of our analysis, we shall look at all the important variants in the LXX so as to highlight how the universal stamp of the psalm is further confirmed by the oldest translation of the Hebrew Psalm text.

c) The novel "Joseph and Aseneth"

Joseph and Aseneth is an intertestamental novel belonging to Hellenistic-Jewish literature. Taking its cue from the hints in Gen 41:45, it develops the story of how the patriarch Joseph ends up marrying Aseneth, an Egyptian young woman, daughter of Pentephres, priest of On. The present study will consider especially the first part of the text, namely, chapters 1 to 29, which tell of the story of the meeting of Joseph and the pagan Aseneth. This is the starting point for a process of profound transformation in the woman which will lead her to abandon her idolatrous behaviour and embrace the faith in the God of Israel alone. It is clear that by developing the story of the change in Aseneth, the novel is concerned with the question of the adhering of non-Israelites to faith in the God of Israel and so, probably, of the relations which these maintained or were able to maintain with the community which professed a membership that was ethnic as well as cultic. Thus, it seems that the example of Aseneth, taken as a model by the narrator, could constitute a paradigmatic example of a pagan who has become a believer in the God of Joseph. This is because, on the one hand, she will have a certain importance in the story of the future Israel on account of her marriage with Joseph; on the other hand, the story of the two spouses is ascribed to the patriarchal period in which the prescriptions concerning new converts to the God of Israel play no role since the Sinai covenant and all the regulations required by the gift of the Torah are actually still non-existent. The novel, therefore, allows the placing of the story of the transformation of a pagan to the worship of the God of Joseph, outside every legal restriction in order to go still further and thus to present some theological ideas which would give not only legitimacy but also desirability to a foreigner's adhering to the Jewish faith.

After all the preliminary questions which will allow us briefly to situate the text of *Joseph and Aseneth* in a basic historico-literary framework, our analysis will investigate the text, interpreting some passages chosen in order to observe how this writing tackles the question of the relationship between God, the foreigners and the Jewish community of which Aseneth and Joseph are the respective representative models. In relation to this, therefore, there will be a

careful reading of some passages of the novel which, taking account of the vocabulary employed, will examine all the important stages of the process of the maiden's transformation: starting off as pagan, she ends up in rejecting the gods of Egypt to which she had been devoted exclusively in order to worship the God of Joseph alone. To this end, we shall examine especially those elements which determine Aseneth's 'religious' status both before and after her radical change, paying attention, first, to those conditions which constitute an obstacle to getting close to Joseph and so to his God; then, the conditions which allow these obstacles to be overcome for the girl to address the God of Joseph as that creator God who gives pardon to all who call upon him.

The text will be analysed using a 'close-reading' approach which will permit us, moreover, to identify those biblical *topoi* which occur on several occasions in the novel and which characterise Aseneth's language, above all when she addresses the God of Joseph in her long prayer. As we shall see, Aseneth is presented as a non-Israelite who is calling on this God as creator God and merciful God. In this connection, it seems important to stress that our research is a sort of *novum* in the panorama of existing studies on *Joseph and Aseneth*. In fact, even if, since the nineteen fifties until the present day, this novel has increasingly recalled the attention of specialists, who have been occupied with it in various ways, there still exist few works which are concerned to comment in detail on some central passages of the text. Above all, an exegesis of the novel must take into consideration those passages which record the principal steps in the transformation of Aseneth, the theological concepts alluded to, and also what is not said in the text.

d) The final conclusions of this study

The final conclusions will contain a summary of the main results obtained from the analysis of each text. We shall also highlight the common ideas which the texts present in order to show how, in these texts, Israel conceived the models of relation between God, Israel and the nations. Finally, we shall seek to note how the important ideas and theological concepts in Jonah, Psalm 33 and *Joseph and Aseneth* return to a certain degree in contemporaneous or later texts in which similar questions arise the responses to which are open to new horizons. In this connection, there will be a brief presentation of some passages in which the question of the relationship between God, Israel and the other peoples is taken up again: Pseudo-Philo, *On Jonah*; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* (XX, §§ 34–48), and Wisdom of Solomon 11:23–26.

Chapter 1: The Book of Jonah

1. Introduction: preliminary observations and starting point for our exegesis

a) The importance of the book of Jonah for our study

The story is structured around four principal poles of interest: God, who sends his prophet to Nineveh; Jonah who, first of all, flees and, then, obeys God's command; the rescue of the sailors from the storm and the adherence of the Ninevites to Elohim; and the idea of a creator God who is merciful in his dealings with his creatures.

Both for the originality of its content and for its style, the book of Jonah stands out as a unique text. There are certainly weak points which the contemporary scholar has still to tackle today in the historical-critical sphere, above all the lack of certain information about date, place, authorship and purpose of composition. Despite these, however, the book of Jonah is a particularly valuable example both from the literary point of view (for the wealth of alliteration, assonance, merisms and plays on words together with its ironical character) and from the point of view of its contents.¹ The book's theological tendencies touch on various themes of capital importance for the faith of Israel such as, for example, the presentation of YHWH as a creator God; the vocation of the prophet; the religious attitudes of non-Israelites and their relationship to the God of Israel; and, finally, the relationship between God's justice and his mercy.

In our study, we shall seek particularly to investigate how the dialectic between so-called universalism and particularism is highlighted in this text, specifically in relation to the question of the salvation of non-Israelites. In this connection, we shall attempt to see how the book of Jonah enters into this debate and to understand what theological conclusions it reaches in the light of the narrative. Through our analysis of the text, we shall ask what is the fundamental message which the author wishes to communicate with regard to the pertinent theme of the salvation of the nations: can there exist for Israel a salvation for non-Israelites *tout court*? Are their conditions for obtaining it? More concretely, is the book of Jonah speaking of a conversion of the sailors and the Ninevites to the only God? If so, what kind of conversion does it have in mind? What are the differences between 'cradle' Jews and foreigners who adhere to YHWH or to Elohim? What is the value of the religious practices described in this book? What is the author's intention?

¹ Cf., for example, E. ZENGER (ED.), *Introduzione all'Antico Testamento*, 827: "Il libro di Giona si differenzia da tutti gli altri libri della profezia [...] esso non presenta il messaggio di un profeta, bensì il racconto su un profeta, sull'istruzione ricevuta da questo profeta da parte di JHWH". For the style, cf., for example, J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 27.

After the treatment of some questions relevant to the historical-literary composition of the book (above all, the problems of the date of composition and the literary genre), we shall focus on certain linguistic and narrative features which can shed more light on the above-mentioned questions. In other words, our approach to the book of Jonah consists of a close reading of the text, taking into consideration its syntactical, narrative and terminological features, including the gaps of information and possible ruptures. This will be followed by an exegetical and theological reflection on the elements we have treated with the aim of elaborating a deeper reflection on the message of the book and, more specifically, on the implications regarding the relations between God, Israel and the nations as they are presented in the text.

However, this study does not pretend to be an exhaustive analysis of the parts of the book examined or to be a systematic commentary on the book of Jonah as a whole. For this reason, independently of whether it belonged to the redaction of the book from the very beginning or not,² the so-called “Psalm of Jonah” (Jonah 2:1–10), will not feature among the objects of our analysis because it does not seem to have a close connection with those points which this study is intended to address. Moreover, we do not intend to give a systematic treatment of four aspects of the exegetical sphere: 1. a possible dependence of the book of Jonah on Jeremiah, particularly Jer 18:7–8³; 2. the relationship of the book of Jonah to the other books of the Twelve Prophets, especially the book of Nahum⁴; 3. the debate about the possible literary strata⁵; 4. and, finally, the rhetorical and stylistic analysis of the book to which recent research⁶ has devoted its attention.⁷ However, where necessary, for a better understanding of the elements being considered from time to time, reference will be made to those publications which deal with the subjects in question.

The basic choice behind our analysis of the book of Jonah will have as its aim, rather, that of putting questions to the text as it has been received in its final Masoretic redaction,⁸ posing

² For this problem, in addition to the commentaries, cf., for example, the monograph of H.J. OPGEN-RHEIN, *Jonapsalm und Jonabuch*.

³ See e.g. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 146, and the critical remarks by D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 433: “But sharing of concepts is not the same as a dependency of concepts.”

⁴ See the observations on this issue in the recent commentary by P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 63–64.

⁵ For such an approach, cf., for example, P. WEIMAR, *Eine Geschichte voller Überraschungen*, 107–158.

⁶ For a summary on the state of research on the book of Jonah, cf, for example, K. M. CRAIG JR, “Jonah in Recent Research”, 97-118; C. LICHTERT, “Un siècle de recherche à propos de Jonas”, 192–214. 330–354; K. SPRONK, “Het boek Jona: Een overzicht van het recente onderzoek”, 1–22.

⁷ Cf., for example, P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*; D.M. GUNN, D.N. FEWELL, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 129–146; C. LICHTERT, *Traversée du récit de Jonas*; id., “Par terre et par mer! Analyse rhétorique de Jonas”; A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*; P. WEIMAR, *Eine Geschichte voller Überraschungen*.

⁸ The Hebrew text is quoted from the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*.

those particular questions which, as mentioned already above, concern the relations between God, Israel and the non-Israelites and which constitute the guidelines of our exegesis. Despite our preference for the Masoretic Text, here and there, where necessary, we cite other textual traditions such as the LXX.

In order not to lose sight of the literary unity of the book, it seems appropriate in what follows to give a brief summary of the contents.

b) A brief summary of the book of Jonah and the consequences for our study

The story begins *in medias res*, without giving any information as to what has gone before⁹: YHWH commands Jonah to go and prophesy against Nineveh because of its wickedness (Jonah 1:1). In the face of such a command, Jonah flees “far away from him, getting into a ship heading for Tarshish” (Jonah 1:3). However, God rouses a mighty storm which throws the crew into such great terror that each sailor calls on his own god. Jonah, instead, goes down into the lowest part of the ship and falls asleep. The captain wakens him and urges him to pray to his God. Meanwhile, the crew throw lots to discover the reason for their misfortune, and the lot falls on Jonah. After replying to the sailors’ questions about his identity, Jonah suggests his being thrown into the sea as a solution to the raging of the tempest. The sailors make a further attempt to reach dry land but, when they do not succeed, pray to YHWH, the God of Jonah, not to blame them for the prophet’s death. He is then thrown into the sea. Immediately afterwards, the sea is calm and the sailors offer sacrifices and make vows in honour of YHWH.

God wills that Jonah is swallowed by a huge fish in whose stomach he remains for three days. From there, the prophet addresses a long prayer to God and, on the third day, the whale vomits him on to dry land. After Jonah is thus set free, the second part of the story begins. Here, the scene shifts. YHWH addresses Jonah a second time and orders him to go to Nineveh to deliver his message. Jonah goes to Nineveh where he announces that the city will be destroyed in forty days. Faced with this announcement, the Ninevites believe God, fasting and repenting. Even their king puts on garments of mourning and, hoping that God will change his mind, decrees that men and animals put on garments of mourning and call on Him loudly, being converted from their wicked behaviour. Seeing their deeds, God decides to spare the city. In the face of the mercy shown by YHWH, Jonah is angry to the point of desiring death. While he is sitting facing east to see what would happen to the city, God causes a castor-oil plant to grow over his head, and this pleases him very much. However, the following dawn, God commands

⁹ For this phenomenon, cf. A. NICCACCI, “Syntactic Analysis of Jonah”, 31; A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*, 96.

a worm to dry it up, followed by a sweltering wind. Feeling bad, Jonah wishes for death. In the face of the prophet's anger over the death of the plant, YHWH vindicates the legitimacy of his compassion in his dealings with all those who dwell in Nineveh in so far as they are his creatures.

On a first level of reading, the story of Jonah would seem to have no need of a particular study. In fact, the events recounted appear to be well connected with one another. However, the elliptical style of the book is notable straight away. One asks, for example, what is the *dénouement* of the sailors' story after they have escaped the storm and offered their sacrifices to YHWH (Jonah 1:16). In this connection, how can one describe more clearly their relationship with YHWH? The same goes for the Ninevites: on the one hand, the text states that they believed in Elohim (Jonah 3:5); on the other hand, we do not know whether this adhering to the faith of Jonah is a temporary choice or whether it would be lasting and continued with the formation of a believing community.

In the light of even just these two enigmatic features of the text, we are aware of the need for a more careful exegesis of the narrative. This must not overlook another fundamental element of the text which concerns the juxtaposition of the two narrative parts, giving rise to the question: how to explain the order of the two elements of the narrative, that is, the storm episode and the reaction of the Ninevites to Jonah's message? Has the first episode to be understood as an introduction or a prelude to the second? Do the two episodes complete each other and, if so, what is the specific message of each?

Before entering into these questions, it is necessary to make another observation: how can one explain that the book of Jonah has no specific historical references and the narrative seems to refer more to fictitious events than to real ones? The language too, simple and flat, is far from typically prophetic speech. In this connection, it is notable that the book of Jonah contains only one speech uttered directly by the prophet, and this consists of a few words (Jonah 3:4). Moreover the absence of a title and an explicit date means that it is a much debated text with regard to the authorship of the book, its literary genre, the sources employed by the author and the purpose for which it was written.

In the two paragraphs that follow, we shall attempt a brief presentation of some historical-literary aspects which, even if disputed, will help the reader to contextualise the text in its complexity according to the latest opinions and studies. However, we do not propose to undertake

an exhaustive *status quaestionis*,¹⁰ merely to record, in brief, the positions shared by the majority of recent scholars as to the date of composition and the literary genre of the book.

c) *Date of composition*

One of the points most discussed among scholars is the date of composition of the book of Jonah. Indeed, in this connection, by contrast with the other prophetic books which record in their *incipit* at least a clue (for example, the mention of one or more kings of Israel or Judah, cf. Isa 1:1; Jer 1:2; Hos 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic 1:1, Zeph 1:1), the text does not provide any chronological indication or any precise historical reference. Thus, an important element is missing from which to deduce at least a *terminus a quo* of the redaction.

However, the narrative offers some features which, on the one hand, could lead to the assumption of its historicity whereas, on the other hand, there are various other elements that can only be understood as fictional. In fact, to speak of cities as important as Joppa, Tarshish and Nineveh, the places where the action takes place, would seem to give the text an historical hue.¹¹ Moreover, “Jonah, son of Amittai”, mentioned in Jonah 1:1 as the one to whom YHWH addresses the message to be carried to Nineveh, would seem to be an allusion to the prophet cited in 2 Kgs 14:24 who lived under Jeroboam II, king of Israel (783–743), under whom the Northern kingdom reached its apogee. In reality, a more careful examination of the text shows that we cannot take into consideration a dating which is based on the identification of these two figures. In our book, in fact, nothing is said in detail regarding the person and origins of Jonah who remains, precisely, a mysterious character.¹² In particular, there is no explicit information in the text which leads to the historical identification of the protagonist of the book of Jonah with the prophet of the VIII century since nothing is said about his background or the historical period in which he lives.¹³ Furthermore, precisely in relation to his mission, there is no account

¹⁰ In this connection, cf., for example, K.M. CRAIG JR, “Jonah in Recent Research”, 97–118.

¹¹ Cf., for example, P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 67.

¹² For this, L ALONSO SCHÖKEL, J.L. SICRE DÍAZ, *Profetas*, II, 1007, already draw the conclusion: “Pero, por muy en boga haya estado la interpretación histórica, debemos abandonarla”; cf. also P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 68. However, even among recent commentators one finds those who continue to defend the historicity of the events recounted. Cf. D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 440.

¹³ In this connection, we refer to some details cited by E. EYNIKEL, “The book of Jonah and the parable of the prodigal son”, 124: “In 2 Kgs 14:25: Jonah is a prophet of salvation for Israel and a prophet of doom for the enemies of Israel, the Aramaeans. Further in 2 Kings 14, Jonah is a prophet whose prophecy is fulfilled. The reader of Jonah has certain expectations when reading the book of Jonah: he expects that Jonah will act similarly but Jonah does not act at all like the Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25: his prophecies do not imply salvation for Israel and his words (Jonah 3:4) are not fulfilled, at least not as Jonah would have desired (see Jonah 4:2). This means that the most important points of

of the call which qualifies Jonah explicitly to be a prophet in the manner, for example, of Jeremiah (Jer 1) or Isaiah (Isa 6). Finally, by contrast with the Jonah mentioned in 2 Kgs 14, the protagonist of our text is not even described explicitly as נָבִיא, a term which never appears throughout the book.¹⁴ Jonah's prophetic mission is inferred only from the context.

Moreover, the book lacks clear references allowing us to identify the movements and to place the events recounted in such a way as to be able to situate them in a precise space and time: we do not know, for example, the details of Jonah's itinerary, the kind of fish which swallowed him, the name of the Assyrian king who accepted his message, and the type of sin with which the Ninevites were tainted.¹⁵ Finally, the exaggerations and the unlikely events described support the thesis that the author of Jonah is not intending to offer a work of historiography but rather a narrative that is beyond knowable history.¹⁶ In this connection, for example, we can mention some elements: Jonah swallowed by a huge marine animal, remaining in its stomach for three days and three nights; the description of the city of Nineveh which seems to be presented as considerably larger than was really the case;¹⁷ and the huge plant which appeared, grew and withered in a single day. In the light of these elements too, we can easily state that the events recounted do not provide sure criteria allowing us to deduce conclusions or approximations concerning the date of the book, not even establishing a *terminus a quo* for it.

To date the book, or, at least, to situate it on a more specific temporal axis, scholars prefer to use other criteria, such as for example, linguistic ones. Whether it is a question of linguistic elements to be attributed to the influence of Aramaic or whether such phenomena are due to the evolution of the Hebrew language in itself,¹⁸ it is certain that we encounter in the book of Jonah

connection between 2 Kgs 14:25 and the book of Jonah are not the similarities between the two but the contrasts".

¹⁴ Cf. also D.M. GUNN, D.N. FEWELL, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 129.

¹⁵ Cf. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 100; P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 68.

¹⁶ Cf. B.S. CHILDS, "Jonah – A study in OT Hermeneutics", 60: "We learn from our critical analysis that the events recorded are not historical ... At this point it is crucial for us in our exegetical method to realise that this judgment in no way eliminates the reality of the biblical witness." J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 22.

¹⁷ Cf. E. EYNIKEL, *Jonah*, 1147: "...the diameter of Nineveh was never more than five kilometres on the longest side and not a 'three day's walk' (3:3)". For the treatment of this subject, see the following paragraphs.

¹⁸ Since the 1960s, the importance of so-called Aramaisms for dating biblical texts has been much debated; see already W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 329–330. For the dating of the book of Jonah on the basis of Aramaisms, cf. L.C. ALLEN, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 186–188, who takes a critical stance. For some minor observations allowing us to situate the Hebrew of the book of Jonah better between the so-called categories of Classical Biblical Hebrew and Late Biblical

words and expressions that are attested only in late texts. The initial phrase (Jonah 1:1), for example, is a formula which usually introduces an oracle and is already found in other texts. It is associated, in particular, with Exilic or post-Exilic usage.¹⁹ Moreover, some words are found only in texts like Daniel and Ezra, for example the verb עָשָׂה “plan” (Jonah 1:6; Dan 6:4) and the substantive דָּבָר “decree” (Jonah 3:7; Ezra 4:19; 5:3.9.13.17; Dan 3:10.29).²⁰ However, once again, it is necessary to recognise that the linguistic criterion does not solve everything relating to the dating of the book and that, furthermore, in the absence of other criteria, scholars prefer to locate the book over a wider period of time, that is, establishing the date on an axis of time which goes from the late Persian period to the beginning of the Hellenistic period.²¹ In any case, it seems that the book existed already at the beginning of the II century B. C. In fact, in the context of the so-called Praise of the Fathers, the book of Sirach mentions the 12 prophets (Sir 49:10^{LXX} and manuscript B). If the book of Jonah was actually among these, we could conclude that the beginning of the II century B.C. constitutes the *terminus ante quem* of its composition.²² This conclusion could be confirmed by another text which mentions the prophet Jonah explicitly: the book of Tobit which was probably available already in the II century B.C. and which cites the message of Jonah (Tob 14:4.8).²³

d) *The problem of the literary genre*

The variety of material which flows into the text, for example, the miraculous elements, the psalm of thanksgiving (chapter 2), and the argument between God and Jonah (chapter 4), has led scholars to differ greatly about the literary genre of the book of Jonah.²⁴ In fact, from time to time, the mythological character of some of the things narrated (the fish, the size of Nineveh, the plant which grows and withers in a day), the closeness of certain narrative *motifs* to those

Hebrew, see e.g. T. MURAOKA, “A case of diglossia in the book of Jonah?”; S. SCHORCH, “Vielleicht wird der Herr doch gnädig sein!”, 462.

¹⁹ J.-L. SKA, “Jonah, or Conversion in the Offing”, 249, nota 3: “The formula occurs only once in the Book of Isaiah (Isa 38:4, in a narrative). In Jeremiah it appears 23 times, in Ezekiel 50 times. We do not find it in former, pre-exilic prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Micah and the first Isaiah. The formula is typically exilic or post-exilic.”

²⁰ For other examples, cf., for example, the commentaries of J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 22–23; J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 29; S.P. CARBONE, G. RIZZI, *Aggeo, Gioele, Giona, Malachia*, 219–220.

²¹ Cf. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 78: “For the time being we can do no more than say that a date in the early Hellenistic period is slightly more probable than one in the late Persian era”; E. ZENGER (ED.), *Introduzione all’Antico Testamento*, 832–833. However, other authors place the book of Jonah in a less precise period of time, for example, J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 29: “postexilic period”.

²² Thus L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, J.L. SICRE DÍAZ, *Profetas*, II, 1011.

²³ See e.g. W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 330.

²⁴ In addition to the commentaries, for example, J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 22–26, see also C. LICHTERT, “A propos de Jonas”, *passim*; E. EYNIKEL, “Jonah and the parable of prodigal son”, 122–138.

in the story of the prophet Elijah (1 Kgs 17:19)²⁵, and the author's satirical tone²⁶ have led scholars to class it as a legend or as a midrash, a novella or a satire, or again as a parable.²⁷ On the one hand, each of these classifications undoubtedly displays one or another aspect of the text, on the other hand, each turns out to be totally limited.²⁸ What seems important, rather, to highlight is that, beyond a certain description of its literary genre on which agreement appears impossible, the book shows a pedagogic character. For this reason, one can speak in general of a "didactic narrative".²⁹ In fact, as already asserted by Lods,³⁰ in telling the story of Jonah, the author wishes to pass on a teaching. In this regard, we reserve the right to draw some more detailed conclusions at the end of our analysis of the book.

2. Exegetical analysis

In this section of the study, we shall concern ourselves with analysing chapters 1, 3 and 4, examining in detail those literary and theological aspect which are of central importance for our research. In particular, it is necessary to study the dialogues between Jonah and the other *dramatis personae* and the attitude of the latter in their dealings with Jonah, on the one hand, and with YHWH, on the other (Jonah 1). In a second stage, we shall analyse the reaction of the Ninevites to the message of disaster announced by Jonah (Jonah 3), and, finally, we shall examine the dialogue between Jonah and YHWH (Jonah 4).

For every section, we shall proceed as follows: in a first step, we present the Masoretic Text with a working translation. The small letters that divide the verses into smaller units have only

²⁵ For the details, cf. C. LICHTERT, *Traversée du récit de Jonas*, 64–71.

²⁶ In this connection, for example, we refer to the dream of Jonah while the ship and its crew are in danger. For this and other *motifs*, cf., for example, H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 84.

²⁷ For the thesis that the book of Jonah is a parable, see also L ALONSO SCHÖKEL, J.L. SICRE DÍAZ, *Profetas*, II, 1008; E.K.E ANTWI, *The Book of Jonah in the context of post-exilic theology of Israel*, 204: "Taking the content and function of Jonah as a whole, it looks closer to a parable than the aforementioned genres."

²⁸ For a brief summary of the results of the studies on the literary genre of the book of Jonah, cf. E. EYNIKEL, "The book of Jonah and the parable of the prodigal son", 121–138; ID., "Le genre littéraire du livre de Jonas", 233–244.

²⁹ For this interpretation of the book, cf. R.E. CLEMENTS, "The Purpose of the Book of Jonah", 17: "... it has been suggested that in its general character and form it [i.e. the book of Jonah] is a piece of didactic writing which has close affinities with wisdom where universalist tendencies are recognized. Thus it is more properly regarded as standing closer to the form of a didactic wisdom composition than to that of a prophetic book." Cf., also, P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 73. J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 22–28.

³⁰ A. LODS, *Histoire de la littérature hébraïque et juive*, 584: "Son intention [i.e. of the author of the book of Jonah] n'était pas de faire de l'histoire mais d'inculquer un enseignement en racontant une histoire". L ALONSO SCHÖKEL, J.L. SICRE DÍAZ, *Profetas*, II, 1008, observe that the majority of exegetes are inclined to consider the book of Jonah as a parable. However, there is disagreement as to the specific message of the book.

an orienting function because subdivisions like “aβ” often prove not to be clear. Where the translation itself is not self-evident or where it requires an explanation, we shall give justifications in the footnotes. In a second step, I shall elaborate an interpretation of the text focusing on the questions mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in particular the relationship between the God of Israel and the non-Israelites. In so doing, some exegetical issues neglected in previous research will deserve attention, notably the implications of the sailors’ attitudes in the first chapter, the “faith” of the Ninevites in God reported in the third chapter, and some aspects of the final dialogue between Jonah and God at the end of the fourth chapter.

a) *Background: Jonah’s call and his flight to Tarshish (Jonah 1:1–3)*

α) Introductory remarks

The first two verses of the book of Jonah make up the background to the entire narrative: God addresses his word to Jonah. There “happened to him” that foundational event which defines him as sent by God to the midst of the nations (“arise and go to Nineveh”) and as His prophet (“and proclaim against her that her evil has risen up to me”). In these two verses, from which unfolds everything which happens to and involves the prophet and the addressees of his message, the absolute protagonist is God. He is the beginning of the story of Jonah. Of the prophet, nothing is said other than that he is the “son of Amittai”, and not the reason why it is he who has been chosen by God as his messenger. He has to “rise” and “go to Nineveh”: beyond movement of a spatial type, the two verbs indicate a passage from a static state to a dynamic one. We shall now try to deepen these preliminary observations.

β) Text and working translation

1a	וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יֹנָתָן בֶּן־אֲמִיטַי לֵאמֹר:	The word of God came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying:
2a	קוּם לךְ אֶל־נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה	Arise, go ³¹ to Nineveh, the great city,
b	וּקְרָא עָלֶיהָ	and proclaim against her
c	כִּי־עָלְתָה רָעָתָם לְפָנַי	since ³² her evil has risen up before me”.

³¹ The two imperatives are formulated asyndetically. That happens when the first verb expresses a movement; cf. P. JOÜON, T. MURAOKA, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 177e.

³² Here, the particle כִּי is not introducing an objective statement (“proclaim *that*...”) but rather a causal one (“proclaim *since*...”). In Jonah 1:2, it seems that YHWH speaks to Jonah *about* Nineveh instead of communicating to him literally the message to be proclaimed there. In fact, in Jonah 3:4, the message which the prophet proclaims before the Ninevites is formulated differently; cf. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 95 (note 2a). J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 75: translates כִּי in the same way because “God is not consulting his prophet; nor is this prophet advised of God’s reasoning. Jonah is merely informed of a decision, and no opportunity is given to him to debate the matter.”

3a	וַיִּקַּם יוֹנָה לִבְרוֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה	And Jonah arose to flee towards Tarshish far from the Lord ³³ .
b	וַיֵּרֵד יָפוֹ	He went down to Jaffa
c	וַיִּמְצֵא אֲנִיָּה בָאָה תַרְשִׁישׁ	and found ³⁴ a ship that was going to Tarshish.
d	וַיִּתֵּן שְׂכָרָהּ	He paid his fare
e	וַיֵּרֵד בָּהּ לְבוֹא עִמָּהֶם תַרְשִׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה	and went on board ³⁵ to go with them to Tarshish far from the Lord.

γ) Exegetical observations

(1) As we have already said, the first chapter of our book opens *in medias res*. The narrative is introduced by the syntagma וַיְהִי which means literally “and it was, it happened”. At first sight this is not surprising. It has for its subject דְּבַר-יְהוָה “the word of God”. This has Jonah as its recipient (preposition אֶל “to” + proper noun יוֹנָה) followed by the construct state בְּן-אַמִּטַּי “son of Amittai”. The verse concludes with the infinitive construct לְאֹמַר which introduces the direct speech of God. Of course, such a formula is quite frequent in Old Testament prophetic texts, e.g. 1 Kgs 21:17, 29; Jer 1:4, 11; Ezek 3:16; Zech 4:8. However, in the book of Jonah, this formula does not introduce a collection of words of the Lord revealed to a prophet. On the contrary, it seems that the formula introduces the entire narrative in prose.³⁶ In this connection, we can make two observations:

a) By contrast with the other prophetic books, the beginning of the book of Jonah does not present any information about what has happened previously to give chronological and spatial coordinates to the narrative.³⁷ For example, the book is not placed in a precise period, defined, for instance, on the basis of the reign of one or more kings of Israel or Judah, e.g. Isa 1:1; Hos 1:1. However, the predicate וַיְהִי in the word-event-formula (*Wortereignisformel*) is not to be confused with the verb וַיְהִי which introduces an adverbial phrase of time (e.g. Ezek 1:1) followed by the main clause, that is, with a וַיְהִי which functions as a macrosyntactical marker. Thus, the beginning of verse 1 is not to be translated as follows: “and when the word of the Lord was addressed to Jonah ...”³⁸. On the contrary, the predicate has a “full” value: it is not

³³ Literally: “from the face of YHWH”, in the sense of “from the presence of YHWH”; cf. a similar expression in Ps 139:7. See also P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 113–114.

³⁴ In this context, the verb מָצָא “find” has probably the meaning of finding accidentally (cf. Gen 44:8; Num 15:32; etc.); see J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 81.

³⁵ Literally, “in it”, that is, the ship.

³⁶ See H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 98; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 93: “Der folgende Text tritt daher nicht mit dem Anspruch auf, ‘Wort Gottes’ zu sein. Er ist Erzählung vom Wort Gottes ...”

³⁷ Cf. also A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*, 57.

³⁸ For such a translation, see J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 66.

macrosyntactical³⁹ and acts as a “narrative equivalent [...] of the background phrase”⁴⁰ of the type “the word of the Lord was addressed to X in the days of Y” (e.g. Jer 1:2).

b) By using a formula which is found, *mutatis mutandis*, at the beginning of other prophetic books (e.g. Isa 1:1; Hos 1:1; Zech 1:1), the text is pretending to introduce a prophecy but, in reality, it is introducing a narrative. Thus, although making use of conventional vocabulary,⁴¹ the book is totally different from a collection of prophetic words. Such an oscillation between “tradition” and “innovation” is apparent also from another literary phenomenon: on the one hand, the book does not use terms like נָבִיא to describe its protagonist; on the other hand, Jonah is essentially being presented as a prophet. In fact, the name “Jonah, son of Amittai”, appears in 2 Kgs 14:25 which refers to a certain prophet Jonah, the son of Amittai, who lived under Jeroboam II (VIII century B.C.). Thus, from the very beginning of the story, Jonah is presented to the reader as one who is familiar to history as a prophet, but without emphasising points of contact between the prophet of 2 Kgs 14:25 and the one in the book of Jonah.

(2) In addition to the historical orientation intended for the narrative, which actually turns out – as has been said – to be difficult to date, one notes the ironical character which the name “Jonah” bears within itself.⁴² In fact, it means “dove”, an animal which, in several texts of the Old Testament (cf., for example, Hos 7:11; Ps 55:7–8), indicates the foolish and capricious attitude of Israel.⁴³ The ironical character which is glimpsed in the name of Jonah is reinforced still further by the meaning of “Amittai” (from the root אָמַתִּי “my truth”) of which he is said to be the son. Perhaps the reader can find a hidden message in the use of these names: although Jonah might appear “flighty” like a dove, he is nonetheless “a son of God’s faithfulness”⁴⁴.

(3) The expression קוּם וָלֵךְ “rise and go to...” which occurs in Jonah 3:2 could be understood in the sense of two complementary movements (that is, rising up and going away) and in the sense of a single movement, the first imperative acting as an auxiliary of the second, reinforcing the meaning of the former⁴⁵: “Go at once to Nineveh!” Both interpretations seem possible. In the light of Jonah 1:3, however, the first is the more probable. As we shall see, in his reaction

³⁹ See e.g. W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 334 note 1.

⁴⁰ A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*, 57, especially n. 9.

⁴¹ See P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 125: “At the beginning, then, conventional language bespeaks the unconventional.”

⁴² For the following observations, cf. the commentaries, e.g. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 99.

⁴³ For a more thorough analysis of the image of the “dove” in Hos 7:11 and in the Old Testament, see e.g. G. EIDEVALL, *Grapes in the Desert*, 118–118.

⁴⁴ H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 99.

⁴⁵ See J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 69–70 who refers to GK §120g. Other examples of this expression: 1 Kgs 17:9 and Jer 13:6.

to the divine command, Jonah seems to obey the first imperative but not the second⁴⁶: rather than “going” (verb הָלַךְ) to Nineveh, Jonah decides to flee in the opposite direction.

(4) God calls Jonah to “proclaim against Nineveh”. If on the one hand, nothing is said for the moment to the prophet about the content of his message, on the other hand, there is a clear indication of the place or, better, the recipient to whom he has to bear his message of disaster which comes from God. It is Nineveh, the great city,⁴⁷ and with it – this is intended with the collective noun – its population. It should be emphasised that Nineveh’s negative reputation is not gone into in detail in this context, and that a possible destruction of the city is not even mentioned or considered, something which would have been desired, perhaps, even by other peoples (cf. the book of Nahum). In any case, what appears clear is that Jonah is being sent by God to some non-Israelites. What will actually become clearer as the narrative proceeds is that the recipients of the message do not belong to the people of Israel who are dispersed there, as if this were about a Jewish “diaspora” in a foreign land, but rather this is wholly about another people, namely, the Ninevites.

(5) “Their evil” (רַעְתָּם) is the charge that condemns them before God: it has risen before him and reached its peak. The term רַעְתָּם, referring to the Ninevites against (עַל) whom Jonah has to prophesy, does not specify the nature of the sin with which they are tainted,⁴⁸ and the text, in general, does not inform us of the way in which YHWH has learned of this sin. Moreover, there is not even an explanation of the reason why YHWH feels bound to send his prophet to Nineveh or why he is concerned about this city. By contrast with other biblical texts which mention the sin of a group and the subsequent intervention of God (for example, Gen 18:20–21; 19:13 [Sodom and Gomorrah]; Exod 3:7 [the Egyptians oppressing the Israelites]; 1 Sam 5:12 [the Philistine cities to which the Ark of the Covenant was brought]), YHWH is not moved by the cry of the victims of the Ninevites’ wickedness, and yet he seems in a certain sense to be “close” to Nineveh: its evil has “risen up” before him. In this connection, we can note that God’s judgement is not poured out exclusively on the chosen people when it transgresses his will or on nations or cities close to Israel (Sodom and Gomorrah, the Philistine cities), but also on a foreign city whose sin in its dealings with Israel is not specified further. It is possible that the

⁴⁶ See also G. VANONI, *Das Buch Jona*, 70; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 97.

⁴⁷ The expression הַגְּדוֹלָה הָעִיר הַגְּבֹרָה occurs on a further two occasions, in Jonah 3:2 and 4:11. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 72, draws attention to the fact that, except in Jer 22:8, the expression “the great city” designates foreign cities, see e.g. Gen 10:2; Amos 6:2; see also Jdt 1:11 where the term occurs in Greek.

⁴⁸ For this detail, see e.g. W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 336, who emphasises a certain proverbial guilt of Nineveh as mentioned in the last verse of the book of Nahum (Nah 3:19: “For on whom has not your evil [רַעְתָּךְ] passed continually?”).

reader feels the need to fill up the gaps in this information such as, for example, the nature of the sin⁴⁹ which induces YHWH to intervene. However, as is apparent from the rest of the book, no answer is given to questions like this and also to the other questions which remain open for the moment.

(6) YHWH's command to Jonah is not followed by an answer from the prophet. Nor is there any dialogue between YHWH and Jonah as the chapter progresses, not even when the captain urges Jonah to pray to his God (Jonah 1:6). The story takes a different turn. Indeed, after Jonah 1:2, the reader is taken unawares: after the first verb indicating Jonah's movement (יָרָא), one would expect to read in Jonah 1:3 of his setting off for Nineveh, just as the Lord had commanded.⁵⁰ In fact, he does rise but in order to "flee towards Tarshish far from the Lord".⁵¹ It should be noted in this connection that the expression "towards Tarshish far from the Lord" occurs twice to indicate the prophet's distance from YHWH.⁵² Although there are some famous examples of hesitation on the part of some prophets in the face of the arduous task given them by God (cf. Exod 3:11; Jer 1:3) in no case, except that of Jonah⁵³, does the prophet flee from the Lord's presence. Indeed, he flees not from Nineveh but rather from God. Choosing Tarshish as the destination for his flight, a place usually identified with a city in the South of Spain⁵⁴, does not seem to be a better alternative than the direction indicated to him by God. In fact, fleeing to Tarshish meant having to face a very long voyage (about three years for the return journey) and, according to words of the book of Isaiah, Tarshish was an isolated spot where – as also in Put, Lud, Mesec, Ros and Tubal – God had never been heard spoken of (Isa 66:19).⁵⁵ Moreover, another element which emerges in this part of the narrative is the fact that it is never explained to the reader – either by Jonah himself or by the narrator – why the prophet decides not to obey the divine command.⁵⁶ Only later, in Jonah 4:2, will Jonah himself justify his flight.

⁴⁹ See R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 96.

⁵⁰ The commission formula which God addresses to his chosen one (יָרָא) is matched by the consequent expression by which the one sent "rises and goes", cf. 1 Kgs 17:9–10.

⁵¹ For this detail, see also P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 128.

⁵² This is an element that seems redundant given the very concise style Jonah 1:1–3, but which clearly seems to emphasise the prophet's disobedience, cf. D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 452; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 97–98.

⁵³ In this context, we do not deal with the case of the prophet mentioned in 1 Kgs 13 who does not observe God's command.

⁵⁴ Cf. the commentaries, for example, H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 100–101; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 98–99, who highlights the symbolic character of "Tarshish": a very distant city with which only foreign peoples, such as the Phoenicians, had trading relations. Thus, the sailors with whom Jonah dialogues are being characterised as foreigners, at least implicitly.

⁵⁵ For this aspect, cf. E. EYNIKEL, "Les païens peuvent-ils participer au culte de Yahvé?", 113.

⁵⁶ See also E.K.E ANTWI, *The Book of Jonah in the context of post-exilic theology of Israel*, 85.

(7) Jonah 1:3a announces Jonah's flight and, in the following statements of the same verse, it is explained how Jonah carries out his plan. The author does not seem to be concerned to show the events in their chronological sequence but according to their importance⁵⁷, and this by means of three elements: the threefold mention of Tarshish; the double expression, already mentioned, "far from the Lord"; and the twofold use of the verb ירד "to go down", used for the journey to Jaffa and for the embarkation of the prophet. As is seen in Jonah 1:5, the same verb serves again to describe the "descent" of Jonah into the bowels of the ship, a movement, that is, that, like the previous ones, distances the prophet from YHWH. However, the prophet is not alone, and that is indicated already in Jonah 1:3 with the word עִמָּהֶם "with them" for which there is no referent in the previous narrative.⁵⁸ These other figures are mentioned only beginning with Jonah 1:5. – The verse is neatly constructed according to a concentric plan⁵⁹:

<p>And Jonah arose to flee towards <i>Tarshish</i> far from the Lord (A) <u>He went down to Jaffa</u> (B) and found a ship (C) which was going to <i>Tarshish</i>. (D) He paid the fare (C¹) <u>and went down</u> on board to go with them (B¹) to <i>Tarshish</i> far from the Lord (A¹)</p>

δ) Concluding remarks

What seems important in these verses is that the sin, the evil of Nineveh against which God wishes his judgement to be proclaimed, is matched in a parallel and, in certain verses, contradictory way by the disobedience of the one he has sent, the one who has to denounce the sins of others. Indeed, one would expect from Jonah, as happens with the homonymous prophet in the Second Book of Kings (2 Kgs 14:25), faithful obedience to God's command. His flight in the opposite direction to the city indicated to him reinforces the reader's awareness that he wishes to flee far from the presence of the Lord. In this connection, the author seems to be creating a parallel between Nineveh and Jonah. In these verses, in fact, both figures seem to occupy the same position in relation to God: guilty and far from his face.⁶⁰ However, if, on the one hand, Jonah's sin is known – precisely his disobedience – nothing is said of the sin of which the Ninevites are guilty before God except that it has come up before Him. As for Jonah and his refusal to carry out the divine command, the following question arises: doesn't the message

⁵⁷ Thus, P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 116.

⁵⁸ See also E.K.E ANTWI, *The Book of Jonah in the context of post-exilic theology of Israel*, 86.

⁵⁹ See already N. LOHFINK, "Jona ging zur Stadt hinaus", 200.

⁶⁰ For this detail, see also R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 98.

which was only to be against Nineveh because of its sin now seem to be directed also against Jonah and to expose him too to the danger of a possible punishment (cf. 1 Kgs 13:20–24)?

b) *Jonah and the sailors (Jonah 1:4–16)*

α) Introductory remarks

Jonah 1:4 begins a new scene in which the setting changes and new characters are added. The former shifts to the sea where YHWH orders a mighty storm which causes the risk of being wrecked to the ship where Jonah finds himself with the sailors of the crew. The dialogue among Jonah, the captain and the sailors, in which Jonah reveals his flight from YHWH, gives rise to a desperate act: Jonah is thrown into the sea and its waves calm down immediately. Saved from certain death, the sailors offer sacrifices to YHWH and offer him vows. This scene is separated from its context, that is from Jonah 1:1-3 and from the chapters which follow, chiefly with regard to one aspect: the *dramatis personae*, namely, the captain and the sailors who were not present before and will not be hereafter. They leave the scene definitively at the end of chapter 1.

In the following exegesis, we shall seek to cause some essential *motifs* of the account to emerge, focusing on the attitudes and words of Jonah, on the one hand, and of the sailors and their captain, on the other. In particular, it seems important to us for our research to highlight the attitude of the non-Israelite sailors recounted in this scene as they come into contact with the God of Israel, and how the latter reacts to them.

β) Text and working translation

4a	וַיְהִי הַטֵּיִל רוּחַ-גָּדוֹלָה אֶל-הַיָּם	But YHWH raised up a strong wind on the sea ⁶¹
b	וַיְהִי סַעַר-גָּדוֹל בַּיָּם	and there was a great storm on the sea
c	וַהֲאֵנִיָּה חֲשָׁבָה לְהִשָּׁבֵר	and the ship threatened to break up. ⁶²
5a	וַיִּירָאוּ הַמַּלְחָמִים	The sailors feared
b	וַיִּזְעָקוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אֱלֹהָיו	and cried each to his god

⁶¹ Note the wayyiqtol sequence → w-x-qatal which marks an interruption in the narrative. There is no mention of the subsequent events (for example, the ship leaves the port, see R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 99) but of the intervention of YHWH. A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*, 58–59, speak of an “immediacy of the divine action” and translate “‘But the Lord *suddenly* threw a strong wind on the sea’ or ‘but *meanwhile* the Lord threw a strong wind on the sea’”. See also E.K.E ANTWI, *The Book of Jonah in the context of post-exilic theology of Israel*, 88.

⁶² The verb חשב “think of, be on the verge of” is never employed in the Hebrew Bible with an inanimate subject. This construction expresses a metonymy through which the concern of the sailors is transferred to the ship transporting them. For other explanations, cf. P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 152 (prosopopeia), and J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 96–97. A correction of the Hebrew text does not seem necessary (cf. also W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 339). The verbal form is also attested in the fragment MurXII.

c	וַיִּטְלוּ אֶת־הַכֵּלִים אֲשֶׁר בָּאֲנִיָּה אֶל־הַיָּם לְהַקֵּל מֵעַלֵיהֶם	and threw into the sea the objects that [were] on the ship to lighten it ⁶³ .
d	וַיֵּזֶן יוֹנָה יָרַד אֶל־יַרְכְּתֵי הַסְּפִינָה	Jonah [instead] ⁶⁴ went out into the flanks of the ship,
e		
f	וַיִּשְׁכַּב וַיֵּרַד	lay down and went to sleep.
6a	וַיִּקְרַב אֵלָיו רֵב הַחֲבֵל	The captain of the ship came to him
b	וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ	and said:
c	מַה־לָּךְ נֹרָדָם	What are you doing asleep?
d	קוּם	Get up,
e	קְרָא אֶל־אֱלֹהֶיךָ	call on your god/gods,
f	אוּלַי יִתְעַשֵּׂת הָאֱלֹהִים לָנוּ	perhaps your god will give us a thought ⁶⁵
g	וְלֹא נִאֲבָד	and we shall not perish.
7a	וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ	And they said to one another:
b	לָכוּ	“Come,
c	וְנַפִּילָה גוֹרְלוֹת	let us cast lots,
d	וְנִדְעָה	and we shall know ⁶⁶
e	בְּשֵׁלְמֵי הַרְעָה הַזֹּאת לָנוּ	who ⁶⁷ is the cause of this evil [which has
f		happened] to us”.

⁶³ Literally: “to lighten [that is, the ship] of them [that is, the objects]”.

⁶⁴ Here again, we have a verbal form, w-x-qatal, which has an adversative function: emphasising the attitude of Jonah which is different from that of the sailors; cf. R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 102; A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*, 58–59; E.K.E ANTWI, *The Book of Jonah in the context of post-exilic theology of Israel*, 89, speaks of a “flashback”: “The actions of Jonah precede the advent of the near disaster. In this context, the verb *yārad* is better translated with the sense of pluperfect “had gone down” rather than the perfect “has descended”. For this interpretation, see already W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 341.

⁶⁵ The verb in the *hitp.* stem, a biblical *hapax legomenon*, is difficult to translate, and modern translations diverge considerably (see e.g. NAS: “Perhaps your god will be concerned about us”; TOB: “Peut-être ce dieu-là songera-t-il à nous”). The MT form of the verb is confirmed by MurXII and, at least in part, by 4QXII^e. In Biblical Hebrew, the noun *עֲשׂוֹתוֹן is attested twice. In Ps 146:4, the term occurs in an exhortation. The Psalmist warns against trusting in the “son of man” (verse 3) because “his plans will perish with him on that day [i.e. the day of his death]” (verse 4: הַיּוֹם הַהוּא אָבְדוּ עֲשׂוֹתוֹנוֹי). The LXX renders the Hebrew text as follows: ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἀπολοῦνται πάντες οἱ διαλογισμοὶ αὐτῶν “in that very day all their designs will perish”. However, for lack of a parallel noun, it is difficult to argue for a specific meaning. Another text which could shed light on the meaning of the word in question is Sirach 3:24 (ms. A): *ky rbyrn štwny bn’ dm wdmwgnwt r’wt mt ‘wt*, “indeed, numerous are the thoughts of man, and wicked imaginations lead them astray”. In this quotation, two nouns are parallel. The LXX diverges from the Hebrew somewhat. However, as for the two Hebrew nouns, the LXX renders *עֲשׂוֹתוֹן* with the noun ἡ ὑπόλημις (“presumption”, “speculation”) and *dmwgnwt* with ἡ ὑπόνοια “fancy”. In any case, in these texts, both nouns, Hebrew and Greek, express ideas that have to do with “thoughts” or “projects”. This leads to the following conclusion concerning the explanation of יִתְעַשֵּׂת in Jonah 1:6: nothing prevents us from thinking that יִתְעַשֵּׂת refers to a kind of divine intervention. Otherwise, the following expression “and we do not perish” would be difficult to understand.

⁶⁶ In the sense of “so that we may know”. The x-yiqtol form expresses here the idea of the “foreseen consequence”; cf. A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*, 27.60

⁶⁷ T. MURAOKA, “A case of diglossia in the book of Jonah?”, notes the alternation of בְּשֵׁלְ- in Jonah 1:7, בְּאֲשֶׁר לְ- in Jonah 1:8, and בְּשֵׁלְ- in Jonah 1:12, all of which obviously have the same meaning “on account of”. According to Muraoka, this phenomenon is an example of diglossia attributed to the *dramatis personae*: “When the prophet boarded the ship at Yaffo, the crew conceivably sized him up and concluded that the passenger was a well-educated gentleman. Hence they addressed him later in the Hebrew version of the Queen’s English (vs. 8). Among themselves, however, they conversed in the

g	וַיִּפְלוּ גוּרְלוֹת וַיִּפֹּל הַגּוּרְלַל עַל-יוֹנָה	They threw lots and the lot fell on Jonah.
8a	וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו	They said to him,
b	הַגִּידֵה-נָא לָנוּ	tell us then
c	בְּאִשֶּׁר לְמִי-הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת לָנוּ	on whose account has this evil [happened] to us?
d	מִה-מְלֹאכְתְּךָ	What is your occupation?
e	וּמֵאַיִן תָּבוֹא	And where do you come from?
f	מָה אֶרְצְךָ	What is your land?
g	וְאִי-מִזֶּה עִם אָתָּה	And from what people are you?
9a	וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם	He replied to them:
b	עִבְרִי אֲנִכִּי	“I [am] a Hebrew
c	וְאֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲנִי יָרֵא	and I fear YHWH, God of heaven ⁶⁸
d	אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-הַיַּבֶּשֶׁת	who made the sea and the dry land.”
10a	וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יָרֵאָה גְדוֹלָה	Then those men feared with a great fear
b	וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו	and said to him:
c	מִה-זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ	“Why ⁶⁹ have you done this?”
d	כִּי-יָדְעוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים	since those men knew
e	כִּי-מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה הוּא בָּרַח	that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord
f	כִּי הִגִּיד לָהֶם	because he had told ⁷⁰ them.
11a	וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו	They asked:
b	מִה-נַּעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ	“What shall we do with you
c	וְיִשְׁתַּק הַיָּם מֵעֲלֵינוּ	so that the sea quieten down from upon us?”
d	כִּי הַיָּם הוֹלֵךְ וְסֹעַר	since the sea was growing increasingly rough ⁷¹ .
12a	וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם	He replied to them:
b	שָׂאוּנִי	“Take me
c	וְהִטִּילְנִי אֶל-הַיָּם	and throw me in the sea,
d	וְיִשְׁתַּק הַיָּם מֵעֲלֵיכֶם	[so that] the sea calm down from over you,
e	כִּי יוֹדַע אֲנִי	because I ⁷² know
f	כִּי בְשָׁלִי הַסֹּעַר הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה עָלֵיכֶם	that [it is] because of me that this great storm [is] upon you”.
13a	וַיַּחֲתְרוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים לְהַשִּׁיב אֶל-הַיַּבֶּשֶׁת	And the men rowed hard ⁷³

vernacular (vs. 7). Jonah, in his turn, apparently thought it more friendly and diplomatic to speak to the sailors in a form of Hebrew with which they would feel more at ease and at home” (153).

⁶⁸ The expression *וְאֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲנִי יָרֵא* is a periphrastic construction that allows the placing of the object, “YHWH, God of heaven”, in first position; see J. BECKER, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament*, 176; A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*, 62–63. Moreover, as stated by P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 141, the position of *וְאֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲנִי יָרֵא* leads to a *hyperbaton* insofar as the relative clause introduced by *אֲשֶׁר* (verse 9d) is subordinate to *אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם* (verse 9c).

⁶⁹ In this case, *מָה* does not mean “what?” but introduces an “expression of astonished surprise” (H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 116).

⁷⁰ For the pluperfect, see E.K.E ANTWI, *The Book of Jonah in the context of post-exilic theology of Israel*, 93: “The action of the verb ... is retrospective”.

⁷¹ The participle *הוֹלֵךְ* followed by another participle expresses the idea of increase, see Ges¹⁸, 277; A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*, 30.

⁷² W.J. HORWITZ, “Another Interpretation of Jonah I 12”, 372, suggests translating *אֲנִי* not as a personal pronoun “I”, but as a noun, “the ship”, which is possible from a philological point of view. However, why should the author have chosen such a word that could easily be (mis)understood as a personal pronoun? See also H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 118.

⁷³ The verb *חָתַר* literally means “to dig through”, “to break through” (see the lexicons, e.g. Ges¹⁸, 412). In the context of the first chapter of the book of Jonah, its meaning must be “to break through (i.e.

b	וְלֹא יָכְלוּ	to come back ⁷⁴ to the dry land
c	כִּי הָיָה הַיָּם הוֹלֵךְ וְסֹעֵר עֲלֵיהֶם	but they could not
d		because the sea was growing more tempestuous
		against them.
14a	וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־יְהוָה	Then they cried out to YHWH
b	וַיֹּאמְרוּ	and said:
c	אָנָּה יְהוָה	“We beseech you, YHWH,
d	אַל־נָא נִאֲבָדָה בְּנַפְשׁ הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה	do not let us perish ⁷⁵ on account of this man’s life.
e	וְאַל־תִּתֵּן עָלֵינוּ דָּם נָקִיא	Do not lay innocent blood on us ⁷⁶ ;
f	כִּי־עָשִׂיתָ יְהוָה כַּאֲשֶׁר חָפְצָתָ עֲשִׂיתָ	because you, YHWH, have done as it pleased you.” ⁷⁷
15a	וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת־יֹנָה	So they took hold of Jonah,
b	וַיַּטְּלוּ אֹתוֹ בַּיָּם	and cast him into the sea:
c	וַיִּצְמַד הַיָּם מִזְעַפּוֹ	and the sea ceased from ⁷⁸ its raging ⁷⁹ .
16a	וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יְרָאָה גְדוֹלָה אֶת־יְהוָה	Then the men feared YHWH ⁸⁰ greatly,
b	וַיִּזְבְּחוּ־זָבַח לַיהוָה	and they offered a sacrifice to YHWH
c	וַיַּדְּרוּ נְדָרִים	and made vows.

γ) Exegetical observations

Verses 4–9

(1) In Jonah 1:4, YHWH comes on the scene again. Instead of communicating another message to Jonah, he orders a storm which terrifies the sailors. Here, for the first time, the verb ירא

the waves)” (thus W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 340). See also C. MEREDITH, “The Conundrum of *htr* in Jonah 1:13”, 151: “The sailors have to tunnel through (wall-like? cf. Ex. 15:8) waves as the tempest swells around them.”

⁷⁴ The *hiph.* stem of the verb שׁוּב is used probably because the implicit object is the ship; cf. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 130.

⁷⁵ Literally: “We do not want to perish”.

⁷⁶ For this meaning of the verb נתן followed by the preposition על, see Ges¹⁸, 861: “jemandem etwas anrechnen” (= “to impute”); “vergelten” (= to repay); for an analogous formulation, see Ezek 7:3.

⁷⁷ There is no consensus as to whether to translate the two Hebrew verbs in the perfect by a present or by a past form. R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 68,117 note 115: opts for the present (“Was dir gefällt, das tust du”; see also H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 120: “The perfect should be understood as a present with an iterative meaning”. In any case, even if in a discourse the perfect normally refers to actions anterior to the moment of speaking (cf. J. JOOSTEN, 194), the iterative meaning of the action expressed by the verbs implies that the actions accomplished in the past have an impact on the present, see P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 183; E.K.E ANTWI, *The Book of Jonah in the context of post-exilic theology of Israel*, 95: “The sailors through this declaration come to the acknowledgement of YHWH and pray to him, admitting that YHWH is responsible for whatever took place.”

⁷⁸ The verb עמד with the particle מן is used in the sense of “to cease from, to stop”; See also, e.g. Jonah 29:35; 30:9; see Ges¹⁸, 979.

⁷⁹ The root זעף is used with reference to the sea only in this verse. In the other occurrences, it denotes human (Prov 19:12) or divine (Mic 7:9) anger. In Jonah 1:15: “the sea is ... personified”; see J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 137

⁸⁰ The apparatus of BHS considers the possibility that the object אֶת־יְהוָה is a later addition. In the fragments from the Jewish desert, however, these words are at least partially present, e.g. in MurXII (in Hebrew letters) and in 8HevXII gr (in Paleo-Hebrew letters).

“fear” is used, and it recurs in this subsection a further three times, in verses 9, 10 and 16, taking on a gradation of significance which goes from simple fear to the recognition of YHWH by the sailors. However, in Jonah 1:5, fear provokes yet another reaction: the sailors cry (וַיִּזְעֻקוּ) to their gods. In the Hebrew Bible, the expression “cry to a god” never refers to non-Israelite gods except in this verse. For the reader, this could be an allusive anticipation to the future attitude of the sailors who, at the end of the episode, will call upon the God of Israel. We observe that, in this text, there is no negative criticism of the sailors who, at this moment, are calling each upon his god. This root זעק accompanied by the preposition אל + אלֹהִים is employed in an idolatrous context, in the sense of “crying to the gods”, only twice, once in Judg 10:14 and the other time in Jer 11:12. In both cases, however, the subject is the Israelites and not pagans. We emphasise again that in none of these texts is there any record of a reaction of these gods, just as in Jonah 1:5.⁸¹

(2) It seems that, right from these first verses, the author of Jonah is anticipating what will happen in the following narrative. Indeed, the *pietas* of the sailors, which will be manifested at the end of the account in relation to YHWH through fear of him – (verse 16: “They were in great fear of YHWH, offered a sacrifice to YHWH and made vows to him”) -, insofar as, at the moment, it is addressed to foreign gods⁸², is portrayed from now on as very close to the religious attitude of Israel which is marked out precisely through its “calling on God”. In this connection, the root זעק is the exact expression of a strong invocation, “crying”, in fact, to obtain help in a situation of extreme danger. Israel cries to God to obtain from him salvation in moments of particular oppression and misery (Exod 2:23). This cry for help, which has the characteristic of reaching “to heaven” (2 Chr 32:20), calls for the attention of God who – if the people are faithful – replies with a concrete and salvific intervention (Exod 2:24; 3:7; Num 20:16; 1 Sam 7:9; Isa 30:19; for the contrary, cf. Jer 11:11). This divine help is a demonstration of his extraordinary power which *per se* is in contrast with the impotence of the foreign gods (Judg 10:14; Isa 46:7; 57:13; Jer 11:12)⁸³. Although they also do all they can according to their own possibilities and abilities, that is, by lightening the ship, the sailors’ cry to their gods, evidences the emergence of a religiosity on their part which, although addressed to a plurality of divinities, coincides in its modality with the religious activity of Israel itself which, in a situation of extreme danger,

⁸¹ See also E. BONS, “YHWH und die Völker”, 18–19.

⁸² Interestingly, this detail is missing in Josephus’ retelling of the Jonah story in *Ant.* 9.209, where only vows are mentioned but not to whom: εὐχὰς ἐποιούντο χαριστηρίους, “they made vows of thanksgiving”. For a more detailed study of the manner in which Josephus summarises the Jonah story, see L.H. FELDMAN, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 39–40.557.

⁸³ See G.F. HASEL, art. זעק zā’aq; זעקו ze’āqāh; זעקו tsā’aq; זעקו tse’āqāh, spec. 120–121.

addressed God strongly (“crying”, to be exact), certain of obtaining a salvific intervention from him and no other. In the light of the epilogue of the episode (verse 16) – and of the account which will see the involvement of the Ninevites – we could say that the use of this verb introduces a theme which will be developed later and which regards the key change in the non-Israelites who address their prayer no longer to their own gods but rather to the God of Israel.

(3) In the face of all this activity of the sailors, who are trying to find a way to save both the ship and themselves, Jonah assumes an attitude which seems to be one of total lack of interest: he descends into the lowest part of the ship, lies down and goes to sleep. Once again the prophet is clearly in flight, not only towards Tarshish, but, now that God has reached him where he is, the prophet tries to distance himself from his presence and from the reality which surrounds him (even if this means risking his own life!). In fact, Jonah’s sleeping is expressed by the root סָדַד , which is the same as the one we find in those biblical episodes in which the sleep which enfolds the person in question is like a state of catalepsy, a profound torpor close to a being in a *trance*⁸⁴ (cf. Gen 2:21: the torpor that descends on Adam when God created woman from him; Gen 15:12: Abraham’s sleep when God concludes the covenant with him). Thus, Jonah’s action, descending into the deepest part of the ship and lying down to sleep is, in some ways, a completion of his initial action of flight: now there is nothing more that can force him to see, to listen to or to choose to obey YHWH’s command. However, by contrast with the above-mentioned passages in which God intervenes in the life of someone who has fallen into a deep sleep, Jonah does not experience any divine intervention but is awakened by the captain of the ship. It is possible that this is another ironic feature of the narrative.⁸⁵

(4) However, in verse 6, this new escape is matched by another summons to rise and act: this time, it is the ship’s captain who, with the same imperatives as those which God addressed to Jonah at the beginning of the story (קוּם וְקִרְא), exhorts him to rise from sleep and to call on his God. In this connection, it is interesting to note that if, on the one hand, in the words of the captain, the object of the invocation still remains ambiguous (אֱלֹהֵי־יָמֶיךָ “your God/your gods”), on the other hand, the verb which refers to this in the phrase which he utters subsequently (תִּתְעַשֶׂה “give a thought”) is expressed in the third person singular, a detail neglected by many studies.⁸⁶ It is obvious that the captain’s initiative is the result of the extreme danger: not knowing who

⁸⁴ For a brief semantic analysis of this verbal root, see e.g. T.H. MCALPINE, *Sleep, human and divine, in the Old Testament*, 57–59.

⁸⁵ The connotations of this deep sleep are not clear in the case of Jonah 1:5; cf., for example, J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 101–102; T.H. MCALPINE, *Sleep, human and divine, in the Old Testament*, 58, who, among other considerations, mentions that of irony.

⁸⁶ See e.g. P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 156; M. ROTH, *Israel und die Völker im Zwölfprophetenbuch*, 123–124.

Jonah's God could be, the captain does not rule out that this God may be able to avert this disaster from all the ship's crew.⁸⁷ However, one could note that, as emerges from the use of אִילַי, the captain's hope is vague: basically, where he is concerned, Jonah's God is one among the others who are being invoked in vain.⁸⁸ However, he is the only one on whom to repose the hope of safety because he is the only one who has not yet been invoked and who could still act. Thus, behind the captain's words is hidden, on the one hand, a principle of hope in the God of Jonah, on whom the safety of the entire crew (וְלֹא נִאֶכְדָּר) could depend, on the other, as the adverb employed testifies, the text seems to be alluding to the idea of the absolute freedom of the God of Israel whose action can be conditioned by nothing and no one. This theological concept which emerges also in other biblical texts⁸⁹ in which this particle occurs (cf., for example, Exod 32:30; Amos 5:15; 1 Sam 6:5) is here put into the mouth of a non-Israelite.⁹⁰ It is the captain who reminds Jonah to call on his God and, further, he seems to know that Jonah – despite the fact that he has not yet explained this – has a God, in the singular, and that this God can, if he wishes, intervene. However, the text does not record Jonah's reaction to the captain's urgent request.⁹¹ Does the narrator wish to underline in this way the particular attitude of Jonah who seems to “collaborate”, neither with God nor with the foreign captain who expresses the hope of being saved along with the ship's crew?

(5) In order to highlight the specific features of the MT of Jonah 1:6, it proves useful to compare it with the LXX version of the text.⁹²

a) Interestingly, in the LXX, the second half of the verse reads as follows: ἀνάστα καὶ ἐπικαλοῦ τὸν θεόν σου ὅπως διασώσῃ ὁ θεὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ μὴ ἀπολώμεθα. Two divergences are striking: firstly, the Greek translator opts for the subordinate conjunction ὅπως (“that, in order that”) to render אִילַי, and secondly he chooses the verb διασώζω (“to preserve, to save”) as his

⁸⁷ See also F.W. GOLKA, *Jona*, 53: “Noch tappt der Kapitän ja völlig im Dunkeln und hat keine Ahnung, wer dieser Gott sein könnte. Er möchte aber schließlich jeden nur denkbaren Weg versuchen“; E. BONS, “YHWH und die Völker”, 19.

⁸⁸ For this argument, see H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 113.

⁸⁹ The adverb expresses the idea not of necessity but of possibility. It expresses a very powerful theological concept: God does not allow himself to be conditioned by the action of man or any other. His freedom is absolute. The use of this adverb in the words of the captain leaves open the possibility that God may intervene; for a brief analysis of this concept, cf. S. SCHORCH, “‘Vielleicht wird der Herr doch gnädig sein!’”, *passim*. See also W. READER, “The Adverb אִילַי [‘Perhaps’] in the Piety and Prophecy of the Hebrew Bible and Early Versions”, 131: “In all these instances, the speakers utter the אִילַי as a circumspect expression of their dependence on God's favor.”

⁹⁰ See also S. SCHORCH, “‘Vielleicht wird der Herr doch gnädig sein!’”, 464–465.

⁹¹ See also W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 342: “Man kann nicht gleichzeitig von Jahwes Angesicht weg fliehen und im Gebet sein Angesicht suchen”; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 105.

⁹² In this paragraph, I develop some considerations I have published in a previous study: D. SCIALABBA, “The LXX translation of Jonah 1:6. Text-critical and exegetical considerations”.

translation of the verb יִתְעַשֵּׂת. Even though the Greek translation presents variants, the MT is confirmed, at least in part, by two fragments of the Dead Sea scrolls, MurXII and 4QXII^g.⁹³ In these manuscripts, we can note that the verse under examination has no significant variations: the adverb אֵינִי is partly preserved in MurXII, and the MT verbal form יִתְעַשֵּׂת is confirmed by MurXII and, at least partially, by 4QXII^g. In his respective Latin translations of the Hebrew and the LXX text of the book of Jonah, Jerome follows the two original texts. For the Hebrew text, the captain's cautious words are introduced by *si forte* ("if perhaps"), a rendering of the Hebrew adverb אֵינִי. Furthermore, Jerome translates יִתְעַשֵּׂת with *recogitet* ("he thinks of"). Likewise, with his Latin translation of the LXX, Jerome interprets the verb διασώζω with the expression *saluos facere* ("to save"). In this second case, as the original text suggests, the expression *si quomodo* ("if somehow") takes the place of the subordinate conjunction ὅπως which removes the doubtful character of the Hebrew אֵינִי.

b) The textual variants of the LXX of Jonah 1:6 have been observed by several commentators. However, they only mention the differences between the biblical versions without developing the issue. In particular, they dwell on the presence of the root עִשָּׂה, present also in Dan 6:3 and considered to be an Aramism the meaning of which is probably "to show himself mindful".⁹⁴ Scholars interested in explaining the possible interpretation process underlying the Greek translation attribute the LXX variant to the translator. Rather than recognising the form in question as the *hitpa'el* of the root עִשָּׂה ("to think"?), he would have read it as a *hiph'il* of another verb: יָשַׁע "to save".⁹⁵ Concerning the Greek rendering of אֵינִי with ὅπως, this divergence is explained as a possible result of "a midrashic or a theological rationale".⁹⁶ In any case, analysing Jonah 1:6 in the LXX, it should be noted that the two variants already mentioned may have great importance for the interpretation of the text. In particular, the question remains open why the Greek translator uses the final conjunction ὅπως for rendering the particle אֵינִי that expresses uncertainty. Moreover, for what reason does he opt for διασώζω in replacing the verb עִשָּׂה, that is, a verb that has another nuance of meaning? In other words, why does the translator change the doubt into certainty, namely, by replacing the idea of a possible divine intervention in the story of the tempest (MT: "perhaps he will think of us") with the idea of the certainty of divine salvation (LXX: "in order that he may save us")? To understand the logic

⁹³ For a synopsis of the manuscripts, see B. EGO *et al* (eds.), *Biblia Qumranica. Minor Prophets*, 79.

⁹⁴ See e.g. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 107.113; W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 339–340; J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 104.

⁹⁵ See M. HARL *et al*, *La Bible d'Alexandrie. Les Douze Prophètes* (BA 23.4–9), 143.

⁹⁶ W. READER, "The Adverb אֵינִי ('Perhaps') in the Piety and Prophecy of the Hebrew Bible and Early Versions", 147.

behind these linguistic choices of the Greek translator better, it is necessary to explain Jonah 1:6b in the light of other texts of the Twelve Prophets in the LXX. In the two following sections, both of the variants will be taken into consideration.

c) Where the translation of יְלִיאָה by ὅπως is concerned, it is striking that it occurs very rarely in the LXX. However, three of these occurrences are in the Twelve Prophets. In the context of Amos 5:15, the future of Israel is in danger because the judgement of God is imminent. Therefore, the prophet urges conversion. Whereas the MT reads “it may be [יְלִיאָה] that the Lord God of hosts will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph”, the LXX does not leave room for doubt that the conversion will be successful: ὅπως ἐλεήσῃ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ τοὺς περιλοίπους τοῦ Ἰωσηφ “*in order that* God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph”. Similarly, Zeph 2:3 says: “seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps [יְלִיאָה] you may be hidden on the day of the Lord’s wrath” (NRSV). The LXX translates the second part of this exhortation literally, except for יְלִיאָה: ὅπως σκεπασθῆτε ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ὀργῆς κυρίου “that you may be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s wrath” (NETS). In both texts, as well as in Jonah 1:6b, the uncertainty is changed into certainty. If the order given by the prophet or by the pagan captain is executed, the favour of God will surely be obtained.

d) As for the translation of תָּשׁוּעָה by διασώζω, it cannot be taken for granted that the translator was familiar with the Hebrew root. Perhaps this is the reason why he replaces תָּשׁוּעָה with the Greek verb διασώζω. Even though it seems that he has understood the generic sense of the captain’s words, the Greek translator opts for a verb that has a more definite meaning, especially when it is used in relation to God. In order to understand the LXX rationale better, we should not rule out the possibility of a different theological idea lying behind its vocabulary. It is possible that the MT hesitates to speak explicitly of the “salvation” of non-Israelite sailors, preferring a more vague expression. On the contrary, the Septuagint does not seem to have difficulties in talking of *salvation* in relation to non-Israelites. Rather, if we take into account other LXX texts of the Twelve Prophets, we can observe that the link between “invoking God” and “salvation” appears in connection with a favourable intervention of God towards *all those* who invoke his name, including non-Israelites. In fact, in Micah 6:9, the prophet announces to the city: φωνὴ κυρίου τῆ πόλει ἐπικληθήσεται καὶ σώσει φοβουμένους τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ “the voice of the Lord will be invoked for the city, and He shall save those who fear his name” (NETS). In this regard, it is interesting to note that the MT is quite different inasmuch as it does not record any reference to a future salvation by God. In fact, the words ἐπικληθήσεται καὶ σώσει φοβουμένους τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ do not correspond to the MT: קָרָא יְתוֹשָׁעָה הָרָצָה שָׁמַע “the voice of the Lord] cries [to the city] and [it is] sound wisdom to fear your name”. Similarly, the

text of Joel 3:5 announces in a more generic way that, before the great and terrible day of Lord comes, “whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered” (καὶ ἔσται πᾶς ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται). Against the background of these two quotations, the conclusion to be drawn is obvious: when rendering Jonah 1:6, the translator reinforces a theological idea that is confirmed by two other LXX texts (Micah 6:9 and Joel 3:5), that is, the link between “invoking God” and “salvation”. Needless to say, this idea will be confirmed by the end of the first chapter of Jonah: those who invoke the name of God, that is, the pagan sailors, will be saved.

e) In the light of our analysis of the LXX variants of Jonah 1:6b, we can conclude that the final clause (ὅπως διασώσῃ ὁ θεὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ μὴ ἀπολώμεθα) appears to be not the result of an erroneous interpretation of the underlying Hebrew text but rather a choice made on the basis of a theological interpretation. In the LXX, the certainty of a divine intervention in favour of non-Israelites is based on the general idea which occurs in Joel 3:5: Salvation is granted to all those who invoke God. This *motif* in Jonah 1:6 seems to be a common idea specific to the Twelve Prophets of LXX.

6) Let us turn again to the Hebrew text and some of the aspects of its context, also taking into consideration its implications on the theological level.

a) In a certain sense, the captain’s initiative involves a reversal of roles: it is a pagan who, bringing Jonah back to reality, leads him once more to the command and presence of YHWH. This reversal of roles does not take place only between Jonah and the captain. In fact, in the following verse (verse 7), we note that the other sailors too have an attitude opposed to that of the prophet.⁹⁷ Indeed, not only do they preserve a clear head and strive to understand what is happening but also seem to grasp that such a disaster must be due to a divine punishment. What is striking is that the solution comes about through the need to *know* (יָדַע) the guilty one. As other biblical texts reveal, “not-knowing” can have important consequences, in particular risking a fall into serious error (cf., for example, Gen 43:22; Exod 32:1, 23). In the case of Jonah 1:7 too, this “not-knowing” causes the sailors to fall into great perplexity. Is it because of a man that they risk perishing? Because of a god? And if yes, why is the latter so irate as to let loose such a storm? In this case, knowledge of the reality of the facts turns out to be something of vital importance in the sailors’ eyes.

b) From the literary point of view, as the syntax of the verse shows, the sailors, represented by the captain, are presented as a single, self-standing body which acts in unison and whose

⁹⁷ This reversal has been observed by various authors, see e.g. J.A. LOADER, “Gottes Umkehr und prophetische Absurdität”, 329.

action is contrasted with that of Jonah who seems instead to be completely inactive. In fact, if one observes the verse in question, one notes that the sailors all take action, saying “to one another: let us cast lots”. They all agree and pursue the same plan: no one seems opposed to this idea; rather, as emerges from the use of the cohortative imperative, they exhort “one another” to cast lots so as to find out who is responsible for their misfortune. This leads to the assumption that none of them feels himself singled out as guilty and that there is an atmosphere of “openness” to a real knowledge of the facts. Thus, their exhorting one another causes two figures to emerge for comparison in this verse: on the one hand, the active ones, the sailors, who agree in looking for salvation, on the other hand, Jonah, who, in this sense, does not seem to take any initiative.

c) Thus, as was then the custom, they “cast lots”⁹⁸ in order to find the guilty one and also some kind of solution which would spare them from death. In such a dangerous situation, the sailors sought answers by a long-standing and widespread method of divination, a method considered useful and effective for communicating with the divinity. This practice is found again also on other occasions in the biblical text and is employed to discern the will of YHWH (as, for example, in Lev 16:8-10). Therefore, the sailors seek a guilty one, a scapegoat on whom to make the guilt fall. But to identify a guilty one involves what? Can it really put off a disastrous fate? What power has a knowledge of this kind? Does it really serve to eliminate the cause of the sailors’ evil at its root? What becomes clear is that the sailors are seeking desperately for a solution to the imminent disaster. They abandon every human effort available to them and now search for divine help, entrusting themselves to the only possible means to discover a truth unknown to them, that is, they decide to cast lots.

d) Another element should be noted: through casting lots, the sailors are entering into communication with an “anonymous” god who, by means of this action, reveals something they had not known before: the one guilty of causing the storm. The fact that the lot produces a result means, implicitly, that the God of Israel seems to be responding to the non-Israelite sailors. If, on the one hand, their gods do not actually seem to respond, on the other hand, Jonah’s God, the God, that is, that they still do not know, makes use of their religious practices in order to enter into communication with them.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ In Jonah 1:7, the technique used for casting lots is not explained. For a more detailed study of this practice and its religious implications, see J. LINDBLOM, “Lot-casting in the Old Testament”. However, the case of Jonah 1:7 is dealt with only marginally by this author.

⁹⁹ See for this idea M. ROTH, *Israel und die Völker im Zwölfprophetenbuch*, 125–126; E. BONS, “YHWH und die Völker”, 19.

(7) When the lot falls on Jonah, the sailors immediately seek information about his identity and his origin. These questions imply that Jonah and the sailors have a different origin.¹⁰⁰ It is not until the centre of the scene that Jonah finally begins to speak (Jonah 1:10). To interpret his declaration adequately, it is necessary to take into consideration the two levels of his discourse: on the one hand, on the narrative plane, this discourse is addressed to the sailors; on the other hand, the discourse bears a message which is addressed indirectly to the Jewish readers of the book of Jonah.

a) Pressured by the questions of the sailors who want to know everything about him, Jonah replies by describing himself as a עִבְרִי, “Hebrew”.¹⁰¹ This term is generally used in the Hebrew Bible in relation to the presence of foreigners.¹⁰² In the sailors’ ears, it sounds like a declaration, albeit implicit, of belonging to a particular people.¹⁰³ In the light of other texts of the Hebrew Bible, by contrast with the rather rare term “Israelite” (e.g. 2 Sam 17:25), this term has, moreover, a strong connotation of identity and is an unequivocal expression of descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. Gen 14:13; 39:14, 17; 40:15; 43:32). In the first part of the declaration, therefore, the reader of the book of Jonah could find two connotations: on the one hand, there is emphasis on Jonah’s belonging to the people of Israel, although this vague term is avoided; on the other hand, there is a highlighting of his belonging to a people to which none of the sailors seems to belong. Jonah is, therefore, a foreigner in relation to the sailors, and the sailors foreigners in relation to Jonah. This is a matter not only of origin but also of another aspect: what kind of God does Jonah have? Even if the sailors have not asked such a question¹⁰⁴, Jonah spontaneously declares his worship of YHWH.

b) To the declaration “I am a Hebrew” is added another which, although not a response to any of the sailors’ questions, consists in a profession of faith proper: “And I fear the Lord God

¹⁰⁰ See R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 108.

¹⁰¹ The commentators remark that Jonah does not answer all of the questions of the sailors and that the last of the questions is the one he addresses first, see e.g. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 114; J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 115; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 108–109. – According to the LXX, Jonah does not identify himself as a Hebrew but as a δούλος κυρίου “servant of the Lord”. This textual variant is probably due to a confusion of the consonants *resh* and *dalet*, either in the *Vorlage* of the LXX or at the stage of translation. In any case, the variant δούλος depends on the noun עֶבֶד “servant”. See also J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 116; M. HARL *et al.*, *La Bible d’Alexandrie. Les Douze Prophètes* (BA 23.4–9), 144.

¹⁰² See e.g. Exod 1:15–16 (the Hebrew midwives and the Hebrew women), Exod 2:6 (“Hebrew children”); 1 Sam 4:6 (the Hebrew camp); 1 Sam 14:11 (Hebrew soldiers).

¹⁰³ H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 114: “It [i.e. the word ‘Hebrew’] is used in a purely ethnological sense”. See also D.N. FREEDMAN, B.E. WILLOUGHBY, art. “עִבְרִי ‘*ibrî*’”, 443: “According to Jonah 1:9, Jonah identifies himself over against the inhabitants of Nineveh [*sic!*] as ‘a Hebrew’. We have already seen in Exodus that the Israelites identify themselves as Hebrews over against foreigners. This late use of ‘*ibrî*’ can only be explained as an archaism.”

¹⁰⁴ See H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 115:

of heaven who made the sea and the dry land”. In this profession, which perhaps is adopting the liturgical formulas with which the Jews manifested their faith in YHWH (for example, Ps 124:8),¹⁰⁵ there are important elements to note which shed light on its content. Once again, it seems important to study the language in a detailed way. First of all, it should be noted that Jonah describes his relationship with YHWH with the verbal adjective נָרַץ. Generally, “fearing YHWH” is a key expression in the Old Testament conception of faith.¹⁰⁶ This should be reiterated, even if it is quite well known. It is a frequent expression for highlighting the specific relationship between Israel and its God, a relationship that implies the observing of the Law and that excludes the worship of other divinities on the part of Israel (Deut 4:10; 6: 2, etc.). In the context of Jonah 1:9, one could attribute a more nuanced sense to this verbal adjective, that is to say that all its connotations which we have mentioned pass to the second order. The same would go also for the meaning of “fear, dread”, in the strict sense of the word. This would mean that the term is employed as an idiomatic formula to express one’s faith in the God of Israel.¹⁰⁷ However, in the light of the immediate context, this does not seem to be the most adequate interpretation. In fact, as expressed, Jonah’s declaration arouses “a great fear” among the sailors in the sense of dread (Jonah 1:10). One could conclude, therefore, that Jonah’s declaration expresses not only respect for the God from whom he has fled but also a true fear of him.¹⁰⁸ In any case, we should emphasise an aspect which is usually neglected by the commentators¹⁰⁹: although addressing foreigners, Jonah is using language specific to the Hebrew tradition. This is probably a detail which is carrying a message for the reader: Jonah is profoundly rooted in the Hebrew faith; he is one who “fears” YHWH.¹¹⁰ Do the foreign sailors understand such a

¹⁰⁵ For this theory, which will not be further developed in this context, see e.g. C.-A. KELLER, *Jonas*, 274.

¹⁰⁶ See H.-F. FUHS, art. נָרַץ *yārē’*, 297.

¹⁰⁷ J. BECKER, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament*, 176.

¹⁰⁸ See already H. GESE, “Jona ben Amittai und das Jonabuch”, 128; S. GILLMAYR-BUCHER, “Jonah and the Other: A Discourse on Interpretative Competence”, 210; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 163. B. COSTA-CURTA, *La vita minacciata*, 147–148, summarizes these ideas as follows: “Egli [= Jonah] sta dicendo la sua identità di ebreo [...] e perciò fa riferimento a Dio [...] professando la propria fede in lui. Ma questa affermazione di Giona è anche contemporaneamente confessione della sua colpa. Egli sta fuggendo dal Signore, spaventato dalla sua missione e dalla volontà di salvezza che essa comporta, in un rifiuto esplicito di questo creatore del mare e della terra che egli afferma di venerare. Perciò, in quel *’ānī yārē’* egli dice di ‘temere Dio’ ma insieme allude al fatto di ‘averne paura’.”

¹⁰⁹ See e.g. P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 141, who only underlines the ironic dimension of Jonah’s confession; D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 461, who recalls other non-Yahwistic cults in Israel; see also R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 109, and P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 159–163, who do not touch this key issue.

¹¹⁰ Several authors draw the conclusion that Jonah is paying only lip service by making this declaration: see e.g. C.-A. KELLER, *Jonas*, p. 266: “Il ne dit que deux phrases, l’une impersonnelle, truffée de formules toutes faites (verse 9), l’autre pour demander qu’on le jette à l’eau.” P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 215: “La frase è troppo impersonale. È una formula imparata a memoria,

vocabulary? The Greek translator obviously had his doubts. Instead of translating אָרַךְ with φοβέομαι as usual (for example, in Jonah 1:5), he chooses another verb, σέβομαι, which, in classical and Hellenistic Greek, expresses the worship of a divinity (e.g. Plato, *Laws*, 729c). According to the LXX, therefore, Jonah is making use of a language that is less specific and, at the same time, more comprehensible from the point of view of an “international” audience in order to express the nature of his God. In any case, both the MT and the LXX share the following theme: although he has turned his back on YHWH by fleeing far from him, Jonah expresses his faith to the sailors so that they know with whom they are dealing.

c) In this connection, Jonah explains, YHWH is “the God of heaven”. Referring to YHWH, the title of “God of heaven” is something that occurs often in Hebrew texts, particularly those of the Persian period, for example, Neh 1:4; Dan 2:18.¹¹¹ In fact, if we trace this attribute to the foreign divinities (in particular to *Ba‘al Šamēm*, chiefly in a Phoenician and Syro-Palestinian context¹¹²), this formula is being used mainly to emphasise to the foreign sailors the greatness of YHWH which excels that of all the other gods addressed by each of them. The formula “YHWH, God of heaven” thus permits at the same time the expression that YHWH is not a local or national God but the one who is above all the other particular gods¹¹³ and who is able to rule the storm.¹¹⁴

d) In this discussion, even if expressed implicitly, the greatness and superiority of YHWH are highlighted once again by what Jonah adds in his profession of faith: YHWH is the one who also “made the sea and the dry land”. Although a formulation like this reproduces a truth present in various biblical texts in which the sea and the dry land are connected with the power of God, (Gen 1:9f; Exod 14:16; Ps 66:6; Neh 9:11), it is not easily found as such. The placing of the substantive “sea” before the dry land and beside the verb אָרַךְ, brings to prominence in this communication with the sailors that YHWH is the creator of the sea and that it is he, he alone, who has the power to raise up such a storm and to decide, therefore, between their life and their death. Even if they call on their own gods, the sailors cannot flee from the true author of the

è una risposta da catechismo. Il suo ‘timore di Dio’ non è che mera formalità.” However, it is questionable if this conclusion does justice to Jonah’s declaration. In fact, it conveys different messages that cannot be reduced to a common denominator; see the following paragraphs. R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 112, argues that the verb אָרַךְ has a wide range of meanings. Therefore, it should not be excluded that Jonah’s “fear of YHWH” moves in a field between real fear and veneration.

¹¹¹ For other examples, see the commentaries, e.g. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 115; J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 118.

¹¹² For a brief overview of the archeological and literary attestations for this divinity, see W. RÖLLIG, art. “Baal Shamem”.

¹¹³ See H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 115.

¹¹⁴ For this aspect, see J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 118.

storm, that God who can send a great wind over the waters and who, at the same time, is the only one able to still it.¹¹⁵ In other words: Jonah makes references to YHWH which the sailors can recognise, whatever their background. In this way, he does not speak of YHWH as the God of the patriarchs or of the Exodus, for example. Jonah's description of YHWH does not present any characteristic that is bound up markedly with the faith of Israel but presents features which seem able to be communicated beyond its borders and which are, therefore, also comprehensible to those who do not belong to the people of Israel. At the same time, it must not be forgotten that Jonah's declaration carries an implicit message for the readers of the book: the God of Israel is a universal God who exercises his power not only over Israelites but also over the foreign sailors.

Verses 10–16

(1) For our exegesis of Jonah 1:10, three elements in particular are important:

a) The verse does not record the events in exact chronological order.¹¹⁶ Obviously, verse 10g is resuming Jonah's speech which is not quoted literally but the content of which is explained in verse 10e–f. This speech provokes the question raised by the sailors in verse 10d (“why have you done this?”), in which the demonstrative pronoun *זֶה* refers to Jonah's flight.¹¹⁷

b) In the light of Jonah's confession, the sailors react in two ways: on the one hand, they ask, “why have you done this?”, on the other, it is said that they feared with a great fear” (Jonah 1:10). Here the verb *יָרָא*, together with the internal object *גְּדוּלְתָּהּ גְּדוּלְתָּהּ* which it governs, expresses the feeling of great fear which envelops the sailors in the light of what Jonah told them¹¹⁸: now they know that it was YHWH who had unleashed such a disaster because he had fled far from him.¹¹⁹ Before their very eyes, the sailors' theory that it was the fruit of the wrath of a god is

¹¹⁵ See also for this idea R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 111. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 119, goes even further: “The God of heaven, who can bring a storm to a dead halt, will also guide their future travel upon the seas and will continue to monitor their lives once they reach dry land.”

¹¹⁶ See also N. LOHFINK, “Jona ging zur Stadt hinaus”, 193–194; J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 121–122.

¹¹⁷ See H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 116.

¹¹⁸ T. HARVIAINEN, “Why were the Sailors not afraid of the Lord before Verse Jonah 1,10?”, 77, wonders why the sailors were so afraid because the declaration made by Jonah in Jonah 1: 9 would not explain their extreme fear. Moreover, Harviainen wants to know when Jonah had told the sailors that he was fleeing from the Lord. Harviainen argues as follows: “The sailors knew that Jonah was fleeing the Lord, because he had told them this before the tempest, perhaps when embarking on the ship in Jaffa.” However, the sailors had misunderstood the word “the Lord” insofar as they understood it in the sense of “master”: Jonah was fleeing from his master, i.e. a human master (*ibid.*, 80). However, this interpretation requires at least two other hypotheses that stand on shaky foundations.

¹¹⁹ However, the text does not allow the conclusion that “the sailors interpret it [i.e. *יָרָא*] as the fear that has led to Jonah's flight”, as claimed by S. GILLMAYR-BUCHER, “Jonah and the Other: A Discourse on Interpretative Competence”, 210.

now confirmed and explained in the account of the prophet to which the narrator alludes without going into further details.

c) At the end of Jonah 1:10, the question “why have you done this?” still remains open. It assumes that the sailors do not understand the behaviour of Jonah who has chosen to flee far from his God.¹²⁰ At the same time, however, they are obliged to share their fate with a passenger who has shown himself disobedient to that God whose name they now know. In this sense, because of Jonah, they too have to do with this God, *nolentes volentes*.

(2) In the face of the fury of the storm, which is increasingly pressing, the need to find a solution seems to be still more urgent. In the light of their awareness that it is Jonah who is the real one guilty of the current tragedy, the sailors ask him for the solution: “What shall we do¹²¹ with you so that the sea quieten down from upon us?” In this connection, we shall underline in what follows some implicit aspects of the discourse which are usually neglected by the studies on this verse.¹²² The sailors’ attitude shows a certain openness and amenability: they do not heap blame on Jonah nor wish to make of him a victim *tout court*. They wish to know how to conduct themselves before this God, YHWH, of whom they had, perhaps, heard speak but with whom they had not had any connection. If it is he alone who has power over the sea and the dry land, how is he to be convinced to still the fury of the wind and storm? How calm him from his anger? Only Jonah can have the answer¹²³: he belongs to the people who have YHWH as their God and who know his actions. What is more, Jonah, who with his flight has aroused this anger, must have a relation with him that is wholly particular: that God who has addressed him with a specific request wants from him a precise response which only he can carry out: Jonah and his action are the very response which they need if God is to change their doom of death into hope of life.

(3) Jonah’s response appears to be quite firm and definite (Gn 1:12): “Take me and throw me in the sea and it will calm down”. Indeed, as he himself affirms, Jonah is fully aware that God unleashed this storm on his account. However, although he is aware of his guilt, Jonah seeks pardon neither from God¹²⁴ nor from the sailors. On the contrary, Jonah sacrifices his life

¹²⁰ D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 462, paraphrases the question as follows: “How could you?” P. SESOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 162, argues: “La frase non è qui tanto domanda, quanto sorpresa per la disobbedienza di Giona verso Dio ...”

¹²¹ It is interesting that the sailors use the same verb עשה as appears in their previous question “why have you done this?” in asking Jonah what they ought to do; see also J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 122.

¹²² See e.g. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 117.

¹²³ See also P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 169: “Jetzt ist Jona gefragt, da allein durch ihn angesichts seiner Flucht vor JHWH eine Lösung zu erwarten ist.”

¹²⁴ For this idea, see W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 343.

so that the sailors, innocent of the disaster, may have at least the possibility of survival.¹²⁵ To hand himself over to them and, therefore, to the waves of the sea requires an act of courage¹²⁶ which exceeds his own strength but responds in a certain way both to the request of the sailors, who seek safety for themselves and their ship, and to that of God: the flight “far from the Lord” ends up in the depths of the sea where the relation between God and Jonah will find a new development and a new dimension.

(4) In Jonah 1:13, the attention focuses on the storm’s becoming increasingly rough, as underlined by the repetition of the participial phrase *כִּי הַיָּם הוֹלֵךְ וְנִסְעָר* which already appeared in Jonah 1:11. In any case, rather than executing Jonah’s order, that is, to throw him into the sea, the sailors are willing to avoid the sacrifice of the prophet, seeking salvation through desperate efforts (Jonah 1:13). Thus, they are presented by the narrator in a very positive way¹²⁷: in order to save their lives and that of Jonah,¹²⁸ the sailors seek to reach the shore by rowing with all their strength but in vain (*וְלֹא יָלְלוּ*; see e.g. Exod 7:21 for the same expression). From a narrative point of view, it is interesting to find the verb *שׁוּב* in Jonah 1:13. It is this verb that often refers to returning to God (e.g. Jer 3:14; Hos 14:3; Joel 2:13). In the book of Jonah, it appears with reference to the Ninevites whom the king invites to “turn from wicked ways and from violence” (Jonah 3:8). In Jonah 1:13, the useless attempts at bringing the ship and its crew to the land might be alluding to a positive meaning of “return”, that is, a successful return: the necessity for Jonah’s return to his God and to his mission instead of fleeing from him.¹²⁹ Moreover, the verb might be anticipating the topic of the future adhesion of the Ninevites to YHWH.

(5) While trying to reach the shore, the sailors do not cast Jonah into the sea immediately but take another measure: they invoke YHWH whose name they now know. Rather than appealing each to his own god, they address their prayer to the God of Jonah, YHWH, for the

¹²⁵ See R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 115: “Er muß sein Leben opfern, damit andere weiterleben dürfen.“

¹²⁶ Some authors seek to explain Jonah’s conduct by emphasising his alleged vices, e.g. P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 147: “Concern for the sailors camouflages self-concern. Altruism discloses, even as it hides, egocentrism”; W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 344: “Wenn er [i.e. Jonah] seinen Kopf nicht durchsetzen kann, will er lieber nicht mehr leben”. However, unlike chapter 4, where Jonah’s anger is mentioned twice, in chapter 1 neither Jonah’s emotions nor his motivations are of primary importance.

¹²⁷ These idea are highlighted by several authors, see e.g. W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 344; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 115.

¹²⁸ D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 463, assumes that the sailors “wanted to get Jonah off the ship”, but the text does not say anything about this plan.

¹²⁹ See P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 145–146; P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 154.

first time. What Jonah was expected to do in verse 6, that is, to invoke his god (קרא אל־אלהיָהּ), is now done by the foreign sailors.¹³⁰ Their prayer is full of fear and consists of three parts:

a) The sailors fear for their lives (אל־נָא נִאֲבָדָהּ), something obvious in the light of the circumstances mentioned in the preceding verse. Thus, the sailors attribute to YHWH the power of life and death over them. However, convinced that the storm is provoked by Jonah's flight, literally "for the sake of this man's life" (בְּנַפְשׁ הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה), they are reluctant to suffer the same punishment and to die with him. Nonetheless, they know that the only solution to prevent their own death is to cast Jonah into the sea.

b) Before doing so, they pray to YHWH that the shedding of innocent blood will not make them guilty: וְאַל־תַּתֵּן עָלֵינוּ דָם נָקִיא.¹³¹ With minor variants, this kind of expression appears several times in the Hebrew Bible, the closest parallels being Deut 21:8 and Jer 26:15. In Jonah 1:14, it consists of two elements, the vetitive "do not give upon us" and the phrase "innocent blood". The verb נתן, followed by the preposition על, has the meaning "to impute".¹³² The object of the verb is the "innocent blood". As emerges from the previous verses, Jonah has admitted his fault (Jonah 1:12). Hence, he cannot be considered as innocent. So the question arises as to why the sailors speak of *innocent* blood in the event that they cast him into the water? Probably the "innocence" can be referred only to "the *act* of shedding blood"¹³³, in this case the behaviour of the sailors, who are about to shed Jonah's blood. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that they have nothing to do with Jonah's guilt and with the causes of the storm that threatens the ship's crew as well as Jonah himself. Therefore, they are in a great dilemma: on the one hand, they hope that by casting Jonah overboard they will be saved from drowning, on the other hand, they feel innocent and do not want to become guilty of Jonah's probable death.¹³⁴ If they cast him into the sea, they are only accomplishing Jonah's wish. This is probably the message of their prayer. In any case, as we have seen, the expression "innocent blood" recalls biblical quotations like Deut 21:8 and Jer 26:15. Thus, the author of the book of Jonah is putting into the non-Israelite sailors' mouths expressions stemming from the traditions of Israel.¹³⁵ Once more, it is possible to find here a hidden message for the readers of the book: like Israelites, who are aware of the possible consequences of the shedding of innocent blood, the non-Israelite sailors want

¹³⁰ See also H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 119; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 116

¹³¹ This detail is absent from Josephus, *Ant.* 9.212: sailors are convinced that they are about to commit an ἀσέβημα towards Jonah.

¹³² See Ges¹⁸, 861.

¹³³ See J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 134.

¹³⁴ For a slightly different interpretation, see H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 120; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 180.

¹³⁵ See the commentaries, e.g. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 120; J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 56.

to avoid such an act at all costs. Thus, unlike Jeremiah's opponents, who want to kill the prophet (Jer 26:15), the sailors hesitate to throw Jonah overboard, considering this act a crime.¹³⁶

c) The prayer is concluded by the formula *כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה כְּאַשֶׁר תִּפְצֹתָ עָשִׂיתָ*, “because you, YHWH, have done as it pleased you”. What is remarkable is that the sailors give absolute priority to YHWH's will. In the past, he has acted as it pleased him, and in the abovementioned dilemma they are faced with the sailors have no other choice than trusting in his favour – even if they cast Jonah into the sea. Once again, it should be underlined that the formula “because you, YHWH, have done as it pleased you” is to be understood against the background of similar expressions in the Hebrew Bible. In Ps 115:3–8¹³⁷, a contrast is made between the powerless idols of the nations, on the one hand and, on the other, the God of Israel who is “in heaven and has done what has pleased” him (verse 3: *וְאֱלֹהֵינוּ בַשָּׁמַיִם כָּל אֲשֶׁר־הִפְּצָן עָשָׂה*). In Ps 135:5–6, the contrast is even sharper: YHWH is praised because he is above the gods and is able to accomplish what pleases him in heaven, on earth, in the sea and in the deeps (verse 6: *כָּל אֲשֶׁר־ כָּל אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה עָשָׂה בַשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ בַּיַּמִּים וּכְל־תְּהוֹמוֹת*). Similarly, in Isa 55:11, YHWH's word is said to be “efficient”: it does not return to him without accomplishing what he desires (*לֹא־יָשׁוּב אֵלַי רִיקִים* (*כִּי אִם־עָשָׂה אֶת־אֲשֶׁר תִּפְצֹתָי*). In the light of these quotations, it is possible to understand the final element of the sailors' prayer as implicit praise of YHWH's puzzling and enigmatic power that they have to submit to. He has the ultimate responsibility for everything that had happened to them: the storm, the result of the lot, the impossibility of reaching the shore. In other words: their destiny is in his hands.¹³⁸

In conclusion, in Jonah 1:14, the non-Israelite sailors address a prayer to YHWH, a god they did not know before. However, the knowledge of his name is like a key that enables them to enter into communication with this deity and to have an idea of his identity.¹³⁹ Moreover, the prayer of the sailors to receive deliverance confronts YHWH with a choice¹⁴⁰: Is he willing to save the lives of these non-Israelite sailors who invoke him for rescue? Or will he shed innocent blood, that is, the lives of the foreign sailors?

¹³⁶ For this comparison, see also P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 163.

¹³⁷ For this and the next Psalm quotation, see L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, vol. 2, 554; E. BONS, “Israel und die Götterbilder der Völker”, 20– 25.

¹³⁸ However, there is nothing in the text to indicate that the sailors express any opinion concerning the alleged powerlessness of other gods. This exegesis is advocated, e.g., by L. SCHMIDT, “*De Deo*”, 79.

¹³⁹ For this idea, see, e.g, P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 161.

¹⁴⁰ See also E. BONS, “YHWH und die Völker”, 20.

(6) The attitude described by the prayer does not involve negative consequences for the sailors. On the contrary, as emerges from Jonah 1:15, as soon as the sailors throw Jonah into the sea, the sea stops raging and the danger is averted. Two aspects deserve further attention:

a) First, the sailors decide to cast Jonah overboard: וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת-יֹנָתָן וַיַּטְּלוּהוּ אֶל-הַיָּם. The verb טול, “to throw, to cast”, appears four times in the first chapter of the book of Jonah: In Jonah 1:4, God “threw a great wind”; in 1:5, the sailors cast the cargo from the ship to lighten it; in 1:12, the prophet himself asks to be cast into the sea; and, finally, in 1:15, the sailors accomplish his wish. These four occurrences of טול establish a link of dependence between the action of God who calls Jonah and the events that follow. It seems that this concatenation of facts is regulated by a link of cause and effect.¹⁴¹ The fact that Jonah flees from YHWH ultimately leads to the destiny he has to face: to be thrown into the sea.

b) The submission of the sailors to Jonah’s will eventually leads to a solution insofar as the sea ceases from its raging. Thus, the sailors are confirmed in their belief that the God of Jonah, YHWH, is not only able to accomplish what he desires but that he is a God who rules over the power of the sea. The calming down of the storm proves that he is the Lord of creation, just as Jonah told them in 1:9. Moreover, the decision the sailors took, that is, to throw Jonah into the sea, proves to be right and is ratified by Jonah’s God.¹⁴²

(7) As a result, the sailors “feared YHWH greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to YHWH and made vows”. Once again, it is necessary to examine each of the three elements of this verse in detail.

a) First of all, the idea of “fear” deserves careful analysis. How are we to describe the attitude of the sailors towards YHWH? To begin with, the verb ירא, has a broad range of semantic nuances. In the Hebrew Bible, where it is attested around 430 times, it can be found both in religious and in non-religious contexts. Generally speaking, the verb denotes the human emotion of fear, in particular the fear of death, even when it is not explicitly mentioned. This is the case, for example, when the verb ירא and its word group is used in non-religious contexts, notably in texts dealing with the fear of animals (Amos 3:8 [lion]; Job 5:22 [wild beasts]), fear of dangers (Jer 42:16 [sword]; Prov 31:21 [snow]) and the fear of influential persons (1 Kgs 1:51 [King Solomon]; Jer 26:21 [King Jehoiakim]; Exod 14:10 [Egyptians])¹⁴³. In religious contexts, ירא and its semantic group express particularly the idea of “fearing” deities,

¹⁴¹ See also P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 189.

¹⁴² L.C. ALLEN, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 211–212, goes as far as saying that “their warrant [i.e. the sailors’ warrant] is based on Yahweh’s own actions: ‘For he commands, and raises the stormy wind, which lifts up the waves’ (Ps 107:25)”.

¹⁴³ For more details, see, e.g., D.J.A. CLINES, “The fear of the Lord is Wisdom (Job 28:28)”, 57–72.

understood as an attitude of respect and reverence for them and/or their putative acts, for example, in 1 Sam 12:18: “So Samuel called upon YHWH, and YHWH sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared YHWH and Samuel” (וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיִּירָא כָּל־הָעָם מְאֹד אֶת־יְהוָה וְאֶת־שְׁמוּאֵל קִלְת וּמְטָר). Of course, “fear” of a deity might include the feeling of dread before the divine world and its mysteries¹⁴⁴ (e.g. Isa 41:5; Jer 10:7). Nevertheless, it is important to note that “fearing a deity” has ethical and practical consequences. Therefore, reverence for God would be also the result of the fear of the negative consequences that disobedience to his laws and his commandments might entail (see e.g. Deut 6:24; 8:6; Prov 14:2).¹⁴⁵ In the first chapter of the book of Jonah, the verb ירא appears four times: once it refers to Jonah, who confesses to being a Hebrew and to fear the God of heaven (verse 9; see above the exegesis of verse 9), and three times to the sailors (vv. 5, 10, 16). In the first instance (verse 5), the sailors are *terrorised* by the storm provoked by God. In the second instance, they are even more afraid, for they have understood that it was Jonah’s disobedience to God that is ultimately the reason for the storm (verse 10). Finally, they fear the God of Jonah even more, once he has appeased the storm (verse 16). The first two occurrences of the verb refer to the panic of the sailors who are in a situation they can hardly manage by themselves: the violence of the storm and the wrath of a God whom they do not even know. As we have seen, in vv. 9 and 16, the fear is referred to God. In verse 9, Jonah’s confession of faith contains the aspect of fear of God, on the one hand. On the other, it is an implicit admission of guilt: he had escaped from the God he worships. This means that the prophet’s reverence towards his God has the additional connotation of fear of him (see above the exegesis of verse 9). Once Jonah is thrown into the sea, however, it is the sailors’ role to fear God (verse 16) as a consequence of the event they have experienced: the storm assuaged by God. This implies that the sailors are not punished for having thrown the prophet into the sea. On closer examination, we are witnessing a *crescendo* in the narrative: the fear (even “panic”) of the sailors is transformed into a kind of respect and veneration towards YHWH. In fact, firstly, the sailors fear for their lives (verse 5); then, their fear increases because they know the real origin of their misfortune (verse 10); and, finally, they fear YHWH greatly because he was obviously able to master the storm and the raging waves.¹⁴⁶ The initial fear of losing their lives is replaced by a fearful reverence towards God. This new attitude of the sailors comes to the fore in two other acts: they offer him sacrifices and make vows. Do they recognize that they have to do with an

¹⁴⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the occurrences, see B. COSTACURTA, *La vita minacciata*, 124–145.

¹⁴⁵ For this idea see D.J.A. CLINES, “The fear of the Lord is Wisdom (Job 28:28)”, 62–66.

¹⁴⁶ See also, B. COSTACURTA, *La vita minacciata*, 149.

extremely powerful God who has to be obeyed and respected? If this were the case, their fearful reverence of him ought to be understood as the result of their experiential knowledge: The experience of the storm as well as Jonah's answer in verse 9 – which is simultaneously a confession of faith and an admission of guilt – have prompted the sailors to recognize his supremacy.

b) As for the idea of offering, it should be noted that in the Hebrew Bible, in fact, the verb זָבַח and its semantic group are used to express the offering of a gory sacrifice – usually a slaughtered animal¹⁴⁷ – to YHWH (Isa 43:23; Ps 50:15.23; 1 Sam 2:29) or to other deities¹⁴⁸ (e.g., Lev 17:7; Judg 16:23). We cannot find a precise description of the execution of this rite. In the Hebrew Bible, it is attested with reference to solemn ceremonies (e.g. Gen 31:54; Num 22:40; 2 Chr 18:2) and, above all, to feasts that deal with the choice of a king (e.g. 1 Kgs 1:9.19.25). Before the era of the centralization of the cult, sacrifices were probably celebrated in a rather private form by the members of a family or by rather numerous groups (Deut 33:19; 1 Sam 9:12; 2 Kgs 10:19). In the light of these considerations, several questions arise:

– Where do the sailors offer their sacrifices and accomplish their vows? Are they promising further sacrifices to be fulfilled at the end of the voyage or do they fulfil the sacrifices and vows on board the ship?

– Why do the sailors offer a sacrifice to YHWH? What value is to be attributed to their sacrifices and vows?

– Do these acts imply, on the one hand, a total abandonment of idolatry, which the sailors might have possibly practised before, and, on the other, an exclusive worship of YHWH?

Unfortunately, the book of Jonah does not provide sufficient information concerning these matters. Hence it is necessary to look into the current state of research and to try to answer these two questions.

(α) Where did the sailors offer sacrifices, on board the ship or in a temple? In the past, scholars have advanced various hypotheses regarding the possible interpretations of the text. In order to solve the question of the place where the sacrifice is supposed to have been offered, it has been suggested to understand the second part of verse 16 as a *hysteron proteron*¹⁴⁹: although the sacrifice is mentioned first, the real sequence of events is in reverse order: the vows precede

¹⁴⁷ Oxen, sheep, and goats (e.g. Hos 5:6; Mic 6:6–7) are mentioned as sacrificial victims; see B. LANG, J. BERGMANN, H. RINGGREN, art. זָבַח *zābhach* זָבַח *zebhash*, 20. For a systematic survey of the Old Testament evidence, see also A. MARX, *Les systèmes sacrificiels de l'Ancien Testament*, chapter II: “La matière du sacrifice”.

¹⁴⁸ See I. CARDELLINI, *I Sacrifici nell'Antica Alleanza. Tipologie, Rituali, Celebrazioni*, 66.

¹⁴⁹ See the definition in H. LAUSBERG, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, § 891.

the sacrifice. This order seems to be in line with some Psalm passages according to which a sacrifice might be offered in fulfilment of a vow, e.g. Ps 50:14; 66:13–14; 116:17f.¹⁵⁰ In other words, the sailors would be promising to offer sacrifices to YHWH, but not before reaching dry land.¹⁵¹ Thus, the vows would have to be understood as promises to be fulfilled in the future.¹⁵² This hypothesis seems necessary in order to avoid two problems: Firstly, the question arises if it was possible to offer sacrifices on board a ship and if there were still edible products appropriate to a sacrifice once the cargo had been thrown into the sea (verse 5).¹⁵³ Secondly, in the light of the centralisation of the cult in the temple of Jerusalem, another sanctuary would have been considered illegitimate, *a fortiori* a ship somewhere on the high seas or on the shore. In view of the fact that the Jerusalem temple appears to have claimed the monopoly of the cult in the Persian era¹⁵⁴, the sailors' sacrifice should have taken place nowhere other than in Jerusalem.¹⁵⁵

However, the objection may be raised that the narration does not locate the sacrifice elsewhere than on board the ship.¹⁵⁶ Do the sailors still have some food on board, albeit in limited quantities, so as to offer these gifts to YHWH?¹⁵⁷ This information is perhaps implied. In addition, there is some evidence for the assumption that ships were equipped with a certain sacred space.¹⁵⁸ Be this as it may, it must not be taken for granted that a sacrifice had to be

¹⁵⁰ These texts are quoted by H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 122. Wolff, however, dismisses the hypothesis that the sacrifice in Jonah 1:16 is to be considered the fulfilment of a vow. As for Ps 116, see the analysis by H. TITA, *Gelübde als Bekenntnis*, 120–122: “V 14 und 18 erklären dieses *tôdâ*-Opfermahl als das Gelübde, das der Sprecher JHWH noch in der Not *gelobt* hatte und nun *einlösen* will [...] Damit ist deutlich, daß der Sprecher in der Bedrängnis für den Fall seiner Errettung Dank gelobt hatte.” Concerning the two other Psalm passages, Ps 50:14; 66:13, see *ibid.*, 175: 183.

¹⁵¹ This hypothesis goes back to H. GESE, “Jona ben Amittai und das Jonabuch”, esp. 128, note 18. The article was firstly published in 1985.

¹⁵² D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 465: “These vows were almost certainly nothing other than promises to bring yet more sacrifices to Yahweh in the future”. See also L.C. ALLEN, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 212; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 121; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 190.

¹⁵³ See e.g. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 138: “Where did the sailors get the victims, especially after they had denuded the ship to keep it afloat? Moreover, could sailors so recently ‘converted’ to the true God risk losing it all by offering sacrifices outside of the Jerusalem Temple?” For the first question, see already an observation made by Jerome (*Commentarii in prophetas minores* [CCL 76, 392–393]): *et immolauerunt hostias, quas certe iuxta litteram in mediis fluctibus non habebant...*

¹⁵⁴ P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 167, emphasises that the sacrifice was certainly not offered in Jerusalem, and that this idea conflicts with the centralisation of the cult in Jerusalem.

¹⁵⁵ For this hypothesis see D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 465; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 191.

¹⁵⁶ See, e.g., H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 121–122.

¹⁵⁷ W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 344, thinks of food supplies for the ship's crew.

¹⁵⁸ For this idea, see A.J. BRODY, “*Each Man Cried out to his God*”, 5–6, states: “The ship itself provided sacred space for Canaanite and Phoenician sailors at sea [...]. While sailing in times of threat from tempest or battle, mariners often made vows to their sacred patrons which were fulfilled once the safety of the shore had been reached”. See also the texts quoted by J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 139.

carried out necessarily in the Jerusalem temple. Although a sacred place is supposed to guarantee the presence of God, a sacrifice could have been offered in a foreign land (e.g. in the desert, see Exod 18:12), even in the absence of a priesthood and a sanctuary (e.g. Gen 31:54).¹⁵⁹

In conclusion, we should not rule out the possibility that the sacrifice mentioned in Jonah 1:16 could have taken place on board the ship. As for the chronological order of sacrifice and vows, some biblical texts seem to suggest that sacrifice is the fulfilment of a vow, as we have already seen (e.g. Ps 50:14; 66:1; 116:17f). However, in Jonah 1:16 the sequence is opposite to that claimed by the representatives of the *hysteron proteron* hypothesis: the sailors made vows after having offered the sacrifice.¹⁶⁰ The syntax of the verse does not allow another conclusion.¹⁶¹

(β) As for the second question, that is, the function of the sailors' vows, a careful analysis of the textual evidence is necessary. Generally speaking,¹⁶² a vow is a promise to the deity that "links a specific action of the votary to a specific action of the deity".¹⁶³ Concretely, the worshipper asks a god to act in his favour according to his specific needs. If the deity hears the prayer, the supplicant will in turn fulfil the promise. Hence, the vow implies a "freewill offering in fulfilment of a promise".¹⁶⁴ In the Hebrew Bible, the only addressee of vows is YHWH, except for Jer 44:25. As can be demonstrated by some narrative texts, vows are made under a great variety of circumstances like war (Num 21:2; Judg 11:30–31), journeys (Gen 28:20) or childlessness (1 Sam 1:11). In these cases, the vows are considered conditional. However, in Jonah 1:16, the situation is different insofar as the narrative does not report any explicit promise the sailors would have made during the storm. Consequently, no specific fulfilment of such a promise appears to be necessary.

Another type of vow that is not subject to any condition (the so-called "unconditional vow") occurs, for example, in David's promise according to Ps 132:2.¹⁶⁵ Can we infer, therefore, that the sailors fulfilled such an unconditional vow, that is, in thanks for the deliverance they have

¹⁵⁹ For the different occasions for offering a sacrifice, see, e.g., A. MARX, *Les systèmes sacrificiels de l'Ancien Testament*, 146.

¹⁶⁰ According to H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 122, the vows follow the sacrifice. For the same interpretation, see also, J. JEREMIAS, "Die Sicht der Völker im Jonabuch (Jona 1 und Jona 3)", 560: "Offensichtlich hat der Erzähler keine Wallfahrt der Matrosen nach Jerusalem im Blick", that is, a pilgrimage to be realised in the future as fulfilment of the vows.

¹⁶¹ See e.g. A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*. 93:

¹⁶² For more detailed studies of vows in the Hebrew Bible, see e.g. C.A. KELLER, art. "נדר *ndr to vow*", 719–722; O. KAISER, art. נָדַר *nāḏar*; נִדְרָה *neḏer*, *TDOT IX*, 242–255; T.W. CARTLEDGE, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, chapters 4–5; H. TITA, *Gelübde als Bekenntnis*, chapters 2–6.

¹⁶³ C.A. KELLER, art. "נדר *ndr to vow*", 720.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 721.

¹⁶⁵ For a detailed analysis of this vow, see H. TITA, *Gelübde als Bekenntnis*, 195–199.

experienced, as was suggested by biblical scholars, especially in the wake of the approach of *Formgeschichte*?¹⁶⁶ Indeed, several biblical texts might lend themselves to this interpretation, for example, the notice that Elkanah paid his vow (1 Sam 1:21). Moreover, as we have already seen, certain Psalms obviously establish a connection between a vow made in a situation of distress and its fulfilment (e.g. Ps 66:13–14; 116:17f).¹⁶⁷ Hence, the sacrifice itself or a thanksgiving liturgy would represent the fulfilment of a vow previously made.¹⁶⁸

As for the nature of the sailors' vows in Jonah 1:16, many scholars agree on their function of gratitude. Having obtained deliverance from an extreme danger, the sailors thank YHWH, praying and offering, and so fulfilling their previous promises.¹⁶⁹ However, is it legitimate to suppose that the sailors in Jonah 1 had made such a vow that they feel forced to fulfil once they have escaped from mortal danger? This hypothesis is questionable. First of all, it should be noted that the direct speeches of Jonah 1 do not report such an unconditional vow. Moreover, we should not take it for granted that Jonah 1:16 speaks of the fulfilment of a vow. In fact, several Hebrew texts (e.g. 2 Sam 15:7–8; Ps 76:12; Eccl 5:3) differentiate between making a vow (verb נָדַר), on the one hand, and its fulfilment (verb שָׁלַם), on the other. Hence, it is far from certain that Jonah 1:16 alludes to an act of thanksgiving which would be required by a previous vow. In this regard, the mention of vows in Jonah 1:16 is different from the other occurrence of the verb נָדַר in Jonah 2:10 where exactly the terminology of making and fulfilling vows appears: אֲשֶׁר נָדַרְתִּי אֲשַׁלֵּם, “what I have vowed I will pay”. That means, praying in the fish's belly, Jonah is willing to accomplish his vow to YHWH.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, we have to take seriously the difference between these two passages in the book of Jonah. While 2:10 refers to vows and their fulfilment, 1:16 does not allude to any fulfilment.

So how are we to interpret the vows in Jonah 1:16? The only possible solution probably lies in abandoning the idea of fulfilment. Instead of fulfilling a previous vow, the sailors *make vows* as has been claimed by a minority of authors.¹⁷¹ However, the text of Jonah 1:16 does not

¹⁶⁶ E.g. C.A. KELLER, art. “נָדַר *ndr to vow*”, 721.

¹⁶⁷ These and other Psalm passages are quoted by O. KAISER, art. נָדַר *nāḏar*; נָדַר *neder*, 246, who underlines the similarities with Jonah 1:16.

¹⁶⁸ According to H. GUNKEL, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, 248, the vows at the end of the lamentation are to be understood as vows of thanksgiving, not as vows of supplication.

¹⁶⁹ See O. KAISER, art. נָדַר *nāḏar*; נָדַר *neder*, 247; C.A. KELLER, “נָדַר *ndr to vow*”, 721; see also J. JEREMIAS, *Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha*, 88: “Dankopfer und Erfüllung der in der Not gesprochenen Gelübde”; J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 140; L.C. ALLEN, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 212: “They offer to Yahweh their Hallelujah in devout recognition of his saving power.”

¹⁷⁰ See e.g. R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 179; A. MARX, “Première partie: Ancien Testament”, 48.

¹⁷¹ See e.g. A. SCHENKER, “Gelübde im Alten Testament: Unbeachtete Aspekte”, 28. According to Schenker, Jonah 1:16 is without any doubt a promise of thanksgiving. In fact, the text does not say that

provide any further information. In fact, we are ignorant of the content of the vows, and the text does not specify how and when they will be fulfilled. In order to fill this gap in the information different hypotheses have been formulated: do the sailors promise to offer further sacrifices as soon as they have reached a safe harbour?¹⁷² This hypothesis is very far-fetched because the narrative does not take into consideration the arrival of the ship.¹⁷³ Do the sailors promise to tell about their deliverance¹⁷⁴ or to thank God in the future?¹⁷⁵ This interpretation cannot be ruled out if Jonah 1:16 is read in the light of a so-called “*tôdâh*-Gelübde”: having become “fearers of YHWH”, the sailors promise to thank and honour God in public.¹⁷⁶ Of course, these interpretations show traces of the approach of the Psalter that was developed by the followers of *Formgeschichte*. However, we have to ask whether such an interpretation risks forcing the sailors’ attitudes into cultic or liturgical patterns deduced from the Psalms – whereas Jonah 1:16 offers only scant information about the nature and the implications of the vows in question. Probably a safer way to understand Jonah 1:16 better is to abandon the categories of *Formgeschichte* and to think of a kind of “lasting bond of trust with Yahweh.”¹⁷⁷ Like the psalmist of Ps 61:9, who fulfils his vows day after day by singing praises to God’s name, the sailors would neither forget the deliverance they had experienced nor their deliverer they only know through the witness of Jonah. Even more, by means of unconditional vows, they would promise to continue worshipping this God.¹⁷⁸

(8) On the assumption that the sacrifice takes place on board the ship, it ought to be considered an action of thanksgiving. In fact, the sailors do not offer the sacrifice during the mortal danger but after having survived.¹⁷⁹ Two aspects should be highlighted in this context:

the sailors fulfilled their vows but that they made vows. See also F. ZANELLA, *The Lexical Field of the Substantives of ‘Gift’ in Ancient Hebrew*, 232.

¹⁷² See T.W. CARTLEDGE, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and in the Ancient Near East*, 64.

¹⁷³ See also H. TITA, *Gelübde als Bekenntnis*, 138: “[...] eine mögliche weitere Gefährdung der Reise, die solche Bittgelübde plausibel machen würde, (liegt) nicht im Horizont der Erzählung.”

¹⁷⁴ For this hypothesis, see L. SCHMIDT, “*De Deo*”, 81.

¹⁷⁵ See e.g. A. SCHENKER, “Gelübde im Alten Testament: Unbeachtete Aspekte”, 28.

¹⁷⁶ H. TITA, *Gelübde als Bekenntnis*, 138.

¹⁷⁷ H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 122.

¹⁷⁸ H. TITA, *Gelübde als Bekenntnis*, 128: “Wären die Versprechen der JHWH-Verehrung dagegen bedingungslos [...], dann käme darin die Entscheidung zum Ausdruck, die aus der augenblicklichen Gotteserkenntnis hervorgehende Anbetung auch in Zukunft fortzusetzen.”

¹⁷⁹ In this respect, Alfred Marx’ observations deserve approval, see A. MARX, *Les systèmes sacrificiels de l’Ancien Testament*, 147 : “[...] c’est après que la tempête se soit apaisée que les marins offrent des sacrifices à Yhwh (Jon. i:16) : lorsqu’elle se déchaîne, ils prient (Jon. i 5-6). C’est au moment de leur délivrance, et non pendant qu’ils sont dans l’adversité, que les fidèles offrent des sacrifices, en action de grâce, associant ainsi Yhwh à leur joie.”

– Firstly, the sacrifice in question, a זָבַח, is, in a certain sense, a common meal. Prepared by men, it is shared with the divinity considered as a guest.¹⁸⁰ Thus, in the case of Jonah 1:16, the sailors would invite YHWH to this kind of meal, celebrating their deliverance together with their deliverer. Needless to say, inviting a divinity to a common meal requires a positive relationship.¹⁸¹

– Secondly, the Old Testament texts do not exclude the possibility of non-Israelites participating in sacrifices in honour of YHWH (Jethro in Exod 18:12; Naaman in 2 Kgs 5:17).¹⁸² These examples show that the spontaneous worship of YHWH by the non-Israelite sailors is not exceptional, especially in the light of the salvation they have experienced.

If the sacrifice is followed by vows, and if these vows are fulfilled in the future, the sailors' worship of YHWH is not at all ephemeral but goes beyond the moment of deliverance. Biblical scholars speak of a kind of partnership and relationship of confidence established by means of a vow, that is, between the divine partner and the human partner who engages himself for the future¹⁸³ and who expects or has already obtained help from the deity.¹⁸⁴

What is particularly noteworthy in Jonah 1:16 is that the sailors are foreigners. This text calls to mind Isa 19:21, which is the only other example of foreigners' vows in the Hebrew Bible. In a sort of vision, the prophet announces that the Egyptians “will worship with sacrifice and offering, and will make a vow to YHWH and perform it” (לִיְהוָה וְשָׁלְמוּ וְעָבְדוּ זָבַח וּמִנְחָה וְנָדְרוּ וְנָדְרוּ). To be sure, the text of Jonah 1:16 is not as detailed as Isa 19:21. However, in this fictional narrative what Isa 19:21 announces has become a fictional reality.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, one crucial question still remains open: what are the implications of the sailors' attitudes? Several hypotheses can be considered:

– Although the sailors fear the Lord greatly, it would be too bold to assert that they convert to YHWH.¹⁸⁶ In fact, if “conversion” means exclusive worship of YHWH,¹⁸⁷ we have to admit that the text does not say a word about a possible abandonment of putative former religious

¹⁸⁰ A. MARX, “Première partie: Ancien Testament”, 27–28 ; id., *Les systèmes sacrificiels de l'Ancien Testament*, p. 143.

¹⁸¹ See e.g. A. MARX, “Première partie: Ancien Testament”, 30.

¹⁸² See also B. LANG, J. BERGMANN, H. RINGGREN, art. זָבַח *zābhach* זָבַח *zebhach*, 18; A. MARX, *Les systèmes sacrificiels de l'Ancien Testament*, 23.

¹⁸³ A. MARX, “Première partie: Ancien Testament”, 48 : “Le vœu établit ainsi un partenariat entre le fidèle et son Dieu. Il permet au fidèle de se projeter dans l'avenir.”

¹⁸⁴ See O. KAISER, art. נָדַר *nāḏar*; נָדַר *nedar*, *TDOT*, IX, 250.

¹⁸⁵ See also P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 166.

¹⁸⁶ For this hypothesis, see e.g. H. GESE, “Jona ben Amittai und das Jonabuch”, 134 (“Bekehrungsgeschichte der Heiden”); J. JEREMIAS, *Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha*, 88: “Die Gottesfurcht [...] ist für die Seeleute Ausdruck ihrer Bekehrung zum wahren Gott.”

¹⁸⁷ For this opinion, see e.g. L. SCHMIDT, “*De Deo*”, 81 note 72: “Überwältigt von Jahwes Macht ist für sie fortan nur noch Jahwe Gott.”

practices.¹⁸⁸ Conversely, the text does not state explicitly that the sailors continue worshipping their former gods after their deliverance and that they simply “complete” the number of their gods by adding YHWH.¹⁸⁹

– Although the sailors make vows to YHWH, it is hardly possible to conclude that they become proselytes¹⁹⁰ or are even integrated with the chosen people.¹⁹¹ In fact, the text does not make any statements regarding the relationship between the sailors and the people of Israel. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that, according to the book of Jonah, non-Israelites can have an access to the community of believers in YHWH. However, the fact remains that this biblical text does not address the issue of the relationship between the people of Israel and non-Israelite worshippers of YHWH.

– Although the sailors offer sacrifices to YHWH, we cannot infer that they become permanent members of the cult of YHWH.¹⁹² In fact, it is not stated that the sailors continue participating in the cult of YHWH, no matter where and in what manner this cult is carried out.

However, taking into consideration the ideas underlying the text, the results are far from negative. First of all, it has to be highlighted that the sailors have experienced that YHWH is a powerful God who rules over the sea and the dry land. On the other hand, they have to conclude that invoking their own gods in the situation of danger has not produced any concrete result. Unlike these gods, the unknown God they know only as a result of Jonah’s confession in Jonah 1:9 has obviously not refused the prayers of people who have invoked him in mortal danger. Therefore, the sacrifices and the vows are able to create a new relationship between the anonymous non-Israelite sailors and the God they have not known before. Hence, the idea is not far-fetched that the sacrifice represents a first spontaneous reaction in order to celebrate the

¹⁸⁸ The hypothesis that the sailors abandon their gods goes back to Antiquity, see e.g. Jerome (CCL 76, 393): ... *promittunt uota facientes, se numquam ab eo quem colere coeperant, recessuros.*

¹⁸⁹ This hypothesis is defended e.g. by M. GERHARDS, *Studien zum Jonabuch*, 178–179, who contends that the sailors recognise YHWH as a mighty god. However, they do not worship him exclusively.

¹⁹⁰ According to H. GESE, “Jona ben Amittai und das Jonabuch”, 128, note 18, the sacrifice that the sailors would offer means that they become, as proselytes, members of the people of Israel; see also R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 121: “Der ungehorsame Prophet muß untergehen, die aufgeschlossenen Nichtisraeliten werden zu Proselyten und dürfen leben.”

¹⁹¹ For this hypothesis, see P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 166.

¹⁹² For such an interpretation, see e.g. R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 121: “So traten die Seemänner mit ihren Gelübden und Opfern in den Kreis der Kulturteilnehmer des JHWH-Kultes ein.” Similarly P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 192: “... sie [erscheinen, i.e. the mariners] geradezu als JHWH-Gläubige und Angehörige der JHWH-Gemeinde ...”

deliverance with the deliverer, while the vows are able to create “a lasting bond of trust”¹⁹³ between the sailors and YHWH, as we have seen above.

Once again it should be pointed out that the text does not give further information about the place where, and the manner in which the sailors could continue worshipping YHWH.¹⁹⁴ In any case, this gap in the information probably bears a message that the reader of the book of Jonah is invited to decipher: the God of Jonah is presented to the reader as a universal God who does not refuse the prayers of people who do not belong to the people of Israel.¹⁹⁵

δ) Concluding remarks

In past research, the sailors’ attitudes have been interpreted as a conversion to YHWH. In fact, to fear YHWH, to offer him sacrifices and to fulfil vows might be understood as steps in that direction. On the one hand, the reverence shown to YHWH could be understood as a sincere adhesion to him; on the other hand, the sacrifices could represent the visible expression of this new relationship between the sailors and YHWH. Furthermore, the vows might imply the sailors’ future adoration or worship of YHWH. Nonetheless, if we retain the category of conversion in the case of Jonah 1:16, we should use it in a nuanced way. Indeed, except for the vows, the text does not use specific vocabulary expressing a permanent relationship with YHWH and with the community of believers. For example, verbs like לָוּה, “to join” (Isa 56:3, 6), and בָּוֵא, “to enter” (Deut 23:2–9; Ruth 2:12), are missing in the context of Jonah 1:16. However, even if the future religious attitudes of the sailors are not clearly outlined or well defined, there is no doubt that the first chapter of the book of Jonah takes into consideration the possibility that YHWH hears the prayers of non-Israelites and that non-Israelites can worship him. Thus, the author of the book of Jonah would have the Israelite reader believe, at least between the lines, that non-Israelites are not excluded from entering into a relationship with the God of Israel by means of sacrifices and vows – although this model of adhesion to the God of Israel is independent of Israel’s history with God and its own religious practices.

¹⁹³ H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 121; J. JEREMIAS, “Die Sicht der Völker im Jonabuch (Jona 1 und Jona 3)”, 560, associates the relationship between the sailors and God with Zeph 2:11. Admittedly, both texts have in common the idea that YHWH can be worshipped at any given location.

¹⁹⁴ See E. EYNIKEL, “Les païens peuvent-ils participer au culte de Yahvé?”, 128: “L’ouvrage [= the book of Jonah] ne précise cependant pas les modalités de ce culte.”

¹⁹⁵ See also V. HAARMANN, *JHWH-Verehrer der Völker*, 186, who contends that the sailors, as gentile YHWH-worshippers, remain non-Israelites. Neither do they become proselytes nor members of the people of Israel. Nevertheless, they worship YHWH; see also ID., “Their Burnt Offerings and their Sacrifices will be Accepted on my Altar (Isa 56:7)”, 164–166; M. ROTH, *Israel und die Völker im Zwölfprophetenbuch*, 138: “Am Schluss der See-Erzählung sind sie [= the sailors], von der religiösen Praxis aus beurteilt, kaum noch von einem Israeliten zu unterscheiden.”

c) Jonah and the Ninevites (Jonah 3:1–10)

α) Introductory remarks

Once the events linked to the prophet's refusal to carry the divine message to the city of Nineveh (Jonah 1 and 2) are finished, chapter 3 picks up the story at exactly the point where the events tied up with the sending of the prophet had been interrupted on account of his opposition. In this way, the third chapter of Jonah constitutes a sort of new beginning to the story. In fact it opens with a note of the fact that God is addressing his word to Jonah "for a second time" (Jonah 3:1: שְׁנִיָּתָא).

In this chapter of our exegesis of Jonah, we shall try to analyse how the Ninevites arrived at their change and how God took it upon himself to accept the outcome. In this connection, it seems necessary to examine carefully some key elements which open a new way to understanding what the message of the book seems to wish to present, that is, the kinds of relation between the God of Israel and the nations. With regard to this, we shall be treating the following key elements in particular:

- the initial order which is confirmed by YHWH and the obedience of Jonah;
- the emphasis on the exaggerated dimension of Nineveh (verse 3) as a characteristic of human power and of deep-rooted sin;
- the, probably deliberate, ambiguity of the vocabulary employed in relation to Jonah's message in which the condemnation would already contain an expectation of salvation (verse 4);
- the "believing" of the Ninevites (verse 5) as starting point of the Ninevites' process of change and cause of all the other gestures of penitence (vv. 6–8);
- the rites of self-abasement and prayer as necessary prelude to creating a balance in the relation between Nineveh and God (vv. 6–8);
- the exhortation and command of the king for a change of behaviour accompanied by the hope of a possible change of decision by God (vv. 7–9);
- God's observing of the change of the Ninevites (v. 10a);
- God's change as response to the change of Nineveh (v. 10b).

A careful reading of the studies of the book of Jonah to date reveals a lack of detailed study of some of the questions just listed. In particular, we are referring to the presence of the verb אָמַן "believe" in relation to Elohim who, in this book, is being placed, surprisingly, in relation to the Ninevites, that is, non-Israelites. Furthermore, precisely with reference to this last element, we think it necessary to focus our attention on how the process of the Ninevites' change is

presented since they seem to tend to act as Israel could have done in a parallel situation. Moreover, an element which surely cannot be neglected is the fact that the change of the Ninevites is accepted by God in the light of a real observing and assessing of their actions which is expressed in verse 10 by means of the apparently common verb ראה, “see”.

Thus, our analysis of Jonah chapter 3 is not aimed at providing an exhaustive commentary on the biblical text but at offering some new perspectives, little researched till now, concerning the relationship between the God of Israel and the non-Israelites. This is the lens through which we propose to analyse the text with the particular intention of examining the process of change and the implications which the divine message triggers both on the narrative and the theological levels.

β) Text and working translation

1a	בְּיָמָיו דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה שְׁנִית לֵאמֹר:	Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying:
2a	קוּם	“Arise,
b	לֵךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה	go to Nineveh, that great city,
c	וּקְרָא אֵלֶיהָ אֶת־הַקְּרִיָּאָה	and cry out to it ¹⁹⁶ the message
d	אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ:	that I am going to tell you.” ¹⁹⁷
3a	וַיָּקָם יוֹנָה	So Jonah arose
b	וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה כְּדִבְרֵי יְהוָה	and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.
c	וַנִּינְוָה הָיְתָה עִיר־גְּדוֹלָה לְאֱלֹהִים מִהַלֵּךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים	

¹⁹⁶ The first two verses of chapter 3 refer to the order of YHWH addressed to Jonah. These two verses have nearly the same formula as was employed in Jonah 1:1–2. It is noteworthy that the preposition changes: whereas על “against” occurred in 1:2 we find אל “to, into” in 3:2. Perhaps Jonah has to speak “against” Nineveh in 1:2 because the message contains an explicit judgment ¹⁹⁶ (for a similar use of the verb קרא + על in contexts of judgment of accusation, see e.g. Deut 15:9; 24:15; 1 Kgs 13:2; for more details, see *DCH*, VII, 294). In fact, the message that Jonah has to report concerns the wickedness of which the people of Nineveh is guilty and that will have as result the destruction of the city. In Jonah 3:2, however, it is repeated, more generally, to Jonah that he carry out the message to Nineveh; see also H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 139. In both cases the Septuagint does not take into account this variation but renders the preposition with ἐν: ἐν ἀντὶ.

¹⁹⁷ In Jonah 3:2, the participial clause אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי דֹבֵר אֵלֶיךָ might here be translated with a past tense: “the message I told you”, because it appears to continue the narration of the beginning of the book (Jonah 1:1). However, in the light of the announcement of condemnation in Jonah 3:4 (“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown”), it is preferable to translate it with a present or a near future which is possible from the point of view of Hebrew syntax: “The message I tell you/I am going to tell you”; see A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il libro di Giona*, 72; E.K.E. ANTWI, *The book of Jonah in the context of post-exilic theology of Israel*, 101.

		And Nineveh was a great city ¹⁹⁸ before God ¹⁹⁹ , three days' journey.
4a	וַיִּחַל יוֹנָה לְבוֹא בְּעִיר מִהֲלָהּ יוֹם אֶחָד	And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey,
b	וַיִּקְרָא וַיֹּאמֶר	and he cried, and said,
c	עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְנִינְוָה נִהְפָּכֶת	“Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown”.
5a	וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ אַנְשֵׁי נִינְוָה בְּאֱלֹהִים	And the people of Nineveh believed in God;
b	וַיִּקְרְאוּ-צוֹם	they proclaimed a fast,
c	וַיִּלְבְּשׁוּ שָׂקִים מִגְּדוֹלָם וְעַד־קִטְנָם	and everyone, great and small, ²⁰⁰ put on sackcloth
6a	וַיָּגַע הַדְּבָר אֶל־מֶלֶךְ נִינְוָה	When the news reached the king of Nineveh,
b	וַיָּקָם מִכִּסְאוֹ	he rose from his throne,
c	וַיַּעֲבֵר אֶדְרָתוֹ מֵעָלָיו	removed his robe,
d	וַיִּכֶס שָׂק	covered himself with sackcloth,
e	וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל־הָאֲפֶר:	and sat in ashes.
7a	וַיִּזְעַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִינְוָה	Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles:
b	מִטַּעַם הַמֶּלֶךְ וּגְדָלָיו לֵאמֹר	No human being or animal, no herd or flock,
c	הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה הַבְּקָר וְהַצֹּאן אֶל־יִטְעָמוּ	shall taste anything.
d	מֵאוֹמָה	They shall not feed,
e	אֶל־יִרְעוּ	nor shall they drink water.
	וּמִיָּם אֶל־יִשְׁתּוּ:	
8a	וַיִּתְכַסּוּ שָׂקִים הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה	Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth,
b	וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־אֱלֹהִים בְּחִזְקָה	and they shall cry mightily to God.
c	וַיִּשְׁבוּ אִישׁ מִדְּרָכּוֹ הָרָעָה וּמִן־הַחֲמָס	All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence
d	אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפְיָהֶם:	that is in their ²⁰¹ hands.

¹⁹⁸ The verb of this clause is in the *w-x-qatal* position, whereas verses 3a and 4a have *wayyiqtol* forms. On the level of content, verse 3b interrupts the narration insofar as it provides retrospective background information. Already before Jonah's arrival at Nineveh, the city was extremely great. For a similar example, see also the two last clauses of Gen 11:3. As for syntactic explanations of these phenomena, see e. g. A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il libro di Giona*, 72; J. JOOSTEN, *The Verbal System of Biblical Hebrew*, 212: “[...] QATAL is found occasionally where the narrator adds a comment from his own point of view, entailing a shift in reference time from the past to the present.”

¹⁹⁹ In this context, the use of the divine name might indicate the superlative:¹⁹⁹ the city of Nineveh was “a very great city”; see H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 148: “‘a great city even for God’, is an ultimate superlative [...]. The compound with ל is reminiscent of the reference to Nimrod, ‘the mightiest hunter before Yahweh’ (Gen. 10:9 = as far as Yahweh's eyes look upon the whole earth; cf. Gen 6:11).”

²⁰⁰ The expression מִגְּדוֹלָם וְעַד־קִטְנָם, literally “from their great to their small”, is a *merismus* that has the function of a superlative and refers to the whole population of the town (“everyone”); see J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 246.

²⁰¹ The Hebrew texts oscillates between the singular and the plural, the noun אִישׁ, literally a singular form, being used as a collective; see also Jonah 1:5: 7 for the same phenomenon. For the problem of agreement, see P. JOÜON, T. MURAOKA, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, vol. II, § 149a.150e.

9a	מִי יוֹדֵעַ	Who knows? ²⁰²
b	לְשׁוּב	God may turn
c	וְנָחַם הָאֱלֹהִים	and relent
d	וְשָׁב מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ	and withdraw from his burning wrath
e	וְלֹא נִאֲבָד	so that we will not perish.” ²⁰³
10a	וַיִּרְא הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם	And God saw their deeds,
b	כִּי־שָׁבוּ מִדֶּרֶכָם הָרָעָה	that they turned from their wicked way. ²⁰⁴
c	וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־הָרָעָה	And God relented concerning the evil
d	אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם	which he had said to bring upon them.
e	וְלֹא עָשָׂה:	And He did not do [it].

γ) Exegetical observations

Verses 1–4

In the context of our analysis of the book of Jonah, the first verses of chapter 3 are of particular importance for the question of the relationship between the God of Israel and non-Israelites. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight two central issues: the new order of YHWH to Jonah and Jonah’s obedience, as reported in Jonah 3:1–3b.²⁰⁵

(1) Although verses 1 and 2 basically repeat the same commandment of YHWH as in Jonah 1:1–2, formally, they introduce a new commencement of the narration. YHWH talks to Jonah again, “a second time”. In this regard, it is noteworthy that God does not abandon His initial idea of sending a prophet to the non-Israelite city of Nineveh, on the one hand, and on the other, that none other than Jonah is ordered to bring the message, in spite of his previous failure.²⁰⁶ After having experienced distance from YHWH and returned to Him (Jonah 2:11), Jonah is ready to obey the divine commandment, as verse 3 confirms. Yet again, Jonah’s reaction is not introduced by any word in reply to YHWH. Thus the reader might wonder: how will Jonah react? Will he escape once more as in chapter one? In the following sentence the narrator removes any doubt: now Jonah is executing God’s mandate “according to the word of YHWH”

²⁰² Normally, this question is understood in the sense of “perhaps”; see the commentaries, e.g. P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 346. Exception: J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 260–261, who quotes another possible interpretation (*ibid.*, 266): “If we stay with the Masoretic punctuation (reflected already by the Targum), the king would actually be making a veiled statement, “He who knows, will turn back (*mî-yôdēa’ yāsūb*), rather than posing the rhetorical ‘Who can tell?’[...]”.

²⁰³ The verb is in the *w-x-yiqtol* position. That means that the clause can be understood as consecutive or final; see E.K.E ANTWI, *The Book of Jonah in the context of post-exilic theology of Israel*, 105.

²⁰⁴ J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 263, argues that verse 10b could be understood as a causal clause and concludes “that Nineveh indeed responds to its king’s appeal.” However, the meaning of verse 10b only differs slightly if understood as an object clause or a causal clause. See also P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 188.

²⁰⁵ As for the narrative caesura between verses 3a and 3b–4, see below.

²⁰⁶ For this idea, see also R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 127: “Der Prophet, der einmal versagt hat, ist nicht unbrauchbar geworden.”

(verse 3a).²⁰⁷ This expression recalls to mind similar examples we can find in the prophetic narratives (1 Kgs 17:5; Jer 13:2). Now Jonah fulfills YHWH's commandment just like the sea, the wind and the fish.²⁰⁸

(2) In verse 3c, the author provides a description of Nineveh as a big city using two expressions: it was “exceedingly big” (עִיר־גְּדוֹלָה לְאֱלֹהִים) and “of three days walk” (מִהֶלֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים). As for the adjective גְּדוֹל, it obviously has an important place in the narrative of the book of Jonah as a whole. It appears, in fact, 13 times: 4 times with reference to the city of Nineveh (Jonah 1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:11), twice, respectively, in describing the storm (Jonah 1:4, 12), the fear of the sailors (Jonah 1:10, 16), the Ninevites and their nobles (Jonah 3:5, 7), and Jonah's emotions (Jonah 4:1.6), and, finally, once, with reference to the fish (Jonah 2:1). The following question arises spontaneously: why does the author underline the size of Nineveh four times? How are we to interpret the emphasis laid on this aspect? Do the expressions mentioned allude to the real dimensions of the city or do they have another, perhaps a symbolical, meaning? As we shall see below, scholars have advanced a number of hypotheses in order to understand the expressions alluding to the geographical dimensions of Nineveh.²⁰⁹

a) To begin with, we have to deal with the first expression. What does it mean that Nineveh “was a great city for God”? It is possible that the text, using the *qal* perfect, is referring to the greatness of Nineveh in a past time,²¹⁰ perhaps in an “immemorial time”. In this latter case, the author would be introducing a *motif* of a “saga containing a lesson”²¹¹. However, this interpretation is not compelling. It is also possible to think of a sort of exaggeration (see also Jonah 4:11 the mention of 120,000 inhabitants): when Jonah arrived in Nineveh, the city was extremely great.²¹²

b) The phrase גְּדוֹלָה לְאֱלֹהִים has led to several interpretations, for example, Nineveh was great even to God, God's favour was towards Nineveh, God had chosen Nineveh as his abode. These and other possibilities are considered to be coherent with the other occurrences of the adjective גְּדוֹל referring to Nineveh (Jonah 1:2; 3:2; 4:11).²¹³ However, according to the majority of exegetes, this expression is a sort of superlative form that means that Nineveh was extremely

²⁰⁷ For this interpretation, see also H. W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 140.

²⁰⁸ This idea is highlighted, for example, by L.C. ALLEN, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 221.

²⁰⁹ See the commentaries, for example, P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 296.

²¹⁰ A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona*, 72.

²¹¹ For more details, see H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 147.

²¹² See also J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 228.

²¹³ See P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 178.

great.²¹⁴ Nevertheless, another interesting interpretation could be taken into account. The fact that the city was great “for God” could indicate that it was held in great consideration by God. Hence, the phrase would not be referring to the real dimensions of Nineveh but to its importance. In fact, the adjective “great” can allude to a stereotyped value or dimension when applied to kings, for example, “great king” (2 Kgs 18:19, 28), or to geographical terms, for example, the “great sea” (= the Mediterranean Sea, see Num 34:6; Jos 1:4) and the “great river” (= Euphrates, see Gen 15:18; Deut 1:7). *Mutatis mutandis*, the same could be said for “the great city of Nineveh” in the book of Jonah: an expression to be understood in an ideal sense and not in an historical or geographical manner.²¹⁵

c) As for the second expression, מִקְדָּלָהּ אֶשְׁלֶשֶׁת יָמִים would be referring to the fact that the diameter of Nineveh corresponded to around 60 miles in breadth.²¹⁶ This is improbable because, as archaeological excavations have shown, the city of Nineveh never had such a huge dimension.²¹⁷ Thus, what seems interesting to note is that the author of the book of Jonah wants to impress the reader with his affirmations.²¹⁸ In other words, the expression “three days’ walk” does not intend to indicate the extent of the city in a mathematical way. Rather, it leaves room for an emotional perception and is meant to suggest to the readers the sense of the huge size of the city of Nineveh.²¹⁹ Moreover, to this interpretation we can add that the phrase “three days of journey” probably conveys a further connotation. In fact, it is possible to see a link between the size of the city and its wickedness: “A three day’s walk in Jonah 3:3 points to the magnitude of the city, but consequently also to the massive evil that existed”.²²⁰

(3) Jonah starts preaching the message of God in the city of Nineveh. Several aspects deserve attention:

a) The way in which Jonah proceeds is not exactly defined: Jonah “began to enter into the city a day’s journey”. What does “a day’s journey” mean in this context? Why does the author

²¹⁴ See e.g. D.W. THOMAS, “Consideration of some unusual Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew”, 216; J. DAY, “Problems in the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah”, 34, who quotes other ancient authors who provide information on the dimensions of Nineveh.

²¹⁵ See J. BERGMAN, H. RINGGREN, R. MOSIS, לְגָדָל *gādal* κτλ., 396.

²¹⁶ In the ancient world, “three days’ journey” would correspond to 60 miles. According to H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 148, there is no doubt: “v. 4a unquestionably suggests diameter”. By contrast, D. MARCUS, “Nineveh’s three days’ Walk (Jonah 3:3): Another Interpretation”, 45: affirms: “‘a three days’ walk’ does not refer to the dimension of Nineveh, but refers to the distance to be travelled in order to reach Nineveh”. However, this interpretation is not in line with the Hebrew text. For other objections, see also E. EYNIKEL, “One day, three days and forty days in the book of Jonah”, 73.

²¹⁷ For a short survey of recent research on this topic, see C. HALTON, “How big was Niniveh?”, *passim*; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 310.

²¹⁸ See also H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 148.

²¹⁹ For more details, see C. HALTON, “How big was Nineveh?”, 205-207.

²²⁰ E. EYNIKEL, “One day, three days and forty days in the book of Jonah”, 76.

mention that the prophet has made a day's journey when he began to speak? In this respect, various theories have been proposed:

- After a day's journey Jonah has arrived in the centre of the city from where his message can spread in all directions.²²¹
- The expression is to be understood as an idiomatic phrase that means something like “a short walk”.²²² Hence, Jonah would have just entered Nineveh when he proclaimed the message of God.²²³
- Jonah preached only the first day because, as the following verse demonstrates, the Ninevites needed, only “the initial word” because they were even now ready to turn from their evil conduct.²²⁴

b) In any case, the indications of time (“one day”, “forty days”) must be considered as elements which speak of the urgency of change on the part of the Ninevites, on the one hand and, on the other, as an announcement of a decisive event which concerns both Jonah and the recipients of his announcement. In fact, as has been said above, in the light of his disastrous flight, Jonah announces from the very first day what God had ordered him to say: the Ninevites have only a limited span of time to transform their conduct and so to escape total destruction. In this process of narrative development, the story can again find a new and effective beginning compared with the prophet's original commission. In fact, if, at first (chap. 1), flight and apathy were Jonah's only responses, this time the word which “came to him” (Jonah 3:1: וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה) impels the prophet to Nineveh where he thus “began to enter into the city one day's journey” (Jonah 3:4). This phrase guarantees for the reader that this time Jonah has decided to fulfil YHWH's command.

c) This actually seems to be emphasised by the way in which the author is here recounting the event as something on which to dwell minute by minute to show all its important stages, as if in slow motion.²²⁵ In fact, the writer does not confine himself to saying that Jonah “entered” Nineveh, but underlines the prophet's entrance as something which has finally taken place: he

²²¹ H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 149: “He is now in the centre of the city; from here the message can spread like wildfire in every direction.”

²²² Cf. E. EYNIKEL, “One day, three days and forty days in the book of Jonah”, 76: Jonah does enter into the centre of the city but he preaches along the periphery of Nineveh.

²²³ C. HALTON, “How big was Nineveh?”, 204–205.

²²⁴ D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 488.

²²⁵ See the formulation used by P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 311: “die Vorstellung eines schrittweise erfolgenden Hineingehens in die Stadt”.

“began” to enter the city. Moreover, the gradual nature of this entrance seems to be further spelled out by the indication of time, “a day’s journey”, that is, the length of a day’s walk.²²⁶

d) Beyond these debated questions and whether Jonah was able in this way to reach the centre or remained in the suburbs, what seems to leap to the eyes is that the indications of time linked to days’ journeys, three (verse 3) and one (verse 4), respectively, are immediately connected with the sentence of judgement which Jonah utters on behalf of YHWH to Nineveh by means of another indication of time: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown”. Once again, in his game of mirrors, the author refers to a measurement which speaks of greatness, in this case of time. The city of Nineveh is great (Jonah 1:2; 3:2) – just like, apparently, its sin²²⁷ – and the span of time granted by God for its reform is equally great, that is, forty days.²²⁸ In the Hebrew Bible, the number forty is used in different contexts. Basically the number and its compounds indicate completeness and, more generally, a long span of time, sometimes bound up with negative situations.²²⁹ We cite two examples: in Gen 7:4, God announces the destruction of every creature, and, in the context of the Exodus, before the people who are murmuring against Moses and Aaron, and so against God, in the desert, it is announced that they will bear the weight of their sins for forty days and that they will be annihilated (Num 14:34–35).

e) But what type of punishment is Jonah announcing? It is interesting to note that, although the prophet clearly uses the verb employed here, פָּרַח , in its negative sense, and that with the meaning of “to overthrow”, it has, in itself, an ambiguous value. In fact, it can also mean “to turn, to change, to transform”. We ask ourselves if this ambiguity is to be taken into account within the overall frame of the book of Jonah. Although possible, the translation “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be transformed” would not render the sense of God’s concrete call for change

²²⁶ R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 132, remarks that the narrator does not detail the considerable distances the prophet is supposed to walk. Yet, there is no doubt that he had to walk a long distance before preaching to the Ninevites.

²²⁷ See for this aspect E. EYNIKEL, “One day, three days and forty days in the book of Jonah”, 67–68.

²²⁸ It is appropriate to recall that, instead of the forty days, the Septuagint records three days (Jonah 3:4 ^{LXX}: $\epsilon\tilde{\tau}\iota\ \tau\rho\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\varsigma\ \eta\mu\acute{\epsilon}\rho\alpha\iota\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \text{N}\nu\epsilon\upsilon\eta\ \kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\sigma\tau\rho\alpha\phi\acute{\eta}\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$). This variant is explained by the majority of scholars as a scribal error due to the presence of the number three in the previous verse. Otherwise, the number three could be explained from the fact that three days would have been sufficient to inform the whole of the city. In this case, however, the reaction of Nineveh which actually follows Jonah’s announcement immediately would take on a positively grotesque character. For this idea, cf. H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 150.

²²⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the real or symbolical meaning of the number “forty”, see e.g. E. EYNIKEL, “One day, three days and forty days in the book of Jonah”, 72–73. See also J. JEREMIAS, *Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha*, 99: “Wenn der Text für die exzessive Größe der legendären Stadt den Begriff ‘eine (selbst) für Gott große Stadt’ verwendet, so mag er dabei die in der Ausdehnung sich widerspiegelnde widergöttliche ‘Bosheit’ (1:2; vgl. 3:8f) der Stadt mit im Blick gehabt haben.”

in this context.²³⁰ Furthermore, the use of the verb performs in itself a typological function. In fact, it is employed particularly in paradigmatic cases “to conceptualise an event long felt to be paradigmatic”²³¹. In this sense, it is undoubted that Jonah’s words are echoing the great oracles of destruction that are already well known such as, to take the best example, that regarding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen 19:21, 25, 29; Deut 29:22; Lam 4:6). Be that as it may, what leaps to the eyes is that there is a gap in the text, that is, the message announced by Jonah turns out to be something absolutely new in its content. In fact, what we heard from the mouth of God was bound up with the sin of Nineveh which, as YHWH himself said, had come up before him (Jonah 1:2). Now, addressing himself to them, Jonah announces a simple condemnation: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown” without any explicit mention of the authority that has commissioned him or using the so-called messenger formula “Thus speaks NN”.²³² Nevertheless, even if the Ninevites understand the sense of the threat, we ask ourselves: do they, at the same time, grasp the possibility of some kind of way of escape from their total destruction?²³³ This would seem a possible path. The threat and the opportunity which coexist in the same judgement constitute the base for a sudden change which, in fact, follows immediately.

Verses 5–10

Jonah’s announcement provokes an immediate reaction on the part of the Ninevites. That means that they have understood the prophet’s words as a divine message.²³⁴ In fact, the Ninevites “believed in God” (וַיִּאֱמְנוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּאֱלֹהֵים). In the *hiph.* form, the root of the verb אָמַן takes on the meaning of “lend faith to”, “believe”, and that can be constructed both with the preposition לְ, “believe someone or something” (e.g. Exod 4:1, 8), or else, as in our case, with the preposition בְּ, “to believe in”, “to have faith in”.²³⁵

We shall devote the following paragraphs to the treatment of the verb וַיִּאֱמְנוּ, which, in our opinion, takes on an important role within the book of Jonah. In fact, as we shall see, it is the turning point which marks the beginning from which the relation between the Ninevites and Jonah changes completely, setting off a chain of attitudes and behaviour which leads no less to the overturning of the entire narrative. Additionally, in the book of Jonah, this verb, which is

²³⁰ See H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 150.

²³¹ K. SEYBOLD, art. הָפַחַח *hāphakh*, 426.

²³² See also P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 180, who notes that “a Yahwistic formula may well be incomprehensible”, i.e. in Nineveh.

²³³ For this question, see also R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 131.

²³⁴ See also J.-D. DÖHLING, *Der bewegliche Gott*, 439.

²³⁵ See the Hebrew lexicons and, furthermore, J. M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 243.

generally used in very particular moments in the history of the relation between YHWH and his people, is applied for the one and only time to non-Israelites, and precisely in relation to the God of Jonah. Moreover, “believing in God” seems to be the first decisive act that the Ninevites are able to perform to avert the imminent disaster.

Starting from this, it seems appropriate to examine in depth the value held by this term within the Hebrew Bible, identifying its basic uses and its principal contexts in order to understand better its implications on the theological plane and, in particular, in relation to the Ninevites in the text of Jonah 3:5. Even if the commentaries on the book of Jonah observe the presence of the verb and manage a certain grammatical and textual analysis, they do not always explain how important this verb could be in the process of the transformation of the characters and events being narrated.²³⁶ Instead, the commentaries almost always confine themselves to brief considerations which, in our opinion, do not leave room for the deeper analysis which, as we have said, is deserved here.

(1) Although the verb אָמַן *hiph.* is not always considered an important theological term in the Old Testament,²³⁷ believing in God, in the biblical texts, is always the prerogative of the people of Israel²³⁸ or of some of its patriarchs or its members. In this connection, we shall limit ourselves here to mentioning briefly some examples, though highlighting texts that focus on turning points in the history of Israel. Among these, we shall mention right from the outset a text which we shall be taking up later, Gen 15:6, where the verb marks Abraham’s passage from his pagan origins to his “cleaving to YHWH” and to his plan for history.²³⁹ Of him it is said that “he believed in the Lord [יְהוָה אָמַן בְּיְהוָה] which was counted to him for righteousness”. In addition, it seems interesting to mention here two more texts: (a) Exod 14:31, where the powerful work of God against the Egyptians on behalf of his people determines the faith of Israel in YHWH and in his servant Moses: “And when Israel saw the great power which the

²³⁶ In this connection, J. JEREMIAS, *Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha*, 100, observes that the verb אָמַן *hiph.* means “to rely firmly on [God]” (“Festigkeit gewinnen an [Gott]”), particularly in situations which are practically without hope. For R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 132: it is a “Spitzenaussage” of the Nineveh scene. Except for a reference to Exod 14:31, the author does not go any deeper into this aspect. An exception is the commentary of P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 318, who devotes a brief paragraph to this verb.

²³⁷ See A. JEPSEN, art. אָמַן *’āman*, אָמַן *’emūnāh*, אָמַן *’āmēn*, אָמַן *’meth*, 308, who denies that the verb “is a fundamental word in OT theology”-

²³⁸ See H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 150: “האָמַן is used only in connection with Israel.”

²³⁹ G. VON RAD, *Genesis*, 240. As for the exegesis of this verse, see e.g. G.J. WENHAM, *Genesis 1-15*: 334, who explains that the affirmation of verse 6b underlines the importance of faith: “Abram is a model for all his descendants to imitate: whatever their circumstances, they must have faith in God.” In this regard, see also C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: a commentary*, 222–223: “[...] the faith which is the subject of the story is related to the generation addressed by the author when the promises and the continued existence of the people were in jeopardy.”

Lord had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord [וַיִּאֱמָינוּ בְּיְהוָה] and in His servant Moses”,²⁴⁰ and the text of (b) Isa 43:10 where God calls Israel, even if a blind servant, to be his witness with the aim of making him and his works “known, believed and understood” in the world,²⁴¹ so as to be his faithful witness before the nations: “‘You are My witnesses,’ declares the LORD, ‘and My servant whom I have chosen, in order that you may know and believe Me [וַתִּאֱמָינוּ לִי], and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me.’”

(2) Returning to our particular text, Jonah 3:5, we ask: why does this verb occur almost out of the blue at this point in the narrative and why precisely does this verb appear when it is never used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in relation to any non-Israelites? Could the verb אמן *hiph.* have connotations which help us to understand better its use in Jonah 3:5? Moreover, why, in chapter 3, in relation to the Ninevites, contrary to the case of the sailors in chapter 1, where the name YHWH is mentioned several times, is reference made to the God of Jonah by employing the name “Elohim”? Does this difference in the text constitute an important distinction with regard to the faith of the Ninevites, or is it an element which can, in some sense, be ignored? In order to guarantee a more systematic treatment of these questions, we want right from the outset to offer some guidelines which allow us to trace some rules concerning the use of the verb and its value in different contexts.

a) Study of the verb אמן *hiph.* has led us to identify some points which seem fundamental for a better understanding of the verb in Jonah 3:5. To begin with, we cite two texts in which it is implied that believing or not believing in God determines the outcome of the history of Israel which can then develop positively or negatively, respectively. In Num 20:12, according to the narrator, Moses and Aaron are deprived of the privilege of entering into the promised land because of their unbelief: “But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron: ‘Because you have not believed Me [וְעַן לֹא־הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי] [...], therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them’ [וְתָבִיאוּ אֶת־הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נָתַתִּי לָהֶם לְכֹן לֹא]”. Another text, on the other hand, 2 Chr 20:20, which itself refers to what is said in Exod 14:31b,²⁴² mentions the

²⁴⁰ See M. NOTH, *Esodo*, 147: “Israele aveva già ‘creduto’ all’annuncio del suo Dio portatogli per mezzo di Mosè (4,31). Ora la promessa dell’esodo era compiuta.” M. PRIOTTO, *Esodo*, 269: “Israele aveva cominciato a credere vedendo i segni compiuti da Aronne (4,31), ma si trattava di una fede ancora fragile; [...] soltanto dopo la lunga sequenza delle piaghe e il drammatico passaggio del mare il popolo presta di nuovo fede a YHWH e al suo inviato Mosè. Questa fede non nasce soltanto a motivo di un intervento di Dio più eclatante [...], ma dall’esperienza profonda che Israele fa di YHWH, da cui emerge una vera e nuova relazione personale.”

²⁴¹ For this text, see e.g. B.S. CHILDS, *Isaiah*, 335.

²⁴² See P.C. BEENTJES, “Tradition and Transformation: Aspects of Inner Biblical Interpretation in 2 Chr 20”, 267.

problem of believing or not believing under the form of an exhortation: “[...] Jehoshaphat stood and said: ‘Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, put your trust in the Lord your God, and you will be established [הַאֲמִינוּ בַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְתֵאֱמָנוּ]. Put your trust in His prophets and succeed [הַאֲמִינוּ בְּנְבִיאָיו וְהִצְלִיחוּ].’” There is no doubt that, in these two texts, believing in God or not believing has, as a consequence for the Israelites, remaining established (2 Chr 20:20) or being punished (Num 20:12), respectively. This idea is even more evident in another text that is clearly alluded to by 2 Chr 20:20 and where the verb appears in relationship to an oracle of doom: Isa 7:9: אַם לֹא תֵאֱמִינוּ כִּי לֹא תֵאֱמָנוּ, “if you will not believe, you surely shall not last”. Against the background of this text, the particular message of 2 Chr 20:12 seems to be as follows: believing in God and, in particular, lending faith to what was said in the past by his prophets constitutes a fundamental path for the existence of Israel: what the prophets uttered in the past can still be valid for today.²⁴³ In the light of these biblical texts, the immediate reaction of the Ninevites who believe in Jonah’s God and his message is astonishing. In fact, although the Ninevites are non-Israelites, they are presented as people who potentially have some knowledge of how to react before the God of Jonah in order to escape the imminent judgment. Believing in the message of Jonah, his prophet, they believe in God, and this reaction constitutes, as we shall see in the following verses, the first and fundamental step towards salvation by God. In fact, without this preliminary, that is the act of faith, of trust in the God of Jonah and in his messenger, the acts of self-abasement and the change of behaviour could neither have taken place nor had the same result, that is, as we shall see in what follows, produced the same change on the part of God.

b) In some texts of the Hebrew Bible, the unbelief of Israel, in particular the generation of the march through the desert, provokes God’s anger, even the revoking of his promises, for example, in Deut 1:32–35: “But for all this, you did not trust the LORD your God (וּבְדַבַּר הַיְהוָה) [אֵינְכֶם מֵאֲמִינִים בַּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם]. [...] Then the LORD [...] was angry and took an oath, saying, ‘Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land which I swore to give your fathers’”. Furthermore, in the long Psalm reflecting the history of Israel, Psalm 78, the unbelief of Israel is associated with its lack of trust in God and His salvation Ps 78:21–22: “Therefore the LORD heard and was full of wrath, and a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also mounted against Israel because they did not believe in God, and did not trust in His salvation [כִּי לֹא הֵאֱמִינוּ בְּאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא בָטְחוּ בִישׁוּעָתוֹ].” Thus, believing in God or not doing so represents the

²⁴³ T. LORENZIN, *1–2 Cronache*, 314: “in questo caso si può notare come la parola di un profeta [= Isaia], pronunciata in una situazione particolare del passato, possa essere rinnovata e attualizzata in altre situazioni storiche e possa diventare un messaggio di vita per il presente.”

decisive criterion for the relationship between Israel and God. Insofar as Israel believes in God, it will be successful. Is this criterion valid for Nineveh also? This might be concluded from the context. As we shall see, the belief of the Ninevites will prompt God to change his mind and to relent about the disaster he had threatened to bring upon them (Jonah 3:10).

The first conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that, on the one hand, in Jonah 3:5, the verb אמן *hiph.* is, exceptionally, applied to non-Israelites. Moreover, God has a message sent to the Ninevites by contrast with other prophetic texts where such a message is addressed to the people of Israel and/or to its members. On the other hand, the Ninevites are presented as a people taking Jonah's message seriously,²⁴⁴ and they appear to behave in exactly the same way in which Israel would be supposed to do in a similar situation, that is, to believe. In any case, what turns out to be decisive in this process is their belief on which the present and future of Nineveh depend. In other words, the presence or absence of such a kind of faith constitutes the point of union or rupture between God and Nineveh.

(3) One of our initial questions remains open. Why does the author use the verb אמן rather than ירא, that is, the verb that appears several times in the first chapter of the book of Jonah, especially when the sailors' "fear of YHWH" is mentioned (Jonah 1:16)? Do we have to attach any particular importance to this choice of theological vocabulary? Among the studies carried out on this verse, only few devote attention to this question. Thus, the explanation of the use of two different terms would seem to lie in the fact that the verb ירא would stress "the relationship of obedience (cf. 1:16 with 1:10)", while אמן *hiph.* emphasises a "relationship of trust" (Ps 78:22)". In any case, both verbs refer to "a reliance on God".²⁴⁵ Moreover, as we have seen, the verb אמן occurs in contexts where the belief of Israel is at stake and where Israel has to bear the consequences of its unbelief. As for Jonah 3:5, the fact that the Ninevites are said to believe in God conveys a message for the reader of the book: reading the verb "as an opening to the scene in Nineveh, a knowledgeable audience can anticipate a radical shift from what is supposed to happen".²⁴⁶ Nevertheless, it is possible to go further and highlight the specific differences between the two Hebrew words although they appear together in at least one important text, Exod 14:31: וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיִּאֱמִינוּ בַיהוָה "the people feared the LORD and they believed in the LORD". Despite this parallel use of the two verbs, it can be claimed that each has its specific connotation. Therefore, a more thorough study of some other biblical texts can hopefully shed some further light on Jonah 1:16; 3:5.

²⁴⁴ See also W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 358–359.

²⁴⁵ H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 150.

²⁴⁶ J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 243.

(a) When referring to the relationship between Israel and God, *ירא* tends to be used in parallel with verbs denoting submission, for example (*עבד*: Deut 6:13; 10:12, 20; Josh 24:14; 1 Sam 12:14; 2 Kgs 17:35) and love (*אהב*: Deut 10:12). To these might be added the hearing of God's voice (verb *שמע*: Deut 13:5; 1 Sam 12:14), keeping of God's commandments (verb *שמר*: Deut 13:5), and knowing of God's name (verb *ידע*: 2 Chr 6:33). According to this last text, even strangers will be able to fear the God of Israel. All in all, in these contexts, the verb *ירא* seems to convey the connotation of a more or less permanent relationship. As for Jonah 1:16, the sailors' fear of YHWH is the result of a gradual process: firstly, the sailors pray to their gods without any result; secondly, they are told by Jonah that he fears YHWH, the God of the sea and the earth; thirdly, after having experienced his salvation, they fear Him. However, the sailors' fear of YHWH in Jonah 1:16 is not only the end of a process; it is also the beginning of a relationship alluded to by the offering of sacrifices and the making of vows.

(b) Unlike *ירא*, the verb *אמן* *hiph.* tends to refer to a reaction to a message, for example, the promise God made to Abram in Gen 15:5; the possible unbelief of the Israelites who refuse to believe in Moses (Exod 4:1); trust in the prophecy of Isaiah and the message he delivered (Isa 7:7); and the exhortation of Jeremiah not to believe in the message of the brothers (Jer 12:6). Likewise, in Jonah 3:5, *אמן* *hiph.* is used to express the fact that the Ninevites trust in Jonah's message as an immediate reaction to the announcement of destruction. This faith in Jonah's word turn out to be the only solution in order to avoid the punishment by God.

(c) Thus, we can conclude that the sailors and the Ninevites have a different manner of approaching the God of Israel. While the sailors fear YHWH, offer him sacrifices and make vows after having experienced his power, the Ninevites are presented as a people willing to trust in Jonah's word and to believe in God *even before* knowing him – unlike Abram in Gen 15:5–6 or the Israelites in Exod 14:31, who already know YHWH.²⁴⁷ In the end, the Ninevites are probably unable to “fear YHWH” because his name and his power have not been revealed to them.

(4) It is noteworthy that in this passage, which from a narrative point of view constitutes the “acme” of the account, the name of God is *Elohim* and not *YHWH* as in chapter 1. In the past, several studies have dealt with the issue of the name of God in the book of Jonah.²⁴⁸ Indeed, in

²⁴⁷ See also P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 318.

²⁴⁸ See e.g. F.D. KIDNER, “The distribution of Divines Names in Jonah”, 127; J. DAY, “Problems in interpretation of the Book of Jonah”, 43–44; R.B. SALTERS, *Jonah and Lamentations*, 37– 38; R.E. LOCORANGE, S.J.J. HWANG, “A Textlinguistic Approach to the Biblical Hebrew Narrative of Jonah”, 353–355; C. LICHTERT, “Récit et noms de Dieu dans le livre de Jonas”, 249–251; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 411–414.

the message that Jonah addresses to the Ninevites, both the name of God and that of the addressees are missing. Hence, in effect, the Ninevites do not know the name of Jonah's God but they understand the particular link between Jonah's message and the divine authority behind him.²⁴⁹ Therefore, it is not surprising that the narrator uses the generic appellation of God that also occurs in the mouth of other pagans in the Hebrew Bible, for example in Jdg 1:7; 7:14; Zech 8:23, or in the mouth of Israelites speaking to foreigners, as in 1 Sam 22:3.²⁵⁰ As already noted, the name of YHWH appears above all in connection with the sailors. Is this because it seemed more important to highlight the proper name of God in order to distinguish him from the other divinities? This might be possible.²⁵¹ Chapter 1 certainly mentions other gods, although it does not indicate their names. It is in this context that Jonah makes his confession of faith and reveals the name of his God.

(5) In concluding our exegesis of Jonah 3:5, three aspects should be stressed:

(a) It should be noted that the Ninevites do not actually know the name of the God of Jonah. Jonah never pronounces it in their presence, either in a profession of faith (unlike Jonah 1:9) or in the message he delivers (Jonah 3:4b).²⁵² However, from the narrative point of view, it is clear to the reader that this is about YHWH, since, in relation to Nineveh, his name is mentioned both in Jonah 1:1 and in 3:1. Thus, we suppose that this corresponds to a specific choice by the author²⁵³ who, through a play of what is said and not-said, affirms that the Ninevites believe in the God of Jonah whom they do not yet know. This would involve the assumption that the relationship between the Ninevites and the God of Israel would be being conceived in different terms: if, on the one hand, the sailors end up in fearing YHWH in the light of their experience of his powerful action on nature, on the other hand, the Ninevites believe because, in a certain

²⁴⁹ However, according to H. GESE, "Jona ben Amittai und das Jonabuch", 129, the Ninevites do not convert to YHWH but feel prompted by the prophet to an "ethical return". Gese has been followed by several authors, e.g. J. DAY, "Problems in interpretation of the Book of Jonah", 43; R. LUX, *Jona*, 201; V. HAARMANN, *YHWH-Verehrer der Völker*, 187–188; D. TIMMER, "Jonah's Theology of the Nations", 17 ("moral reform"). For a more nuanced opinion, see J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 244: "Despite the prevalence of 'elōhîm in chapter 3, however, the text wants the Ninevites to be wholeheartedly moved, not by the power of divine being, but by the might of the unique God of Israel".

²⁵⁰ For these and other quotations, see P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel Libro di Giona*, 171.

²⁵¹ P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei pagani nel libro di Giona*, 171: "Va sottoineato [...] che la situazione tra i marinai del 1° c. ed i Niniviti è diversa, in quanto nel primo caso occorre individuare fra i numerosi dèi quello che effettivamente causava la burrasca."

²⁵² See C. LICHTERT, "Récit et noms de Dieu dans le livre de Jonas", 250.

²⁵³ According to P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 171, for example, the author of the book of Jonah would not use the name of YHWH deliberately. In fact, for this scholar, to use the proper name of God in relation to pagans (and furthermore in relation to the inhabitants of Nineveh) would even have caused protests by contemporary readers

way, they are constrained by the urgency of the imminent judgement of God. They, thus, believe in the message of Jonah and in his God, before experiencing Him in a concrete way.

(b) As already noted, the use of the expression אמן *hiph.* + בְּאֱלֹהִים in Jonah 3:5 can be explained as follows:

- The verb אמן *hiph.* is used when speaking of turning points for a person or a group.
- Believing or not-believing can result in success or condemnation respectively.
- To believe in God constitutes the fundamental base, the *conditio sine qua non*, in order to obtain salvation.

Hence, belief is even more important than the practices of penitence the Ninevites undergo immediately. In fact, believing in God is the first and essential step in order to establish a relationship with the God of Jonah, a relationship in which conduct plays an important role: the Ninevites believe in Elohim first of all, and, only afterwards, perform rites in order to show that they repent from their wicked conduct.

(c) In any case, the believing indicates a bond, a relation. In fact, believing is precisely the beginning that changes the reciprocal relation between God and Abraham which becomes paradigmatic for the generations to follow. A very similar thing happens in the case of the Ninevites: like Abraham, they are given the possibility of believing, of putting faith in God's message, and, starting from that, they begin a profound change. On the one hand, this involves them and God himself: in the light of their process of change which has its beginning precisely in believing that they will be preserved from condemnation by God. On the other hand, it opens the way to a new way of thinking of the relationship between God and man. In fact, even if considered the exclusive prerogative of the chosen people in the person of Abraham regarded as "Father of faith", faith in the God of Israel now becomes the arena of encounter and relation for the non-Israelites too. In this connection, it seems important to underline the paradigmatic character of this faith with reference to Nineveh, the city which, in biblical texts, often plays the role of Israel's quintessential enemy and of perversion in general. If Nineveh "believed in God" and was saved from its fate of condemnation, the path to the relation with the God of Israel and to the salvation performed by him can be considered open for those – Israelites or not, good or wicked – who have been reached by God and who believe in him, although they do not know his name.

(6) Jonah 3:5bc–6 mentions the penitential rites the inhabitants of Nineveh are going to perform. The following three aspects deserve attention:

(a) Fasting and putting on sackcloth are the immediate reaction of the Ninevites when hearing the announcement of the imminent disaster. Now, believing in Elohim takes the shape of a

hope of a possible change by God (Joel 2:14): “Who knows whether he will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind him [וְהֵשִׁיב בְּרָכָה מִי יוֹדֵעַ יָשׁוּב וְנִחַם]”.

(b) The self-abasement involves the entire population of Nineveh, from great to small, including the king who later confirms the urgency and the importance of the rites by issuing a decree (Jonah 3:6). It is interesting to note that, at the very beginning, this self-abasement is not imposed from above, namely from the king and the notables of the city. Rather, it spreads like wildfire until it reaches the highest circles of society.²⁶¹

c) In this context, the king plays the role of representative, formalising the urgency and its validity through a decree (verse 7). Nonetheless, this official act is not his first reaction. In fact, the issuing of the decree is preceded by his own self-humiliation: a total self-abasement that he shares with his people and which consists of four elements: rising from the throne, taking off his royal garments, putting on sackcloth and lying on ashes. These rites constitute the stages of a reversal where the highest representative of the city of Nineveh, the king, returns to being a person like all the others, or rather he makes himself lower than the lowest of his people.²⁶² Even the verb used for the king’s putting on sackcloth is rare. In fact, for indicating clothing oneself, the verb normally employed is לָבַשׁ.²⁶³ “Covering oneself with sackcloth”, as if wishing to hide in it, renders the act of humiliation still more profound: the king, removing his royal robes – tearing them off, clothing himself with sackcloth and, even, sitting in ashes – decides to put on the poorest clothes. In this way, his self-abasement before God is complete: in doing this, the king proves that he is recognising that the only true power lies in God. However, the king’s self-abasement, which we could here describe also as “self-downgrading”, does not prejudice his role as leader. Rather, by acting in this way, the king of Nineveh assumes the role of the king pleasing to God as described in Deut 17:20: a king who does not “lift his heart above his brethren”, that is, who does not exalt himself above his countrymen.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ In the context of this analysis of chapter 3, the question of whether this reaction of the Ninevites seems plausible or probable and why they took Jonah’s message seriously, will not be examined; cf. e.g. P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 182; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 133.

²⁶² The author of Jonah has already accustomed us to these ‘games of mirrors’ where the spatial dynamic high - low (cf., for example, in chap. 1 when Jonah goes down into the lowest part of the ship while the others on top seek a solution to their misfortune) provides a more vivid texture to the facts which are unfolding.

²⁶³ According to H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 151, the verb עָבַר *hiph.* with the meaning “to take off [a garment]” underlines the force of the king’s act of putting off his royal mantle. It is noteworthy that this verb occurs in some texts where it is used to remove or to eliminate persons or objects supposed to be “offensive to YHWH”; see e.g. 1 Kgs 15:12; Zech 3:4; 13:2. Wolff emphasises furthermore (*ibid.*, 151) that the verb for putting on sackcloth is not לָבַשׁ “to put on [clothes]” but כָּסָה *pi.* “to cover, to hide”.

²⁶⁴ See also H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 151.

(7) That the role of the king as leader of his people remains his prerogative is confirmed by the fact that he makes a decree and causes it to be proclaimed:²⁶⁵ fasting, penance and prayer are extended to all, animals included. Once again, various aspects of this decree need to be examined.

a) The king's reaction is dictated not by the news of the people's self-abasement but by the actual words of Jonah.²⁶⁶ With an official act, he confirms and reinforces the choice to pursue the way of humiliation and penitence before God. The decree is unequivocal: all, nobles and animals included, must abstain from food and even from water; they must cover themselves with sackcloth; and cry to God "mightily". The fact that the animals are also involved in these rites of self-abasement underlines the universal character of such penance (see also Jdt 4:10).²⁶⁷ This is a total, radical fast which envisages abstaining even from water. In this connection, the verb טעם, "taste, enjoy", which elsewhere refers to foods that are particularly delicious (e.g. 2 Sam 14:29, 43), refers here to not touching any food at all.

b) In addition to fasting and dressing in sackcloth, the Ninevites have to pray to God "mightily". As elsewhere, in Jonah too, prayer takes on a fundamental role. In the texts of the Hebrew Bible, in fact, prayer is one of the essential elements accompanying the rites of self-abasement.²⁶⁸ It has the function of drawing YHWH's attention and moving him to compassion.²⁶⁹ The fact that the king of Nineveh specifies the way in which his people must call on Jonah's God, בְּהִזְקָה, "mightily", emphasises the need for an invocation without interruptions or slacking. It is a decisive moment: the king of Nineveh and his people seem to be aware that everything is at stake. Their salvation can only come from that God, called by his generic name "Elohim", to whom they are crying and before whom they are prostrating themselves. All their energies and all their powers have to be employed so that God can accept their desire not to be destroyed. In this connection, verse 8b constitutes one of the points of fundamental importance in the dynamic which involves the Ninevites in their relation with the

²⁶⁵ For the exact meaning of the noun, see the recent commentaries, e.g. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 253–254; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 333.

²⁶⁶ For this interpretation of הִזְקָה in Jonah 3:6, see H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 151.

²⁶⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the penitential rites for animals and their alleged non-biblical parallels, see M. MULZER, "Die Buße der Tiere in Jona 3,7f. und Jdt 4,10", *passim*. According to T.M. BOLIN, "Jonah 4:11 and the Problem of Exegetical Anachronism", 104, "the role of the animals in the story is as future function offerings Yahweh, now that the Ninevites have been made aware of his displeasure and their impending peril." Admittedly, domestic animals could be offered to a deity, but nothing in the text of the book of Jonah corroborates such an interpretation.

²⁶⁸ See also E. KUTSCH, "'Trauerbräuche' und 'Selbstminderungsriten' im Alten Testament", 82; D. LAMBERT, "Fasting as a Penitential Rite: A Biblical Phenomenon?", 479.

²⁶⁹ D. LAMBERT, "Fasting as a Penitential Rite: A Biblical Phenomenon?", 479–480, remarks: "[...] prayer captures the attention of YHWH and rouses him, as a God of mercy, to pity and hence action".

God of Israel. The rites of self-abasement do not actually have the function of producing an automatic reaction from God but are aimed at accompanying a sincere and efficacious approach to him. In the text of Jonah, that is highlighted by the final command of the king to all the people: “all shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands”.

c) Precisely because of the importance of this passage in the book of Jonah, we prefer to devote separate treatment to it in the sections that follow. In fact, as said in Isa 58:1b-9a, part of Third Isaiah and so a text of probably post-Exilic origin,²⁷⁰ the only fast that is truly acceptable to the Lord and produces salvation is one accompanied by justice, particularly towards the weak. In other words, although the rites of humiliation and abasement express the intention of a certain change in relation to the Ninevites’ wickedness, which God himself abhors as something to be judged and condemned, they could remain wholly negligible acts unless accompanied by a real change of conduct. They would be reduced to a futile practice. The return from wicked behaviour is the true aim of the change which the Ninevites are undertaking. In a certain sense, if we compare the attitude of the Ninevites described in verses 5–7 with the rites of penance practised in Israel, we can say that the former are being presented as pious people.²⁷¹

d) Concerning the exegesis of Jonah 3:8cd, two issues deserve attention: the specific use of the verbal root שׁוּב as well as the exact meaning of the noun תְּקִיטָה in the context of Jonah 3:8. In recent commentaries and other secondary literature on the book of Jonah, these two words are dealt with in a somewhat superficial manner,²⁷² perhaps because they are quite common in the language of the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, only an in-depth analysis of these two problems will allow the shedding of more light on the specific meaning of the verse. As for שׁוּב, this verb no doubt plays a significant role in numerous passages of the Hebrew Bible because it occurs in specific theological contexts. Concretely, it refers to the Israelites’ return to God by which they seek to remedy their relationship with him. In fact, it is because of sin or bad conduct that Israel is held to have moved away from God. Therefore, Israel is admonished by God and his prophets to come back, that is, to *turn* to him (= שׁוּב) in order to avoid divine punishment, for example, in Hos 14:2; Joel 2:13; Jer 3:22. In order to pinpoint the specific meaning of this verb in Jonah 3:8, it will be helpful to give a brief outline of the different ways it is employed in theological

²⁷⁰ For this problem, which cannot be treated in this context, see e.g. the introductions such as T. RÖMER, J.-D. MACCHI, C. NIHAN, *Introduction à l’Ancien Testament*, 419–420.

²⁷¹ H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 152, comments upon the reaction of the Ninevites as follows: “The Gentiles could not possibly be described to Israel in more pious terms than these” (i.e. in verse 7).

²⁷² See e.g. the commentaries by H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 153; W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 359–360; J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 258; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 341.

contexts of the Hebrew Bible. This problem will be dealt with in the following paragraph. Thereafter, a brief analysis of the noun הָמָס is necessary.

(7) *A brief excursus on the theological use of the root שׁוּב*: The verb שׁוּב is widely attested in the Hebrew Bible. In the context of the analysis of Jonah 3:8, there is no need to present an exhaustive and complete overview of its usage.²⁷³ However, it is useful to provide some basic information concerning the verb that will allow us to highlight better the role it plays in Jonah 3:8 and its immediate context. In the strict sense, שׁוּב is a verb of movement with the meaning “to turn, to return, to come back”. In its concrete meaning, it denotes the physical movement of turning or returning to the original point of departure,²⁷⁴ for example, in Gen 28:21 where Jacob speaks of returning to his father’s house. In many instances, however, the biblical texts also employ the verb to indicate the idea of turning or coming back in a figurative sense. In this manner, the verb assumes several meanings, depending on the prepositions it is combined with and on the context in which it is used. As for theological contexts, the following two usages of שׁוּב are characteristic, each of them expressing a movement, (a) either the idea of departing from God or the opposite, that is, the idea of approaching to him, (b) a change of conduct that might require an attitude of repentance.

a) Concerning the idea of departing and/or approaching, in many occurrences שׁוּב is used to indicate a movement towards God. This often implies that the subject of the verb – an individual or a collectivity, notably Israel – has previously distanced itself from him. This is the case in Deut 30:10, for example, where this idea is outlined: even if Israel breaks the covenant (Deut 29:17–27), it can nevertheless “return” to God: כִּי תָשׁוּב אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ, “if you turn to YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (see also 1 Sam 7:3; 2 Kgs 23:25). In the case of Deut 30:10, שׁוּב appears with two adverbial phrases of manner, בְּכָל־לִבְבְּךָ, and בְּכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ, with the aim of underlining that Israel’s movement back to God is not supposed to be a superficial attitude²⁷⁵ but implies a real and serious decision. Indeed, as the presence of the terms לֵב (‘heart’) and נֶפֶשׁ (‘soul’) suggests, this movement back to the Lord entails the involvement of the whole person, that is, with its capacity of deciding, expressed by the noun לֵב, and with that of willing, expressed by נֶפֶשׁ.²⁷⁶ Conversely, in various prophetic texts the

²⁷³ For an in-depth analysis of this root, see the monograph by W. L. HOLLADAY, *The root šûbh in the Old Testament*, especially chapters III–IV; see furthermore M. GRAUPNER, H.-J. FABRY, art. שׁוּב šûb κτλ.; *DCH*, 8, 273–298.

²⁷⁴ For more details, see W.L. HOLLADAY, *The root šûbh in the Old Testament*, 53–55; G. OSSOM-BATSA, “The Theological Meaning of the root šwb in Jeremiah”,

²⁷⁵ S. PAGANINI, *Deuteronomio*, 408: “Il vocabolario (‘con tutto il cuore e con tutta la tua persona’) richiama Dt 6,4–9 e sottolinea, ancora una volta, come questo movimento di conversione non sia solo di carattere spirituale, ma implichi un atteggiamento di adesione radicale concreto”.

²⁷⁶ See e.g. H.W. WOLFF, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 53.

Israelites are said to have turned away from YHWH, that is, they have become unfaithful to him. This idea of departing is highlighted several times by means of the compound preposition *מֵאַחֲרַי*, literally “from behind”, for example, in Jer 3:19 [*Qere*]: *וּמֵאַחֲרַי לֹא תִשׁוּבִי*: “[that] you would not turn away from [following] me” (see also 1 Sam 15:11; 1 Kgs 9:6). Accordingly, the prophets complain about the unwillingness of the Israelites, or part of them, to return to God, for example, Jer 5:6 *מֵאַחֲרַי לֹא שׁוּבִי*, “[the Israelites] have refused to turn back”, and, in Amos 4:6, 8–11, God states five times: *וְלֹא-שָׁבַתְּם עָדַי*, “you [= Israel] did not return to me”. Therefore, the verb *שׁוּב* is used in various instances to exhort the Israelites to return to YHWH as a consequence of their sin, for example, in the formula *וְשׁוּבוּ אֶל־יְהוָה*, “return to YHWH”, which appears in Hos 14:3 as well as in Joel 2:13. In the latter instance, this return to God is all the more necessary because the “day of the Lord” is announced.

b) As mentioned above, the verb *שׁוּב* is also used with reference to abandoning a type of behaviour, in particular, evil, sin or bad conduct. More specifically, the phrase *שׁוּב* followed by (*הֲרָעָה*), *מִדְרָגָה (הֲרָעָה)*, “to turn away from [bad] conduct”) occurs several times. Thus, it might be associated with the idea of idolatry (e.g. 1 Kgs 13:33; Jer 35:15) or, more generally, with that of disobedience toward God (e.g. Jer 15:6–7). In fact, the phrase appears in various contexts, for example, where Israelites are blamed for their sins and iniquities (e.g. Jer 36:3); where they are reproved for following their own plans (Jer 18:11–12); or where they are criticized for not listening to their God and His prophets (Jer 25:4–5; 26:3–5). The prophetic passages in particular underline that persisting in sin or bad conduct provokes divine punishment. For that reason, the present or the future of Israel depends on its “turning away” from its evil ways. This latter idea appears in several texts where condemnation is considered inevitable, e.g. Jer 15:7: *אֲבַדְתִּי אֶת־עַמִּי מִדְרָגָתָם לֹא־שָׁבוּ*: “I will destroy my people; they did not turn away from their ways”. Similarly, in 1 Kgs 13:33–34, for example, the ruin of the house of Jeroboam is explained by the king’s unwillingness to return from his evil way: *לֹא־שָׁב יִרְבֵּעַם מִדְרָגָו*. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same holds true for the end of Samaria according to 2 Kings 17. This event happened (see verse 7) because the people of Israel ignored God’s warnings to return from their evil ways and to keep his commandments (see verse 13: *שָׁבוּ מִדְרָגְכֶם הֲרָעִים וְשָׁמְרוּ מִצְוֹתַי חֲקוּתַי*). In addition to these observations, it should be emphasised that not only humans can be subjects of the verb *שׁוּב* but also God. In particular, such texts deal with God’s changing of “behaviour” and manifesting of mercy toward those who do not persist in sin but repent, that is, they “turn

away” from sin and bad conduct.²⁷⁷ In fact, whereas, on the one hand, the refusal to turn away from evil is the cause of punishment by God, on the other hand, change of conduct allows God to forgive humans. In other words, he changes his mind, abandoning the idea of punishing. Thus, divine and human attitudes seem to be interrelated: human willingness to repent and divine willingness to forgive, that is, refraining from punishment. Once again, this idea is attested in prophetic texts, in Jer 26:3, for example, where Israel’s willingness to repent is expressed by the verb **שׁוּב**, while the verb **נָחַם** refers to God’s change of mind (see also Jer 36:3 where God’s forgiveness is mentioned). In Joel 2:13–14, however, this verb is in parallel with **שׁוּב**. Elsewhere, this idea of “turning back” is underlined by phrases like **מִקְרוֹן אַפּוֹ** “from his burning anger” which occurs in Jonah 3:9 and in Josh 7:26.²⁷⁸

The previous observations concerning the use of the root **שׁוּב** in theological contexts allow us to draw some conclusions:

- The verb **שׁוּב** serves to indicate the interior movement of returning to God in the sense of the repentance of an individual or a collectivity which feels guilty and must expect punishment.
- The verb **שׁוּב** assumes an important role in texts where the relationship between Israel and God is called into question. In these texts, in fact, coming back to God or turning away from bad conduct is decisive for the history of the individual or the people. Indeed, more than once Israel is called to come back to God under penalty of its own destruction (e.g. Jer 18:11; 25:5–6; 35:15–17; 36:7).
- The verb **שׁוּב**, associated with **מִדְרָךְ [הַרְעָה]**, “turn back from an [evil] way”, occurs in contexts where the judgment of God is supposed to be imminent or to have taken place.
- The root **שׁוּב** is also applied to God in a particular context, that is, his intention to renounce punishment because his people is willing to abandon evil or bad conduct.

(8) Getting back to Jonah 3:8, the question arises as to how to characterise the use of the root **שׁוּב** in this specific context. In Jonah 3:8, the verb **שׁוּב** governs two phrases introduced, respectively, by the preposition of direction **מִן**: **מִדְרָכּוֹ הַרְעָה וּמִן־הַחֲמָס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם**: **מִן**. This gives rise to some remarks:

- To begin with, the text does not specify the nature of the concrete acts of the Ninevites’ evil. Thus, the text diverges from other biblical examples where the phrase “to turn away from evil” (**שׁוּב** + **מִן** + noun) is used in connection with particular sins or crimes. For example, in Jer 23:14,

²⁷⁷ For an in-depth analysis of this biblical idea, see J. JEREMIAS, *Die Reue Gottes*, chapter III. According to Jeremias, this divine attitude can be understood as “Selbstbeherrschung”, i.e. self-control that allows God to relent. See below the exegesis of Jonah 3:10.

²⁷⁸ For the opposite idea, that is, God’s unwillingness to “turn back from his burning anger”, see 2 Kgs 23:26.

the expression appears in connection with the guilt of prophets (“adultery and walking in lies”) who are obviously not willing to turn away from their wickedness (מִרְעֵתוֹ לְבַלְתִּי-שׁוּבוּ אִישׁ, “so that nobody turns from his wickedness”).

– The verb שׁוּב is not directly employed here in connection with God. In particular, it refers neither to any kind of infidelity towards God nor to the idea of abandonment of his commandments. In fact, this would not be possible because the Ninevites are not supposed to know Israel’s God or the law he has given to his people. In other words, since the Ninevites cannot know Israel’s God and his law, they cannot be accused of having abandoned him, which would imply that they had known him previously. Equally, and for the same reason, they cannot be invited to return to him. In this respect, the formulation in Jonah 3:8 is totally different from the language used by other prophets who exhort the Israelites to return to YHWH (e.g. Hos 14:3; Joel 2:13) or who complain about the people’s unwillingness to return to him (e.g. Jer 5:6; Amos 4:6, 8–11).

– Hence the text of Jonah does not mention any particular guilt in referring to the evil way of the Ninevites (see also Jonah 1:2 where the general term that indicates “evil” [רָעָה] is used), this case can be considered representative. In this text, the bad conduct from which they have to turn away can be considered as evil in general and in all its facets. Not only is this aspect of representation – Nineveh as a wicked city – confirmed by the content of the announcement that God himself wants to address to the Ninevites, but it also becomes evident if we take into account the role that Nineveh plays in the history of Israel. In the biblical texts, in fact, the city is mentioned among the enemies of Israel who will be judged by God, for example, in Zeph 2:13. Moreover, its abominable destructiveness is noted in the book of Nahum. Here Nineveh is described as “city of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty” (Nah 3:1), and, for this reason, it will be condemned by God forever.²⁷⁹

(9) In Jonah 3:8 the topic of “turning away from evil” is associated with the phrase וּמִן-הַחַמָּס אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפְיָהֶם. Four observations allow the better understanding of this term:

a) Unless חַמָּס refers to a specific physical misdeed (e.g. Jdg 9:24), the term is often associated with acts of injustice and oppression committed in a social context,²⁸⁰ for example,

²⁷⁹ L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, J.L. SICRE DIAZ, *I Profeti*, 1239, explain the evil of Nineveh as follows: “v. 4. Ninive non solo ha fatto uso della violenza e dell’inganno, ma ha fatto ricorso anche alla seduzione, all’attrattiva dei suoi valori per comperarsi e sottomettere al proprio dominio gli altri popoli corrompendoli. [...] 5. Il Signore raccoglie simile attività come una sfida e accorre di persona [...]. Questo obbrobrio segnerà il fallimento dell’imperialismo sulla scena internazionale”. See also W.H. VAN WIJK-BOS, “No Small Thing: The ‘Overturning’ of Nineveh in the Third Chapter of Jonah”, 228.

²⁸⁰ I. SWART, “In search of the meaning of ḥamas: studying an Old Testament word in context”, 159–160.

Amos 3:10; Isa 59:6; Zeph 1:9.²⁸¹ In particular, *hāmās* appears to entail bloodshed,²⁸² in Ezek 7:23, for example: “the land is full of bloody crimes [מִשְׁפָּט דָּמִים], and the city is full of violence [הַקָּמָס]”; and Joel 4:19: “because of the violence done to the sons of Judah, in whose land they have shed innocent blood [מִקְהָמָס בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר־שָׁפְכוּ דָם־נָקִיא בְּאֶרְצָם]”.

b) Deeds characterized as *hāmās* contrast with justice and righteousness, as can be inferred from Jer 22:3 where the verbal root *hāmās* appears: the exhortation “do justice and righteousness [וַיִּצְדָּקָה עֲשׂוּ מִשְׁפָּט]” is in parallel with the warning not to mistreat [אַל־תִּהְיֶה־מָסוּ] the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. Furthermore, in Ezek 45:9, YHWH requests the princes of Israel: “put away violence and destruction, and practise justice and righteousness [וְשָׁד הַקָּמָס וְשֹׁד הַסִּירִי וּמִשְׁפָּט הַקָּמָס וְשֹׁד הַסִּירִי]”.

c) The fact that *hāmās* deserves punishment by God might be deduced from texts where it appears in connection with the expression “in someone’s hands” (see in Jonah 3:8 [בְּכַפֵּיהֶם]), especially in the negative formulation “no violence in someone’s hands”, for example, in Job 16:17; 1 Chr 12:18. In both these texts, the speaker affirms his innocence. Therefore, he does not expect any negative consequences.

d) In Isa 59:6, the expression *hāmās* בְּכַפֵּיהֶם refers to the sinful and violent behaviour of the people which is the cause of punishment by God. In this regard, it is interesting to note that, a few verses earlier, the anonymous prophet accuses his audience (verse 2): “But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God [בֵּינְכֶם לְבִין]”. This text reveals a fact: iniquity and sin are the cause of a breach between Israel and God.²⁸³ This terminology chosen by the author of Isa 56:2 reinforces the theme on which the entire chapter is focused, namely: the people’s transgression hinders God’s salvific action because it effects a clear separation between God and man. It even – the text goes on to state – provokes the hiding of God and his refusal to listen (verse 2b: “Your sins have hidden *His* face from you, so that He does not hear [מִשְׁמוֹעַ מִכֶּם מִשְׁמוֹעַ]”). Therefore, iniquity and sin separate

²⁸¹ As can be noted, in these texts, the term is associated with a vocabulary of social and ethical wrongdoing: Amos 3:10: שָׂד, “extortion”; Isa 59:6: מַעֲשֵׂי־אָוֶן, “works of iniquity”; Zeph 1:9: מְרִמָּה, “deceit”.

²⁸² H.J. STOEBE, art. “*hāmās*, violence”, *TLOT* I, 437–439.

²⁸³ In this connection, the Hebrew employs a rather strong expression: *hāmās* + *hāmās*, “separate you and God with a space”, that is, set a kind of barrier in spatial terms which creates a real impediment to the relation with him. The use of the verb *hāmās* is not accidental here. Rather, it is a question of a deliberate choice on the part of the author since this is the only occurrence in which *hāmās* is used in a translated sense, that is, with a value that is predominantly theological. In fact, beyond being used in the priestly account of the creation to indicate the act of separation with which God creates the elements of nature (e.g. Gen 1:4.6.7.14.18), the verb *hāmās* is mostly employed in the sphere of the sacred and normally to indicate the separation between priest and people (Num 8:14; 16:9); between pure and impure; and, above all, in the post-Exilic period, between Israel and the pagans (Ezra 6:21; Neh 9:2; 10:29); see B. OTZEN, art. *hāmās*, *bdl*, κτλ., 2.

man from God to the extent of impeding his vision and every form of communication. In other terms, the text reveals that when the people acts wickedly, its relationship with God is wholly obstructed whether in terms of dialogue or in terms of closeness.

e) In this connection, it seems important to highlight four elements which could be useful from the exegetical point of view in helping the better understanding of the value of the same expression used in Jonah 3:8:

- The vocabulary employed in Isa 59:2, is distinguished for being essentially religious. In fact, what provokes the separation between the people and God and his consequent hiding himself are the “iniquities, faults” (יָצוּר) and “sins” (חַטָּאת) of Israel. Indeed, just as we have seen for the root בָּדַל, so too the terms יָצוּר and חַטָּאת are employed principally in religious contexts, and their inevitable negative consequences can be cancelled only by a divine action and as the result of real penance or expiation.²⁸⁴ In this sense, Isaiah’s text is addressed specifically to the Israelites, who are able to understand the prophet’s words in their profoundly religious sense.
- Among the transgressions which provoke the distancing of God and the consequent misfortune of his people, Isa 59:6, also mentions immoral acts of . As we have seen²⁸⁵ חֲסִידָה previously, the term חֲסִידָה occurs in the vocabulary of wrongdoing and can designate sins connected in a particular way to violence. These belong more to a moral or physical violence which especially concerns the social environment. They too can only have negative consequences for those who commit them.
- If we take account of the observations on the text of Isaiah where the expression חֲסִידָה חֲסִידָה occurs, as in Jonah 3:8, we can note that the two texts are close although they refer, in the one case, to Israel, and, in the other, to foreigners, that is, the Ninevites. In fact, the reason why the Ninevites have to distance themselves from their wicked conduct and from the violence that is in their hands is explained from the starting point that evil, sin, is the cause of separation from God and the reason for misfortune. Therefore, the separation from wicked conduct and violence will be directly proportional to their will to come close to the God of Jonah and, so, to possible salvation. In this connection, it is noticeable that the vocabulary in the text of Jonah, by contrast with that of Isaiah, does not use terms narrowly and exclusively bound up with Israel, but no less efficacious in relation to the prophet’s intention. Along these lines, we have noted various factors, particularly the Ninevites’ referring to Jonah’s God with the generic name “Elohim”. That, and the fact that they are foreigners, leads to the assumption that they do not know the name of the particular God of Israel, as revealed to Moses and his people (i.e. in Exod 3:14).

²⁸⁴ For more details, see: K. KOCH, art. יָצוּר, ‘awōn κτλ., 546–562; ID., art. חַטָּאת ḥāṭā’ κτλ., 309–319.

²⁸⁵ S.M. PAUL, *Isaiah 40-66*, 499, interprets חֲסִידָה in Isa 56:2: “lawless acts of evil men”.

Moreover, they are not asked to “return to YHWH”, as the Israelites are elsewhere. Similarly, however – with a more generic expression and one less bound up with the typically religious vocabulary of Israel – the order given to them is that of “turning from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands”. This expression, which refers elsewhere to the Israelites, constitutes a clear indication for the Ninevites which does not leave room for doubt and which does not presuppose any preunderstanding of an exclusively religious type. In fact, it expresses the necessity of changing one’s way of living and, in particular, of a change which has to involve a decisive and concrete rejection of evil. If, on the one hand, in Isa 59:2, iniquity and sin cause separation from God, his hiding himself and his not listening, on the other hand, in Jonah 3:10 – as we shall see – abandoning their wicked conduct and the violence that is in their hands, together with their believing and their humiliation, obtains for the Ninevites a guaranteed and efficacious approach to God which will be followed by his repenting and salvation for the city.

(10) In conclusion, the expression *וּמִן־הַהֶמְסָא אֲשֶׁר בְּכַפֵּיהֶם* serves to specify the generic formula *מִדְרָכֹו הִרְעָה* insofar as it conveys a more concrete nuance.²⁸⁶ In fact, although this term does not indicate a specific crime in Jonah 3:8, it usually refers to acts of injustice committed in society, particularly against the *personae miserae*.²⁸⁷ To this extent, the term specifies the alleged wickedness of the Ninevites more clearly.²⁸⁸ Nonetheless, what is noteworthy is that this expression is here referred to foreigners, perhaps for two reasons. On the one hand, it could be explained by the theological idea underlying the book of Jonah: God cares even for people who do not know the particular religious categories the Israelites are supposed to know. On the other hand, this expression shows that the Ninevites are aware of their culpability, although they neither know the Israelite law nor the identity of the God whose messenger is Jonah. Even though they do not mention any specific sin, they know precisely that the cause of the ruin they would have to suffer lies in their wicked conduct. They recognize that they are violent, and decide to turn away from this path.

However, there is something more that can be said: if, on the one hand, the repenting of evil presupposes the believing, the affording of trust in the message received through the prophet, on the other hand, it presupposes a knowledge of the good. However, this idea is not examined deeply in the book. The stress is placed rather on the idea of abandoning wicked conduct and violence as the final fulfilling of that process suddenly put into action following Jonah’s

²⁸⁶ See also W.H. VAN WIJK-BOS, “No Small Thing: The ‘Overturning’ of Nineveh in the Third Chapter of Jonah”, 228

²⁸⁷ The noun *הֶמְסָא* is considered to be a synonym of *דָּשׁ* which indicates, predominantly, the oppression of the *עַנְיִים* and the *אֶבְיֹוֹנִים*; see H. HAAG, art. *חֶמְסָא chāmās*, 480.

²⁸⁸ See also P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 179.

prophetic announcement. Like a chain reaction, believing is followed by fasting; fasting by the clothing with sackcloth; and, as in a *crescendo*, the wave of change engulfs everyone from the smallest to the greatest, both in terms of age (children and adults) and in terms of importance (the king and the nobles). In addition, the spontaneity of the change is strengthened by a legal ordinance, a decree from which no one can be exempt, not even the animals. This leads the Ninevites to reject evil and to do good.

In this regard, however, while, in the book of Nahum, especially in chapter 3, the judgment of condemnation seems to have no other consequence than the destruction of Nineveh, the book of Jonah opens the way to forgiveness and mercy. In this sense, the book of Jonah represents an *unicum* among the biblical texts: here, Nineveh is allowed to hope for salvation. The Ninevites' intention of turning away from wickedness constitutes the real turning point of the narrative. In fact, as will be developed below, this leads to the solution of the initial problem: the evil, that has prompted God to send his prophet is now eliminated. This will render possible God's repentance concerning Nineveh and his protection of it from destruction.

(11) In Jonah 3:9, the king's discourse continues. In particular, he expresses the hope that God will change his mind so that the Ninevites will not perish because of His anger. The following aspects of this verse deserve attention:

- a) Verse 9 has a syntactic construction very similar to that of Jonah 1:6.²⁸⁹

Jonah 1:6	Jonah 3:9
אוּלַי	מִי־יִדְעַע
יִתְעַשֶׂת הָאֱלֹהִים לְנוּ	יָשׁוּב וְנַחֵם הָאֱלֹהִים
	וְיָשׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ
וְלֹא נֹאכַד	וְלֹא נֹאכַד

Both of these quotations are introduced by adverbial expressions, *אוּלַי* e *מִי־יִדְעַע*, respectively, which express a desire and which in the text of Jonah can be considered more or less synonyms. They are two expressions which have the same function: that of expressing the hope in a possible intervention by God.²⁹⁰ In the first case (Jonah 1:6), it is the captain who is exhorting Jonah to pray to his God in the hope of his possible intervention so that none of those who are in the ship will perish on account of the storm (“Perhaps [אוּלַי] He will think of us and we will not perish [וְלֹא נֹאכַד]”). In the second case (Jonah 3:9), it is the king who exhorts his people to

²⁸⁹ See also J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 260.

²⁹⁰ With respect to these two adverbial expressions, *מִי־יִדְעַע* and *אוּלַי*, P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 181, writes: “I termini sono diversi ma il contenuto è uguale. Probabilmente il “chi sa che” (3:9) indica ancora più di un “forse” (1:6) la convinzione che il perdono sia imminente”.

change their behaviour in the hope that God will change his mind (“Who knows? [מִי־יֹדֵעַ] God may turn...so that we will not perish [וְלֹא נִאָכַד]”), in order that all the inhabitants of Nineveh may survive his wrath. It is clear that, in both verses, at the base of this hope lies the same fundamental motivation: the desire to avoid perishing and, so, for God to work salvation on their behalf. In this connection, in fact, we note that the two phrases conclude with the same expression introduced by a ׀ with consecutive value (וְלֹא נִאָכַד). In the light of these observations on these verses, three elements seem to leap to the eyes:

- Even if they are non-Israelites, both the captain of the ship and the king of Nineveh cherish the desire and the hope that Jonah’s God can intervene as a God who punishes, on the one hand, and, on the other, who also saves: that is, a God able to restrain his wrath²⁹¹ and to overthrow his judgement of condemnation completely, turning it into an action of salvation.
- In both cases, therefore, the exhortation to call on the God of Jonah, the penitence and the change of behaviour of the Ninevites, would be the expression of a tacit faith in a God able to go back on a decision already taken.²⁹² In this case, the Ninevites would have interpreted the announcement in Jonah 3:4 as an announcement of destruction but one that did not exclude the possibility of a way of salvation.²⁹³
- Guiding the actions of the sailors and the Ninevites are their respective leaders, the captain and the king. They are the expressions of the highest authority in their respective contexts.²⁹⁴ Not only does this guarantee an involvement on the part of all those under these authorities, that is, the crew and the Ninevites, respectively, but it is also a sign of a submission to and total recognition of the superior authority before which these leaders stand, that of the God of Jonah, the only one able to change their fate of death into salvation.

b) The theme of mercy is tackled openly only in the fourth chapter. In both episodes, in chapter 1 and in chapter 3, the non-Israelites do not make any explicit reference to the mercy of God but express their hope (thus, in Jonah 1:6 and 3:9). This hope is accompanied by the will to carry out what seems pleasing to the God of Jonah, namely: the sailors maintain an attitude of benevolence towards Jonah whom they hesitate to throw into the sea; the Ninevites reject evil. These attitudes constitute the motivation which acts as an immediate brake on the divine condemnation: the sailors survive the storm which is calmed and the Ninevites are spared

²⁹¹ This is the central hypothesis of J. JEREMIAS, *Die Reue Gottes*, 104–105.

²⁹² P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 182, writes that the expression could belong to liturgical formulae from the rite of penitence.

²⁹³ See e.g. J.-D. DÖHLING, *Der bewegliche Gott*, 442–443.

²⁹⁴ According to J. JEREMIAS, *Die Reue Gottes*, 101, chapter 3 of Jonah is alluding to Jeremiah 36. In Jonah 3, the pious pagan king is being described as the antitype of the disobedient Jewish king in Jeremiah 36.

from the evil which God had said he would do to them. In this sense, therefore, one could claim that, in both these episodes, there are two decisive elements which open the way to the compassionate intervention of God on behalf of the non-Israelites: their hoping in a God who can change his mind and their fulfilment of his will. In the specific case of the Ninevites, this is not a matter solely and exclusively of believing the divine message and doing penance but also of changing direction totally, rejecting in the most sincere and absolute way the evil and violence they had committed until then.

c) As has been said, the hope of the king and the Ninevites lies in a possible change on the part of God. Such a change is rendered by two verbs, **שׁוּב** and **נָחַם** *niph.*, which express the idea of a return *par excellence*, in the sense of a reconsideration concerning a plan or an action already prepared. As we have seen, the verb **שׁוּב** is the same as that employed in the case of the Ninevites with a complement of movement from a place, constructed to indicate a total change of direction: by decree of the king, they are to “turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands” (verse 8). In the following verse, **שׁוּב** is employed twice with reference to God: once, joined to the verb **נָחַם** *niph.* “to relent, to be sorry, repent”; the second time, with a complement of movement from a place, constructed expressly with the preposition **מִן**, as in verse 8: **וַיִּשָׁב מִקְרוֹן אָפוֹ**, “withdraw from his burning wrath”. These two verbs require some explanations:

- Used in the *qal* form and without any particle or complement, in some texts, **שׁוּב** can take on the meaning of “to turn back” in the sense of “to change one’s mind” (see, e.g. 2 Kgs 24:1; Jer 34:11). With reference to God, the verb **שׁוּב** occurs on various occasions in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Ps 6:5; Isa 63:17, Joel 2:14) where it indicates a “return”, a “change of mind” with regard to a previous decision or action of God.²⁹⁵ The sense of such a return and, therefore, of “second thoughts” is reinforced in the text by the presence of the verb **נָחַם** *niph.* which here performs a synonymous function. In particular, with reference to YHWH, the verb **נָחַם** *niph.* occurs in the Hebrew Bible precisely in relation to his change of decision and/or repenting in connection with his intention of judgement and condemnation (e.g. Amos 7:3, 6).²⁹⁶
- Through the repetition of the verb **שׁוּב** in Jonah 3:9 and the presence of its synonym **נָחַם**, there would seem to be a deliberate insistence on the theme of the possibility of a change on the part of Jonah’s God. In this way, it seems as if the king wishes to persuade and motivate the inhabitants of Nineveh even more to put their change into practice. In particular, the repetition of the verb **שׁוּב**, accompanied by the expression **מִקְרוֹן אָפוֹ**, would seem to be intending to specify

²⁹⁵ DCH VIII, 284, translates by “to relent”.

²⁹⁶ See also H. SIMIAN-YOFRE, H.J. FABRY, art. **נָחַם**, 347.

the nature of God's change. The basic conviction which emerges from the text is that this God, whose message is reached through his prophet Jonah, can change his mind and so withdraw from the fury of his wrath.

– This last *motif* is well known in some texts of the Hebrew Bible and seems, therefore, to be a kind of *topos* in which the wrath of God is presented as his characteristic trait which he manifests as a result of a grave sin committed by men, for example, Deut 13:18; Jos 7:26; 2 Kgs 23:26; Ps 78:49. Among these texts, Deut 13:18 exhorts the Israelites to fight successfully against idolatry “so that the LORD may turn from his fierce anger [יָשׁוּב יְהוָה מִקְרוֹן אַפָּיו] and show you compassion [וַיִּתְּנוּ-לְךָ רַחֲמִים]”. This exhortation recalls to some extent that of the king of Nineveh in Jonah 3:8–9. However, what constitutes the aim of the exhortation to abandon idolatry in Deut 13:18, that is, the prospect that YHWH will renounce his anger,²⁹⁷ is placed in Jonah as a possibility that could be realised (“who knows”) but which will depend, finally, on God's decision. Nevertheless, what can certainly be noted is that both texts link God's withdrawing of the fury of his wrath with the idea of the possibility of surviving divine judgement. In this sense, Deut 13:18 introduces the theme of the divine mercy explicitly, while Jonah 3:9 concludes with a consecutive clause with final value expressed in the negative, “so that we will not/lest we perish [וְלֹא נִאֲבֹד]. One could infer that beneath these texts lies the basic conviction that the abandonment of wicked behaviour and violence is never an end in itself but that, in the light of God, it can always produce a positive change in relation to the persons acting, to God, and, therefore, to the actual situations. In Jonah 3, this idea is corroborated by verse 10 which confirms the hope of the king of Nineveh and which, moreover, sets the change of the Ninevites (that is to say, their works, מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם) and the change of God in a relation of cause and effect.²⁹⁸

– If the basic idea of a possible change on the part of God in the light of repentance by the people is a given in those Old Testament texts where it is Israel that repents, this idea assumes a completely new and unexpected significance in Jonah. In this connection, it seems appropriate to cite the text of Joel 2:14 with its expression מִי־יִוָּדַע יָשׁוּב וְנָחַם, almost identical to that in Jonah 3:9. In Joel 2:14, it is put into the mouth of the prophet, and the context seems to recall in the same way a situation in which the divine judgement is ready to be carried out: the day of the Lord is imminent. In this context, the speaker is exhorting Judah to repentance and to penance in the light of which he hopes that God will repent and change his mind. Even if, on account of literary genre, the text of Joel is some distance from that of Jonah, verses 13–14 recall common

²⁹⁷ *Mutatis mutandis*, the same goes also for Exod 32:12 where similar formulations can be found; for a comparison with Jonah 3:9, see E. BONS, “Zwei Überlegungen zum Verständnis von Hos XI”, 291; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 348.

²⁹⁸ For this terminology, see also J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 263.

elements such as the theme of the “return to the Lord” and that of penitence. These are intended to express that the return of Judah can correspond to a “return of the Lord” and his consequent blessing. This conviction is based on three principal assumptions: 1. God is merciful, as is explicitly stated in verse 13. 2. As manifested by the Hebrew expression *מִי יֵדָע*, which presupposes an equally rhetorical reply (“no one knows”), God’s return always depends on his free decision.²⁹⁹ 3. However, the possible return of God presupposes his people’s return to him (verses 12–13).

– In the light of these brief observations, we ask ourselves whether we can glimpse a similar theological context at the root of the text of Jonah. That would permit us to understand whether the theological model which underlies the text of Joel, which is clearly addressed to Israel, is identical or similar to that applied by the author of the text of Jonah to the non-Israelites. In fact, as has been said several times, even if the text of Jonah is a literary fiction, it is interesting to understand how the author is presenting to his readers the ways with which the relationship between the God of Israel and the non-Israelites is being presented in this text. In this connection, it seems important, first of all, to take into consideration that the text of Jonah presupposes that Jonah’s God is a merciful God. Even if this conviction is expressed explicitly by his prophet in the following chapter, the vocabulary relating to the episode of the Ninevites recalls once again the theme of the divine mercy, even if there is no explicit mention of it. This mercy is not conceived as an act on the part of God that is due or automatic; rather, it is understood as a free act of YHWH. However, this presupposes, first, a return on the part of those who are judged by God as being wicked. If, in Joel, it is the prophet who intercedes, in the book of Jonah, it is the king of the city who exhorts his people to the change. Finally, God’s mercy is expressed concretely in a change which is manifested in a rethinking and in the fact that he ceases from carrying out the evil announced. What is at stake is life itself: the collective perishing presupposes a total annihilation which leaves no room for a future generation. Just as the penitence must be total, so would the destruction be total. What is extraordinary in Jonah is that YHWH is addressing non-Israelites, seeking their repentance, even if not explicitly. Their commitment in faith, their calling into question their whole way of life with an act of self-abasement, their prayer addressed to him and their abandonment of their wicked conduct cause him to go back on his decision.

(11) Verse 10 presents a chiasmic construction formed by five phrases at the centre of which is the statement that God relented concerning the evil.³⁰⁰ In this connection, it seems important

²⁹⁹ See J.L. CRENSHAW, *Joel. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 138.

³⁰⁰ See also P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 188; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 350.

to underline the explanation which the text puts in emphatic position at the beginning of verse 10 where it says that “God saw their deeds”.³⁰¹ This verse constitutes a most important transition in the narrative: now the action is focusing entirely on the action of God in the light of the reaction of the Ninevites to the message sent to them. Verse 10, in fact, which is linked syntactically to the preceding verse by the *waw* consecutive, is continuing the narration of the events connected with the city of Nineveh and setting out their results. Indeed, verse 10 concludes the episode about the city of Nineveh’s change of behaviour, from evil to good, bringing the attention back to the response of God which, almost symmetrically, coincides with another change: God himself “relented concerning the evil which he had said to bring upon them and He did not do it”. The text presents the change of God as a consequence of the fact that God observed, “saw”, the effective change on the part of the city, consisting, precisely, in the people’s having totally abandoned their wicked conduct. In this connection, we can make the following observations:

- a) God’s change would seem to suggest the fact
 - that the repentance of the Ninevites, that is, their self-abasement and their abandonment of the path of evil, was sincere and profound;
 - that God fully accepted this process, despite the fact that it was concerned with a foreign population, namely, non-Israelites;
 - and that, therefore, the change of God towards them is not based on those categories on which Israel’s belonging to its God was based, for example, covenant or election. Rather, it roots its motivations in the fact that, in the light of the divine judgement, the evil committed is completely rejected by the Ninevites who abandon their wicked deeds totally.

b) In particular, the text notes: “God saw their deeds [וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם]”. With reference to these deeds (substantive *מַעֲשֵׂה*), the verb *רָאָה* occurs on other occasions in the Hebrew Bible and mostly in contexts where men are being called to contemplate the great deeds of God (cf., for example, Exod 34:10; Deut 11:7; Ps 8:4; 107:24). In Jonah 3:10, instead, the subject of this verb is God. In this context, it seems important to examine some connotations of the verb *רָאָה* in Jonah 3:10, an enquiry which is generally passed over in the commentaries.³⁰² In particular, we wish to draw attention to five aspects:

³⁰¹ See also R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 140: “Der erste Schritt der Umkehr der Gottheit ist die Wahrnehmung der Taten Ninives.”

³⁰² H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 155; J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 263; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 140–141; P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 350–351.

- Concerning the possibility of seeing the wickedness or the sins of men, quite a few texts, each in its own way, contest the idea that these can be hidden from God; rather, he is said to be able to see and examine even the thoughts of men. A clear example of this is in Isa 29:15–16 with its condemnation of those who deceive themselves that they can conceal their plans from YHWH, hiding their real intentions.³⁰³ In fact, they think: “Who sees us? Who knows us? [מִי יִרְאֵנוּ וּמִי יִדְעֵנוּ]”, thoughts which God condemns (verse 16). A similar idea is found in Ps 94:7³⁰⁴ *à propos* those who commit evil and say: “The Lord does not see, the God of Jacob does not understand [לֹא יִרְאֶה-יְהוָה וְלֹא-יָבִין אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב]”. To which the psalmist retorts in verse 11 that, on the contrary, “The Lord knows the thoughts of man that they are but vain [יְהוָה יִדַע מִקְשָׁבוֹת אָדָם כִּי-יֵי-הֵמָּה הִבָּל]”. Also, in Job 11:11, Zophar says that no falsity escapes God but rather “He knows false men, sees iniquity and understands it [כִּי-יִהְיֶה אִשָּׁא וַיִּרְא-אֲנִי וְלֹא יִתְבוּנָן]”. This would explain the reason why Job is in disgrace. In fact, as is inferred from the immediate context of verse 11, Zophar insists that the one who knows no evil does not experience such a disaster (verses 14–16). These texts share the idea that God is able to see the works of men, even their hidden thoughts, since his glance penetrates beyond appearances. Each in its own way, these texts are part of a polemical context in which this ability of God is challenged, implicitly or explicitly.
- From the texts considered, there emerges another aspect which can certainly not be passed over. God’s act of seeing is part of a broader cognitive act which also concerns understanding in the sense of judging the thing seen. This emerges in particular from the presence of the verb ראה which, in these texts, is placed in parallel with the verbs ידע (see Isa 29:15 and Job 11:11) and בין (see Ps 94:7). That allows for the clear understanding that God’ gaze goes beyond the apparent truth but, actually, also sees and understands the nature of men’s deeds. In fact, God’s *seeing* always coincides with a judgement which bears with itself consequences such as, for example, punishment.
- The fact that God can understand human actions is explained in Ps 94 by the idea of the God of Israel as a creator God. That emerges from the rhetorical question of verse 9: “He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? Or he who made the eye, shall he not see?”³⁰⁵ Nevertheless, God’s hearing and seeing go beyond the external perception of men’s actions. As creator of every human being, “he knows the thoughts of man” (Ps 94:11). This is also found, similarly, in Ps

³⁰³ For the politico-social context which is probably to do with the secret political manipulation of the leaders of Israel in the time of Hezekiah, see B.S. CHILDS, *Isaiah*, 219.

³⁰⁴ For such a link, see also W.A.M. BEUKEN, *Isaiah II/2*, 115.

³⁰⁵ For a similar idea, see Isa 29:16 where the prophet uses the comparison of the clay and the potter.

33:15 where, with reference to the God of Israel as creator of all things, it is said that he gazes on all the sons of man and the inhabitants of the earth. “He has fashioned their hearts and scrutinises all their deeds [הַיִּצָּר יַחַד לְכֶם הַמְּבִין אֶל-כָּל-מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם]”. In these texts, therefore, one can observe a clear interest on the part of God in “all the sons of man”, including non-Israelites. He is the creator of every man and is able to see the acts and understand the thoughts of each of them. However, the idea of a creator God, which Jonah had announced to the sailors already in chapter 1, is not mentioned explicitly in Jonah 3:10. However, in the light of Ps 33 and 94, we have an explanation of why God takes the deeds of the Ninevites into consideration and does not ignore their worth. As we shall see in what follows, the idea of the creator God in relation to the Ninevites is present in chapter 4 and constitutes the *motif* underlying God’s argument against Jonah’s rebellion over his mercy.

– As we have already seen in connection with the texts of Isa 29:15, Job 11:11 and Ps 94:7, God’s ability to see the visible deeds of men and to understand their true nature is always followed by a judgement on his part. This seems to emerge also from what is said in Jonah 3:10. Here, God is not limited to seeing the Ninevites’ deeds *sic et simpliciter*, but his seeing also corresponds to an assessment of these deeds which, in this specific case, is positive. That is given by the fact that, first of all, the Ninevites take God’s message seriously. In fact, with reference to their behaviour, the narrator makes no allusion to an attitude of deceit,³⁰⁶ nor any challenge over God’s ability to see and to understand (thus, the thought of the ungodly in Ps 94:7). Rather, as we have seen, the Ninevites respond to his judgement of condemnation by *believing* (Jonah 3:5). In this connection, as we have emphasised above, it is no accident that the author utilises the verb אָמַן for all the implications which it has in relation to the faith of Israel in its relationship with God, above all, in the moments when his steadfastness is called into question.

– Furthermore, as specified by the text which introduces the following phrase, the object of God’s seeing is the Ninevites’ change of their wicked conduct (כִּי-יָשְׁבוּ מִדְּרָכָם הָרָעָה). That leads to the supposition that this change cannot be referred only to the external actions, as, for example, the putting on of sackcloth or the fasting, but that the Ninevites have really abandoned every link with evil. In this sense, the author uses here an expression which in itself proves to be unambiguous. In fact, as has been seen previously, the language adopted here for the Ninevites is the same as that which occurs on all those occasions when, in the light of an imminent

³⁰⁶ To distinguish between the interior disposition and the exterior behavior, some biblical texts distinguish between what is on the lips and what is in the heart; cf. Isa 29:13: “[these people] honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (וּבִשְׂפֵתָיו כִּבְדוּנִי וְלִבּוֹ רֵחַק מִמֶּנִּי וְתִהְיֶה); cf. also Sir 12:16^A, while Prov 26:24 uses קָרַב instead of לָב.

judgement of God, Israel is faced with its evil and called to radical change (see e.g. Hos 14:3; Joel 2:13) as a result of which God will be disposed to think again and revoke his judgement of condemnation. In this sense, God's *seeing* in Jonah 3:10 has as its immediate consequence his own "repenting" because it is actually nothing other than observing of a sincere change in the light of which the Ninevites will not be destroyed because of their guilt. That evil which God had observed at the beginning of the account (Jonah 1:2) has now been effectively abandoned.³⁰⁷

c) Moreover, concerning God's attitude towards the city of Nineveh, we note that, in verse 10, there are some omissions. In this verse, in fact, the author does not dwell on how God accepted all the acts of penance carried out by the inhabitants of Nineveh. The text, that is, does not record any declaration of pleasure and/or approval on the part of God, as, for example, in Exod 33:17 where God responds to Moses' intercession: כִּי־מָצָאתָ הוּא בְּעֵינַי, "you have found favour in my eyes". However, it is understood that he welcomes the Ninevites' change of conduct.³⁰⁸ In fact, just as God can see and know the wicked actions of men (cf. the above-cited texts, e.g. Ps 94:7; Job 11:11), in the same way, he is capable of registering positive changes in attitude. In other words, the fact that God abandons the punishment signifies that his seeing goes beyond appearances and grasps the sincerity with which the Ninevites have acted. Thus, the act of seeing has the function here of confirming their real change.³⁰⁹

d) Verse 10c focuses on God's reaction to what he observed: "And God relented concerning the evil [וַיִּגָּחֵם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־הָרָעָה] which he had said to bring upon them. And He did not do so". In this phrase, the verb נָחַם *hiph.* is joined to the complement of argument "concerning the evil" (עַל־הָרָעָה). As has been seen, the verb נָחַם, referring to God occurs, also in verse 9 where the king exhorts the Ninevites to abandon their wicked conduct in the hope that God will repent and change. By contrast with verse 9, where it appears together with the verb שׁוּב without any complement, the same verb has, in verse 10, the function of expressing the repenting in relation to "the evil" (עַל־הָרָעָה). However, this repenting is not to be understood here in the sense often recognised in modern language translations, that is, as "repentance", in the sense of

³⁰⁷ See also J. JEREMIAS, *Die Reue Gottes*, 104; R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 140–141.

³⁰⁸ See also P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 193: "Il libro di Giona [...] fa solo capire che Dio stima sufficiente la conversione dei niniviti per sospendere il suo giudizio su di loro."

³⁰⁹ In this connection, R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 141, makes use of the concept of ethics to describe the behaviour of the Ninevites. In fact, according to him, God's seeing does not refer in the first place to the fasting and the prayer; rather, according to him, it would be a new way of acting, an 'ethic', which finally prompts the Ninevites to change their behaviour.

acknowledging oneself as guilty for an action committed.³¹⁰ Rather, it expresses the idea of a radical and definitive change concerning a decision taken previously. In this connection, it seems that God's "repenting" consists in something more than in simply self-control.³¹¹ In fact, it implies the definitive abandonment of a plan previously approved. In this specific case, the change has to do with "the evil which he had said to bring upon them [עַל־הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־] לְהָמָּה". This syntagma is already found in other texts of the Hebrew Bible where there is another example, *mutatis mutandis*, of a similar theological model in which God's change of decision is presented in a context in which his imminent judgement of condemnation presses the Israelites to abandon their wicked conduct. In what follows, we record some significant examples:

- In Exod 32:14, in the light of the intercession of Moses who calls on God and seeks him precisely to go back on his wrath (verse 12), God abandons his intention to do evil. In particular, Moses' intercession contains the return of one of the principal *motifs* in the whole of the first half of the book of Exodus: God's reputation in the eyes of the Egyptians and of the foreign nations. This is one of the arguments that Moses employs for God to be able to go back on his decision to punish the Israelites.³¹² Consequently, Moses – the text notes – "placated the face of the Lord" (verse 11), who "repented of the evil which he thought to do his people" (verse 14: וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה עַל־הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ).³¹³
- In the same way, in Jeremiah 26,³¹⁴ this syntagma occurs several times as a kind of refrain which structures Jeremiah's prophecy over the house of Judah. In verse 3, God hopes that Israel will repent of its wicked deeds so that he can change his mind over the misfortune which he was thinking to cause them (וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה אֶל־הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי חָשַׁב לַעֲשׂוֹת לְהָמָּה). In verse 13, the prophet guarantees that, if the people will reform its own conduct, God will change his mind over the misfortune which he has announced against them (וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה אֶל־הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר עָלֵיכֶם). In verse 19, the elders hold up Hezekiah as an example of good behaviour when he did not have Micah condemned despite the harsh words of his prophecy. Hezekiah's fear placates the Lord who

³¹⁰ Cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Die Reue Gottes*, 125: "Im Falle der 'Reue' fällt bei der Übertragung auf Gott z.B. die Konnotation der schuldhaften Einsicht völlig fort...".

³¹¹ In this sense, cf. J. JEREMIAS, *Die Reue Gottes*, 105: who, in order to express the idea of repenting as self-control, uses the German term "Selbstbeherrschung". However, Jeremias seems to be insinuating with this term that God is ready to spare the Ninevites from judgement.

³¹² For the exegesis of these verses, see e.g. T. B. DOZEMAN, *Exodus*, 707.

³¹³ T.E. FRETHEIM, *Exodus*, 286, notes that the repenting of God, expressed here through the syntagma עַל־הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת + נָחַם, consists in "going back from a direction taken or a decision made."

³¹⁴ For the similarities between Jeremiah 26 and Jonah 3:8–10, see also J.T. WILLIS, "The 'repentance' of God in the books of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah", 166.

thus “repented of the evil which he had pronounced against them [וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָרַעְעָה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר]”³¹⁵ [עָלֵיהֶם].³¹⁵

e) In these texts, there emerges the conception that:

- God is prepared to renounce his judgement of condemnation when faced with intercession by a mediator (Exod 32:12);
- changing his decision is something that God himself hopes for by wishing for the repentance of Israel³¹⁶;
- however, the latter is the *conditio sine qua non* for God to abandon his intention to carry out his judgement.

In relation to these three elements, the text of Jonah is astonishing because God reacts towards the Ninevites as if he were dealing with his own people, Israel. In fact, he not only does not limit himself to observing the Ninevites’ change of conduct but, in the final analysis, fully accepts it, although they are non-Israelites. Giving up on his plan to carry out the destruction announced through his prophet, God thus reassures the hope of the king and all of his people (Jonah 3:9): their change of behaviour has produced the desired effects. It is the narrator himself who observes the results of this, adding the final statement “and he did not do it”. This brief sentence concludes the narrative picture of the events which took place in Nineveh and seals a certainty: God’s decision not to implement his judgement on the city is definitive.

δ) Concluding remarks

(1) The greatness of Nineveh, which is emphasised several times by the author, could be referring to the fact what we have here is a message addressed to a population which has a clearly defined political and social identity. This is one of the elements which distinguishes the Ninevites from the sailors of which nothing is known except that it is presupposed that they come from different origins because “each one prayed to his god” (Jonah 1:5). Moreover, Nineveh’s greatness refers to a vast community compared with the limited number of the sailors. In this connection, the exaggerated dimensions of the city would cause the realisation that the sin of Nineveh is in proportion to its size (cf. 1:2). Along these lines, another element that distinguishes Nineveh from the sailors is the evil which is never mentioned in connection with the latter.

³¹⁵ The syntagma occurs in other texts, also in the negative e.g. Jer 4:28; 15:6; cf. also Isa 5:25: “לֹא־יִשָּׁב אָפוֹ.”

³¹⁶ See e.g. W.H. VAN WIJK-BOS, “No Small Thing: The ‘Overturning’ of Nineveh in the Third Chapter of Jonah”, 232: “God was the one leaving the possibility open for new things to happen in Nineveh by sending a prophet there.”

(2) Jonah utters an announcement of condemnation which does not contain any explicit appeal concerning possible actions to be taken in order to avoid the total destruction. In this connection, even if Jonah is appointed by God as his messenger, he does not perform any function beyond that of being spokesman. For example, he does not take it upon himself either to intercede on behalf of the city threatened by destruction or to exhort Nineveh to change its conduct so that God can go back on his decision. This results in the fact that Jonah performs a role different from that presented in other prophetic texts, as, for example, in Amos 7:3.6 where the prophet intercedes on behalf of the people, or in Joel 2:13–14 and Amos 5:15 where it is precisely the prophet who with his “perhaps” (מִי־יֹדֵעַ in Joel 2:14 and אֵילִי in Amos 5:15) causes the glimpse of a possible and achievable way of salvation, providing Israel repents and changes. In the book of Jonah, a role like this is attributed to the king of Nineveh, that is, to someone who does not belong to the people of Israel. However, rather than fulfilling the role of intermediary between Nineveh and God, the king is fully involved in the process of change along with his people.

(3) It is the narrator who tells how the Ninevites react to the threat announced by Jonah: they “believe” in Elohim. The announcement is sufficient for them to make an immediate and effective response, a response already known to and practised by Israel in decisive situations. In fact, this verb occurs right from the beginnings of the history of Israel (Gen 15) and, above all, when its own stability is at stake. Thus, in the history of Israel, “believing” is the adequate response to a divine utterance and opens the way to a new beginning. It is very significant, therefore, that this verb is being used in the book of Jonah – just as elsewhere – but with reference to non-Israelites who, as such, do not share with Israel its special relationship with its God. Thus, it is assumed that the Ninevites know how to act towards Elohim in relation to the need to escape the destruction announced by him, although it is not Jonah himself who suggests such a response and, still less, who reveals the identity of Elohim.

(4) The communal rites of self-abasement have the function of underlining the acknowledgement of guilt. As is recorded at the end of verse 5 (“great and small”), even the king takes part in these rites as a representative figure. He himself performs all the rites of self-abasement to the point of taking off his robe, leaving the throne and sitting in dust: very powerful gestures for a king who has the function of validating the communal rites (*see below*). These are joined to a sincere prayer which the Ninevites have to address to Elohim “mightily” (Jonah 3:8). In this regard too, the Ninevites are being presented as pious Israelites.

(5) In addition to the rites of self-abasement, the king also performs a key function on the political level, taking personal responsibility for the future of his people. It is he, in fact, who

exhorts the Ninevites to carry out those actions which could change the fate of the city. By commanding public penance involving all, without exceptions, he is the hinge on which all the penitential activity turns. His command somehow seems to stand in for a divine law, of which the text, however, says nothing. In this connection, his order seems to follow precisely the model of a prophetic decree which is given an official and authoritative force. The king's attitude seems to assume a spontaneous knowledge of the way to act in this situation, as if he had as his model of reference Israel's experience with its God. However, as we have seen, the prophet's message gives no hint in this direction.

(6) Basically, the king's initiative is motivated by a profound hope that God can go back on his decision so that the city is not destroyed. The same hope is uttered in Jonah 1:6 where it is the captain who exhorts Jonah to pray to his God in the hope that they do not perish. From these elements, we seem to be able to observe that the sailors' prayer and the Ninevites' calling on God have the function of letting the reader understand that such an attitude is nourished by a certain faith in a God whom they did not know before but who is, nonetheless, prepared to receive their supplication. The idea implicit in these texts is that, although they are dealing with men who are completely foreign to the race of Israel, the former use a similar language to the latter in order to be able to enter into a relationship with God – Elohim, not YHWH – and so to be saved.

(7) Preliminary to the change in God is his observing of the actions performed by the Ninevites. Rather than putting this observing in the mouth of God, the text attributes it to the narrator. As we have seen, God's observing is expressed by the verb ראה, "see", (Jonah 3:10) which has a double value: "seeing", in the sense of observing the concrete reality of acts being performed, and "seeing", in the sense of accepting the sincerity with which these acts are carried out. From this starting point, it is clear that God does not ignore the action of the Ninevites but accepts as genuine their wish to renounce evil definitively. Their turning back from their wicked conduct becomes the outcome of the process of change which began with their believing in Elohim.

(8) The action of the Ninevites persuades God to abandon his project of destruction. This action of God is expressed with a syntagma well known in some texts of the Hebrew Bible and which recurs, in particular, in contexts where God, in the light of a change by Israel, decides to go back on his intention and save his people from destruction. This attitude of God is traditionally translated with "repenting" (root נחם). However, we should emphasise that this does not have a moral value, that is, of repenting with regard to an evil or a sin committed; rather, it expresses the idea of a radical change with respect to a decision taken previously and which,

therefore, goes beyond the sense of self-control. Just as the Israelites can enjoy a rethinking by God concerning the evil announced to them, so too the Ninevites, that is, non-Israelites, can enjoy the change in God which avoids his fulfilling his judgement of condemnation on them.

d) Jonah's Dialogue with God (Jonah 4:1–11)

α) Introductory remarks

In the following sections, we shall record the analysis of some elements that we consider important for our basic question: what is the book of Jonah's concept of the relationship between God, Israel and the non-Israelites? As we shall see, chapter 4 is certainly the story's conclusion in which the narrative elements of the book find a horizon of meaning within the context of what is said and what is not said within the dynamic of God's dialogue with Jonah in this chapter. In carrying out our analysis, we shall proceed to study, first of all, the section of verses 1–4 which records Jonah's negative reaction to God's actions in his dealings with the Ninevites. A second stage of the analysis will be concerned with the explanation which God gives to Jonah through the actions performed on his behalf and the words addressed to him in the second section of the chapter, verses 5–11.

β) Text and working translation

1a	וַיִּרַע אֶל־יְהוָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה	But it displeased ³¹⁷ Jonah greatly
b	וַיִּחַר לוֹ:	and he burned with anger.

³¹⁷ As for the syntax of this phrase, see the convincing explanation by G.I. DAVIES, "The Use of R' QAL and the Meaning of Jonah IV 1", 107–108: "... it is quite common for R' qal to be used without an explicit subject, and that in such cases the subject is generally a pronoun 'it', which refers to the action or situation just described. This is most likely to be the case in Jon. iv 1. The subject of *wayyēra* is 'it' referring to Yahweh's action described in iii 10b, his retraction of the word of judgement pronounced against Nineveh. This 'displeased, seemed bad to Jonah.'" As for the phrase רָעָה גְדוֹלָה, Davies notes (*ibid.*, 108) that it "serves to intensify the meaning conveyed by *wayyēra* in iv 1". Similarly, H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 160: "The subject of the sentence is the whole of 3:10, which explains that the God withdrew the word of judgement"; J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 273: "In some cases [...] Hebrew leaves it to readers to realize that this unhappiness results from previously detailed circumstances. An example is in Neh 13:8, where an insolent use of Temple space displeases Nehemiah; and the same also obtains in Jonah. Therefore, in order to locate the cause of Jonah's irritation, we must hark back to 3:10". K.M. CRAIG JR., *A Poetic of Jonah. Art in the Service of Ideology*, 139: "Since Jonah is introduced into the sentence by way of a preposition, אֶל־יְהוָה "unto Jonah", he cannot be the subject of the sentence and since the feminine expression רָעָה גְדוֹלָה "a great evil" would normally require a feminine verb (וַתִּירַע), one may suspect that the subject is understood as "it", i.e. God's actions described in 3:10".

2a	וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר	And he prayed to the Lord, saying,
b	אָנָּה יְהוָה	I pray you, Lord,
c	הֲלוֹא־זֶה דְבָרִי עַד־הַיּוֹמִי עַל־אֲדָמָתִי	was not this ³¹⁸ my thought when I was still in my own country?
d	עַל־כֵּן קָדַמְתִּי לְבָרוּחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה	This is why I hastened to flee towards Tarshish
e	כִּי יָדַעְתִּי	because I knew
f	כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי־חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם	that you [are] a merciful and compassionate God,
g	אָרֹךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חַסְדִּים וְנִחַם עַל־הַרְעָה:	slow to anger and of great kindness and who repents of evil.
3a	וְעַתָּה יְהוָה קַח־נָא אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִמֶּנִּי	So now YHWH take away my life
b	כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי: ס	(lit. take the breath from me) since my death is better than my life.
4a	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה	And YHWH said:
b	הֲיֵטִב חָרָה לְךָ	“Is it right ³¹⁹ that you are burning with anger?”
5a	וַיֵּצֵא יוֹנָה מִן־הָעִיר	Jonah went out of the city
b	וַיֵּשֶׁב מִקְדָּם לְעִיר	and sat to the east of the city
c	וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ שֵׁם סֹכָה	And there he made a booth for himself
d	וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחְתֶּיהָ בַּצֵּל	and sat there in the shade
e	עַד אֲשֶׁר יֵרְאֶה	until he saw
f	מַה־יִּהְיֶה בָּעִיר:	what would happen in the city.
6a	וַיַּמֵּן יְהוָה־אֱלֹהִים קִיקְיוֹן	And YHWH God prepared a castor-oil plant
b	וַיַּעַל מֵעַל לְיוֹנָה	which grew above Jonah
c	לְהִיט צֵל עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ	to provide shade for his head,
d	וַיִּשְׂמַח יוֹנָה עַל־הַקִּיקְיוֹן שֶׁמָּתָה גְדוּלָּה:	to save him from his suffering. And Jonah rejoiced because of the castor-oil plant with great joy.
7a	וַיַּמֵּן הָאֱלֹהִים תּוֹלַעַת בְּעֹלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר	When the sun rose on the following day,
b	לְמַחֲרָת	God prepared a worm,
c	וַתִּבֶּד אֶת־הַקִּיקְיוֹן וַיִּבֶשׁ:	and it attacked the castor-oil plant ³²⁰ and dried it up.
8a	וַיְהִי כַּזְרוֹחַ הַשָּׁמֶשׁ	And it happened, at the rising of the sun,
b	וַיַּמֵּן אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ קָדִים חַרְיִשִׁית	that God prepared a sultry east wind
c	וַתִּבֶּד הַשָּׁמֶשׁ עַל־רֹאשׁ יוֹנָה	and the sun struck Jonah’s head,
d	וַיִּתְעַלֵּף	and he felt faint
e	וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ לָמוּת	and asked that he might die,
f	וַיֹּאמֶר	saying:
g	טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי	“Better my death than my life”.

³¹⁸ This demonstrative pronoun זה refers to God’s decision reported in Jonah 3:10, i.e. that God relents from bringing disaster upon Nineveh; see J.A. LOADER, “Gottes Umkehr und prophetische Absurdität”, 330.

³¹⁹ Y. KIM, “The Function of היטב in Jonah 4 and Its Translation”, 389–393, proposes not reading the infinite absolute as a predicate but, on the basis of other texts of the OT, such as Deut 9:21, he interprets it as an adverb of degree, “very”, “thoroughly”, translating the sentence in question as: “Are you very angry?”. Cf., already, H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 160. This translation would be a good rendering of the empathy of God who does not show himself indifferent to Jonah’s feelings and situation. Along the same lines of interpretation, cf. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 287, who, among the other possibilities, prefers to consider היטב an adverb of degree. In fact, for him, God’s question is not only a question about Jonah’s motivation or justification, but, rather, through it, “God sympathizes with Jonah’s despair”.

³²⁰ The issue of the exact species of this plant and its symbolical function will not be addressed in this thesis; see the commentaries as well as B.P. ROBINSON, “Jonah’s Qiqayon Plant”, *passim*.

9a	וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־יוֹנָה	And God said to Jonah:
b	הֲיֵטֵב חָרָה־לְךָ עַל־הַקִּיקְיוֹן	“Is it right that you are angry about the castor-oil plant?”
c	וַיֹּאמֶר הֵיטֵב חָרָה־לִּי עַד־מוֹת:	[Jonah] said: “It is right that I am angry, even to death”.
10a	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה	And YHWH said:
b	אַתָּה חֹסֵף עַל־הַקִּיקְיוֹן	“You are concerned for the castor-oil plant
c	אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָמַלְתָּ בּוֹ	for which you did not labour
d	וְלֹא גִדַּלְתּוֹ	and which you did to make to grow,
e	שֶׁבַר־לַיְלָה הָיָה	which sprung up in one night [lit. son of a night]
f	וּבַר־לַיְלָה אָבָד:	and in one night [lit. son of a night] perished!
11a	וְאַנִּי לֹא אַחֹס עַל־נִינְוָה הַעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה	And should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city,
b	אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבָּהּ הַרְבֵּה מִשְׁתִּים־עֶשְׂרֵה רְבּוֹ אָדָם	in which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand people,
c	אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע בֵּין־יְמִינוֹ לְשִׂמְאֵלוֹ וּבֵהֶמָּה רְבֵה:	who do not know how to tell their right hand from their left, and many animals?” ³²¹

γ) Exegetical observations

Before entering into the detailed exegesis of chapter 4, we have some necessary observations to make on its structure. In fact, the chapter lends itself to a multiplicity of subdivisions. This depends on the criterion chosen for identifying the various sections of the chapter. The possible criteria are mainly three:

– A first criterion is that which takes into consideration the changes connected with the narrative in itself, such as those which concern the change of characters or subjects (cf., for example, in this connection, the alternation between the speeches of Jonah and God)³²², of scenes (cf. Jonah who goes out of the city, verse 5)³²³ or, the deploying of actions as though they were contradictory (cf., for example, the fact that God causes the castor-oil plant to grow

³²¹ The verse is translated as a question. In recent research, however, the idea that Jonah 4:11 is a rhetorical question has been contradicted. In fact, some authors claim that the final verse of the book of Jonah is an affirmation: God does not completely rule out destroying the Ninevites and their cattle. From a philological point of view, this interpretation seems possible because the *He interrogativum* is missing; see P. GUILLAUME, “Caution: Rhetorical Questions!”, 11; ID., “The end of Jonah is the beginning of Wisdom”, 243-244). However, this argument is not decisive. Therefore, authors argue that, in the light of the context of the book of Jonah or even the book of the Twelve Prophets, the idea that God is merciful towards the Ninevites should be ruled out. Their arguments are based on the assumption that God does not change his mind and, consequently, he does not repent. For a more detailed discussion of the problem, see our exegesis of Jonah 4:11.

³²² H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 162, employs this criterion in identifying in chapter 4, three main sections: vv. 1-4; 5-9a; 9b-11, expressing himself thus: “The first phase points out the problem; the second phase develops a paradigm or example; the third tries to solve the problem with the help of the paradigm”.

³²³ This criterion is considered by P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*. 195-196, who sees the change of scene in verse 5 as an element which could suggest the subdivision of Jonah 4 into two main parts (vv. 1-5 and 6-11) in which verse 5 plays a transitional role.

but then makes it also wither) or, again, the change in the narrative tone (cf. verse 10 in which God defends his merciful action with regard to Nineveh).

– A different criterion could be that which refers to the formulae employed or the idioms repeated (along these lines, cf., for example, the idiomatic formula $\text{לֵךְ הָיָה לְךָ הַיָּמִים}$ which we find in verse 4 and in verse 9).

– Finally, another possible criterion is that which concerns Jonah's attitude as an element which allows for the better identification of the dispute between God and the prophet and which determines two main parts in chapter 4: the section concerning verses 1–6 and that concerning verses 7–11.³²⁴

For our analysis, we are opting for a bipartite subdivision of the chapter with its first part in verses 1–4 and its second in verses 5–11 on account of the change of scene in verse 5 and because the first four verses make up a subsection in which verse 1 forms an inclusion with verse 4 through the presence of the verb חָרַה , “burn” which we find in both verses. Verse 5, which is constructed in concentric parallelism, forms a break-verse because of the change of scene (Jonah moves outside the city, facing east) and introduces the second scene which coincides also with the second section of the chapter. This is found in verses 6–11 and is constructed with symmetrical phrases and repetitions which link the statements to one another.³²⁵

Verses 1–4

(1) Chapter 4 opens with Jonah's reaction to God's salvific action with regard to Nineveh. Jonah appears greatly annoyed on account of what was expressed in Jonah 3:10. In this connection, two aspects have to be studied in more detail.

a) At the beginning of verse 1, we find the verb רָעַע which, accompanied by the particle אֲל , has the meaning of “be angry because of, be displeased at”. The verb רָעַע has as its subject what God has done with regard to the Ninevites, that is, Jonah is very displeased at the fact that God “repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them and did not do it (Jonah 3,10).³²⁶ It is precisely this which appears hateful to Jonah and which causes him great displeasure (רָעַע (גְּדוּלָה)). In this connection, one can note that the verb רָעַע *qal* in the sense of “to be angry because of³²⁷ [which causes displeasure at]” is constructed with the preposition אֲל and with the internal

³²⁴ For the criteria adopted for the identification of the structure of Jonah 4, cf. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 271–272. He prefers the third criterion, subdividing the chapter into these two main sections; L.C. ALLEN, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 227–235 and D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 500, also identify a bipartite structure, subdividing the chapter into 1-4 and 5-11.

³²⁵ For a detailed analysis on the structure of Jonah 4, see P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 195-225.

³²⁶ See above the note on the translation of verse 1.

³²⁷ See also H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 165.

object רָעָה גְדוֹלָה which emphasises the degree of displeasure experienced by Jonah in observing God's action with regard to Nineveh.³²⁸ Some other texts of the Hebrew Bible allow us to understand better the feeling to which the verb רָעַע is referring. We should note that the verb רָעַע occurs there often to express a situation of profound personal crisis dictated by a wholly unexpected event which involves the person closely. In what follows, we cite three examples: in Gen 21:11, רָעַע is used to express Abraham's profound displeasure in having to agree to Sarah's wish when she asks him to expel the son which he had from Hagar, her handmaid (Gen 21:11: וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינָיו אֲבְרָהָם עַל אֹדֶת בְּנוֹ). The same goes for Joseph who is displeased when his father decides deliberately to place his hand on Ephraim and not on the firstborn Manasseh (Gen 48:17: וַיִּרַע יוֹסֵף כִּי־יָשִׁית אָבִיו יַד־יְמִינֹו עַל־רֵאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וַיִּרַע בְּעֵינָיו: Gen 48:17–20). In fact, as will be said in the verses immediately following, Ephraim will become greater than Manasseh.³²⁹ The verb is also found with reference to Samuel who is displeased when the elders of Israel ask him for a king (1 Sam 8:6: וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינָיו שְׂמוּאֵל כְּאִשֶּׁר (אָמְרוּ תִּבְנֶה־לָּנוּ מֶלֶךְ). That upsets Samuel a great deal because having a king will mean a radical change for Israel which, up till then, has been called to live as a people subject solely to the will of YHWH and, therefore, according to the Torah and in full trust in his promises.³³⁰ As emerges from these texts, the use of the verb רָעַע serves to render the idea of a profound displeasure at the failure of an initial plan that is very important and which touches the people in question in aspects that are deeply bound up with their existence and, in the case of Samuel, in the idea which he has of the relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel. As has been said, in Jonah 4, the factor which provokes in the prophet a deep crisis which, as emerges from the expressions employed, hovers between anger (Jonah 4:1) and despair (Jonah 4:4), is precisely the fact that God is abandoning his condemnation of the city. The question we ask here regards the specific element which becomes the reason for Jonah's displeasure and anger.

b) Does Jonah's refusal to accept YHWH's stance in his dealings with the city depend on the fact that Nineveh's evil is too great to be pardoned by God or else the fact that, beyond the serious nature of the crime, God is showing himself merciful in his dealings with a people who have nothing to do with the particular relationship between Israel and its God? To answer this question, we shall seek to analyse the text by highlighting those passages which will lead us to draw some brief conclusions. It is interesting to note that the root of the verb רָעַע in Jonah 4:1

³²⁸ In this connection, see also D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 502; see above the note on the translation of verse 1.

³²⁹ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 318.

³³⁰ In this connection, cf. W. BRUEGGEMANN, *I e II Samuele*, 74.

is used again with the corresponding substantive הַרָּעָה in Jonah 1:2 to describe the accusation with regard to Nineveh, and in Jonah 3:10 to express the object of God's change of decision and which concerns, specifically, the punishment to be meted out to the city. Therefore, it would seem that what the book of Jonah describes first as the evil of Nineveh which has come up before God becomes, secondly, the object of God's repentance in his dealings with the city, and, finally, "an evil for Jonah" so great as to be the cause of his anger and his bitter disappointment.³³¹ Thus, the evil referred to Nineveh and the evil relating to God's plan of condemnation both find a solution: the first, in the fact that Nineveh repents of its evil and decides to change its conduct radically; the second, in the repentance of God who, by virtue of the city's mending of its ways, changes his intention and abandons its punishment. In the light of these changes, the only evil which seems as such to remain is that which involves Jonah personally. It is precisely the change of evil into something else which causes Jonah his great displeasure. Thus, the problem which Jonah has to face does not seem to be the serious nature of the sin in itself or the fact that God can repent.³³² Basically, the fact that God is merciful, slow to anger and repents of evil is something that the prophet admits to knowing already. The true reason for Jonah's anger and disappointment seems rather to be bound up with the fact that YHWH shows himself to be slow to anger and compassionate, precisely in his dealings with Nineveh.³³³ In fact, this is what he confirms in Jonah 4:2 when he refers to his initial flight to Tarshish. The reason for his anger is expressed explicitly in verse 2b where Jonah explains the cause of his initial refusal to go to Nineveh.

(2) Verse 2 opens the dialogue between Jonah and God in which the former "prayed to YHWH" ($\text{וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל-יְהוָה}$). It is interesting to note that the verb פָּלַל , which, as here in the *hitpa'el*, has the meaning of "prayer", has the meaning of "judge" in its *qal* form. In fact, the text of

³³¹ The word is present again in other verses in the text of Jonah, cf. Jonah 1:7.8; 3:7; 4:2.6, where we are in the presence of a kind of procession of witnesses which touches all the characters in the book. However, here, we refer to the fact that it seems to be at the centre of a game in which first in play is the anger of God which, through Jonah, threatens to punish Nineveh for its wicked conduct; then, in a second stage, the anger of Jonah because of the repentance which God shows with regard to the punishment promised to the Assyrian city.

³³² See also G. ANTONIOTTI, "La libertà di Dio", 273: "Giona [...] professa un 'credo' che dichiara di 'conoscere' ma, in realtà, sfugge alla sua comprensione. Si dichiara *'ibrî* e si esprime secondo la teologia ortodossa di Israele, citando addirittura le formule classiche esprimenti l'intima natura di JHWH e appoggiandosi direttamente su un'altra tradizione profetica, ma di fatto vuole fuggire proprio da quel Dio, il quale non si lascia ingabbiare nei suoi personali criteri di ragionevolezza."

³³³ For a similar idea, cf. D. STUART, *Hosea – Jonah*, 502: "He [God] spared the Israelites, his own covenant people (Exodus 32), he now spared Assyrians, the very enemies of his own people. How could Yahweh do such a thing?"

Jonah has already familiarised us with some ambiguities which also conceal a kind of irony.³³⁴ Indeed, the discourse which Jonah addressed to God in the following verses reveals a certain ambiguity because of what is said and what is not said to the extent of raising a question: are we dealing with a prayer *tout court*, as the verb and the initial invocation to YHWH would allow us to understand, or else, are his words here hiding a judgement with respect to YHWH? We can note that Jonah's prayer opens with a rhetorical question, introduced by an invocation (אֲנִי יְהוָה) accompanied by the negation (לֹא־אֵ־יְהוָה) which expects a positive reply. In the same verse, he mentions "his country" (עַד־הָיָתִי עַל־אֲדָמָתִי), but, in the rest of the story, especially in chapter 1, this is never mentioned, as also the information that he found himself there at the moment when God called him for the first time. This last fact is now given in Jonah 4:2, not so much because it is important from the point of view of the narrative *per se*, as, rather, for the tone of justification which seems to lie beneath the text. Basically, Jonah seems to be alluding to his state of life before the mission imposed on him by YHWH, thus claiming the futility of all the vicissitudes which he has had to face because of it. This is, on the one hand because God has changed his idea over the condemnation of Nineveh, and, on the other hand, because of what is said as the discourse continues. In Jonah 4:2d, in fact, which opens with the expression "this is why" (עַל־כֵּן), he justifies his initial flight towards Tarshish (עַל־כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לְבָרֶחַ פְּרָשִׁישָׁה) as the result of what he had already suspected before being sent to Nineveh.³³⁵

(3) Furthermore, Jonah reinforces his words by adducing an additional reason immediately afterwards.

a) Introduced by the particle כִּי "since" (Jonah 4:2e), the statement that follows depends on what has just been affirmed.³³⁶ That allows a broadening of the horizon of understanding concerning Jonah's behaviour in the face of his mission, his refusal of it and his anger at God's repentance with regard to Nineveh. Jonah is presenting here his initial reluctance and his anger at the postscript to his mission, basing them on his awareness that already at the beginning it was clear to him: וְרַב־הִסָּד וְנָהָם עַל־הִרְעָה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי־חַיִּים וְרַחֲוִים אֶרְךָ אַפַּיִם, "because I knew

³³⁴ In this connection, cf., for example, the use of the verb הִפַּךְ, in Jonah 3:4, something we have mentioned in the previous paragraphs.

³³⁵ G. ANTONIOTTI, "La Libertà di Dio". 257: "Nello sviluppo della vicenda, il motivo della fuga di Giona gioca di fatto un ruolo essenziale. Esso però non viene svelato fin dall'inizio: il narratore, anzi lo mantiene volutamente nascosto fino a Gn 4,2. Solamente quando ha ormai visto definitivamente fallire le sue attese, il protagonista rivela a Dio direttamente (e al lettore indirettamente) le ragioni del suo comportamento [...]". R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 189, argues that Jonah would have communicated to God the reasons for his flight when embarking for Tarshish.

³³⁶ P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 200: "[...] 'al-kēn (therefore) links the new information to a known event as Jonah justifies himself: 'Therefore I-hastened to-flee to-Tarshish.' Self-justification prepares for the motivation: 'Because I-knew that...'"

that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger and of great kindness and who repents of evil". Here the prophet is found admitting that what he already knew about his God is inexorably true.

b) As is well known, this statement contains a formula which belongs to Israel's creed and which appears in one of its foundational texts, in Exodus 34:6, which constitutes one of the Old Testament descriptions of the idea that Israel had of its God. In the context of our analysis of Jonah 4, it is sufficient to recall some elements of the exegesis of this formula, which has been analysed by many scholars,³³⁷ aimed at a better understanding of its function and its implications in Jonah 4. First of all, we should note that this formula places at its centre the mercy and kindness of God which constitute the divine response to Israel's repentance. For Israel, the God of the covenant is a God who pardons, who "bears" the sin of others (cf. Exod 34:7: *וַיִּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְשַׁע וַיִּחַטְּאָה*) and who abandons his wrath (*אַרְדֵּי אַפָּיִם*) in the face of man's repentance and by virtue of his own *חַסְדֵּךָ*. In this way, God's anger is never an end in itself but, in the Old Testament, it has, rather, a pedagogic function and has as its principal purpose that of bringing back man and his social condition to a dimension that is more just.³³⁸

c) As for chapters 32–34 of the book of Exodus, it is sufficient to summarise the basic elements. In Exod 34:5–7 the above-mentioned formula represents the fulfilment of God's promise to Moses in Exod 33:19–23 concerning the proclamation of his name.³³⁹ That happens precisely after what is considered the sin *par excellence* with which Israel is tainted: the worship of the golden calf on the slopes of Mount Horeb. This encapsulates the breach with YHWH as the only God, the only one Israel is called to worship, and the rejection of the greatest gift received, namely, that of freedom from its condition of slavery.³⁴⁰ In the face of such sins, God reacts by rejecting Israel as his people (Exod 32:7), punishing with death those who rebel against his commandments (Exod 32:25–29) and promising condemnation and destruction for Israel (Exod 32:33–35). It will be Moses' role of mediation and intercession on behalf of the people which opens a way towards the overturning of what has happened: through the proclamation of his merciful and compassionate name, God will change his mind with regard to the punishment to be meted out to Israel (Exod 34:5–7).³⁴¹

³³⁷ In addition to the commentaries on the book of Exodus, cf., for example, H. SPIECKERMANN, "Barmherzig und gnädig ist der Herr ...", 1–18; J.T. WILLIS, "The 'repentance' of God in the books of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah"; R. SCORALICK, *Gottes Güte und Gottes Zorn*, 10–130; E. SANZ GIMÉNEZ-RICO, "Si può usurpare a Dio la sua ira? Rilettura di Es 34,6-7 nel libro di Giona", 84–93.

³³⁸ See e.g. E. SANZ GIMÉNEZ-RICO, "Si può usurpare a Dio la sua ira?", 91–98.

³³⁹ For the function of the formula of Exod 34:6 in the context of Exod 32–34, cf. R. SCORALICK, *Gottes Güte und Gottes Zorn*, 104–110.

³⁴⁰ E. SANZ GIMÉNEZ-RICO, "Si può usurpare a Dio la sua ira?", 86.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

d) This so-called “formula of grace” is present also in other biblical texts (Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; 2 Chr 30:9; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 145:8; Neh 9:17, 31) where there are often variants. The only text in which this formula appears in almost identical form to that which is found in Jonah 4:2 can be found in Joel 2:13 where there also appears the final expression which concludes this formula, that is, וְנָתַם עַל־הָרָעָה “who repents of evil”.³⁴² If one considers the formula in itself, neither in Exodus nor in Jonah does it contain a specific recipient, that is, it does not say to whom and when YHWH is a God who is merciful, compassionate, slow to anger and of great kindness. It is clear, however, that if, in Exodus, this formula is addressed to Israel, in the book of Jonah, it is placed in the mouth of the prophet who utters it, at least implicitly, with reference to the recent action of God with regard to Nineveh, because he ceases from punishing it.

e) As we have already seen, in the context of Jonah 4, from a narrative point of view, the presence of this formula constitutes the true reason with which Jonah summarises all his actions relating to his call by God to announce his message to Nineveh. However, this observation could be completed by another. If we make the connection between Jonah and Moses in Exod 32–34, we can observe that the role performed by Jonah in relation to Nineveh is different from that which Moses performs for the Israelites in the context of the sin of the golden calf.³⁴³ There, the formula of grace is inserted as a proclamation of the glory of God with reference to what he has done on behalf of his people and, almost as a seal, ratifies his nature once and for all. *Mutatis mutandis*, the use of the formula in Jonah 4:2 also diverges from that of its completely identical counterpart in Joel 2:13 where the prophet is exhorting his own people to conversion in the hope that God will repent of the evil which he intends to send. In this text too, in a certain sense, the prophet is acting as mediator between Israel and its God. On the other hand, Jonah’s reaction to what YHWH has done with Nineveh seems totally alien to a dynamic of mediation. In fact, the formula of grace on Jonah’s lips is not bound up with the prophetic role which he was called

³⁴² For a more detailed analysis of the common and different elements of this formula in the other texts, cf., for example, J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 279–283. G. ANTONIOTTI, “La Libertà di Dio”, 267–271, focuses on analysing the formula in Jonah 4:2 and Joel 2:13 and, despite certain other studies of this subject, seeks to take a position concerning the possible link of dependence between the two texts. According to Antoniotti, Jonah depends on Joel because of its totally innovative character which sees this formula employed for the first and only time with reference to non-Israelites.

³⁴³ E. SANZ GIMÉNEZ-RICO, “Si può usurpare a Dio la sua ira?”, 105: writes in this connection: “[Mosè...] intercede con urgenza davanti a Dio affinché ponga termine alla sua ira e perdoni il suo popolo. Giona, invece, non agisce in base a ciò che abbiamo chiamato funzione pedagogica dell’ira, cioè non rimane attivo davanti a Dio, chiedendogli che cessi la sua ira, intercedendo come Mosè.” See also J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 89–90: “While he was still in his home country of Israel and was given the Niniveh assignment, he had suspected that the people of that city might repent. [...] Jonah did not want the people of Nineveh to repent and be forgiven, which is why he tried to run away to Tarshish”.

to undertake in relation to Nineveh. Thus, he is not professing here his faith before Nineveh with the aim of making his God known and his name glorified. On the contrary, as we have said, Jonah even preferred to flee rather than to go to that city.³⁴⁴ In other words, in Jonah 4, this formula does not have the role which it plays in Exod 34:5–7 where it is employed in an absolutely positive sense, that is, to speak of the mercy of YHWH who, in pardoning Israel's sin, affirms and reveals that he is the God who is compassionate, long-suffering and rich in love. In Jonah 4:2, however, the formula of grace, as uttered by the prophet, betrays his profound annoyance.³⁴⁵ In fact, it seems rather to imply a kind of protest on Jonah's part who, despite himself, finds he has to admit a truth which, on the one hand, he already knows³⁴⁶, but which, on the other hand, seems to be a factor with which he has to reckon. God's kindness in dealing with Nineveh provokes Jonah to grudging and resentment.³⁴⁷ Thus, anger and despair constitute the essential context within which Jonah finds himself. His rejection of YHWH's repentance gives rise even to his desire to prefer to die than to live (verse 4).

(4) Thus, Jonah's crisis touches all the aspects of his personality. As a prophet, he sees himself discredited because the content of his announcement has been almost wholly contradicted by the opposite action which God decides in the end to implement in his dealings with the city.³⁴⁸ As a man, he also knows, in the light of the events recounted especially in chapters 1

³⁴⁴ This subject is not tackled by R. SCORALICK, *Gottes Güte und Gottes Zorn*, 185: whose approach, that is, a canonical reading of the goodness and wrath of God in the Twelve Prophets in the light of Exod 34:6–7, is different from ours.

³⁴⁵ See e.g. H. SPIECKERMANN, "Barmherzig und gnädig ist der Herr ...", 12–13: "Jona tritt aus der zur Dominanz gelangten Tradition vom gnädigen, vergebenden Gott heraus und unterwirft sie gnadenloser Kritik. Er akzeptiert nicht die immer umfassender verstandene Geltung der Gnadenformel, bei der Gottes Reue über das von ihm rechtens beschlossene Unheil fest einkalkuliert ist ... Gnade vor Recht gegenüber der Stadt Ninive, Repräsentantin der jahwefernen Völkerwelt, das macht Jona, Repräsentant des jahwegläubigen, aber an Jahwes Langmut mit der Völkerwelt verzweifelnden Israel, nicht mit. Seine Flucht ist kein theologischer Eskapismus, sondern scharfer Protest gegen den von allen und jedem durch Umkehr zu Gnade und Reue beeinflussbaren Gott." G. ANTONIOTTI, "La Libertà di Dio", 272–273 highlights the fact that, on the one hand, Jonah shows that he knows the "creed" of Israel well, but, on the other hand, that his personal drama is part of his profoundly egocentric and complex character which even presents pathological elements.

³⁴⁶ See e.g. J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 92: "[...] Jonah knows that when God's people cry for help, God will respond because of that steadfast love (Ps 106,40–45)."

³⁴⁷ See also P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 204: "Jonah accuses and condemns Yhwh for being Yhwh. He castigates divine mercy to justify himself."

³⁴⁸ In this connection, cf. also J.J.M. ROBERTS, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Collected Essays*, 409–410, according to whom what is at stake is Jonah's reputation as a prophet. In this sense, Jonah's anger is to be ascribed not so much to the fact that God is sparing Israel's enemies but to the fact that, in changing his mind about the condemnation of Nineveh, he puts at risk the credibility of Jonah's prophetic mission. For a similar idea, cf., also, G. ANTONIOTTI, "La Libertà di Dio", 272–273, even if this author admits that the concern of the text is chiefly that of highlighting that, although professing the faith of Israel, Jonah has trouble in acknowledging and accepting it fully, above all in relation to the fact that God shows himself merciful in his dealings with non-Israelites. In particular, he

and 2, that he cannot escape from the God whom he fears, even by physical death.³⁴⁹ What we have here is a prayer of intercession which God does not accept or answer. Instead, God prefers to pose to him a question which seems to act as a mirror to the emotional situation in which Jonah finds himself: הֲהִיטֵב תִּרְרָה לִי (Jonah 4:4). With this question, which, being rhetorical expects a negative answer, God seems to wish to arouse in Jonah a kind of reflection on what is happening. In posing the question “Is it right?”, God seems to wish to bring Jonah back to a state of reasonableness to make him recover the sense of what has happened³⁵⁰ and, particularly, to bring his attention to one thing: there can only be righteous anger, and this belongs solely to God who is also merciful and who repents of evil.³⁵¹ This becomes all the more true if one reflects on the fact that Jonah is challenging the behaviour of God.³⁵² Can God be subjected to judgement by a man? God’s first question does not find any response from Jonah; just as God too does not offer any rebuttal concerning his mercy, as if to say that the subject of Jonah’s challenge is not at all a question for discussion.³⁵³ As we shall see in what follows, God will choose a more effective way to enter into dialogue with Jonah and to show him the reality of things in a way that is concrete and experiential.

does not seem to see that what he himself professes has to do with the freedom of God which goes beyond his personal ‘nationalistic’ pretensions.

³⁴⁹ For a similar idea, cf. P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei pagani*, 221: “Di nuovo egli cerca di fuggire dal Signore, inabissandosi questa volta nella morte stessa.”

³⁵⁰ S.T. MANN, “Performative Prayers of a Prophet”, 37, also writes that YHWH is trying to help Jonah to see the situation from a divine perspective. See also P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 204–205: “And-said Yhwh, ‘Is-it-good it burns to-you?’ (4:4). The question belongs to the genre of disputation, a form-critical category that designates an argument between parties who hold differing points of view. [...] By countering Jonah, Yhwh seeks to persuade him to leave the circle of anger. But the rhetorical maneuver does not work.” P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 138: “Lo sforzo di Jahve sarà volto ora interamente a liberare il profeta dal suo male, l’unico che ancora rimanga.”

³⁵¹ For a similar idea, cf. E. GIMÉNEZ-RICO, “Si può usurpare a Dio la sua ira?”, 107.

³⁵² Some authors criticize Jonah’s attitude as “egocentrism”: see e.g. P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei pagani*, 220–221: “Si tratta di una preghiera estremamente egocentrica. Non Dio, ma la persona del profeta occupa il primo posto [...] egli vorrebbe prescrivere a Dio come debba comportarsi rispetto agli infedeli e agli uomini non facenti parte del popolo eletto.” For a more nuanced opinion, see R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 153: “Der Konflikt wurde aber nicht durch die Selbstsüchtigkeit Jonas verursacht, sondern durch Gott selbst. Es ist der Widerspruch zwischen dem Gerichtswort Gottes, das der seinem Propheten anvertraut hat, und der ausbleibenden Erfüllung ...”

³⁵³ We should note that the reader of this dialogue between the prophet and YHWH is called on to take a position. In one way, Jonah’s anger could appear legitimate, both because he feels himself discredited as a prophet and because God is merciful in his dealings with non-Israelites. In the face of this distance which is created between Jonah and YHWH because of the תִּרְרָה of the latter, the reader must take a decision: to ally himself with Jonah or to respond to YHWH. For this idea, cf. S.T. MANN, “Performative Prayers of a Prophet”, 38–39.

Verses 5–11

(1) Jonah's resistance in accepting precisely this aspect of the kindness and compassion of God seems to emerge further in verse 5. From the narrative point of view, this verse seems to interrupt the conversation between Jonah and God.³⁵⁴ In fact, Jonah leaves the city in order to see what will happen to it. The detail of leaving the city and facing east "in order to see", lets us presuppose that he chose a point that was particularly favourable for observation from a distance.³⁵⁵ Moreover, this feature, together with the fact of leaving the city physically presupposes another doubt: will God really do what he has now promised to do or will he change his mind yet again and destroy the city? In this sense, from the narrative point of view also, verse 5 seems intended to create a kind of suspense by means of which the reader, along with Jonah, asks himself what will be the outcome of this sequence of events.³⁵⁶ Jonah's leaving the city, the building of the booth, and the watching from a distance are the narrative elements which slow down the account and illustrate Jonah's waiting. The reader too is now waiting with him to discover the extent of the mercy and patience of God. From the narrative point of view, if, on the one hand, verse 5 slows down the account in order to create a certain *pathos* with regard to the final outcome of the fate of Nineveh, on the other hand it prepares for a further development in the story which will now continue.³⁵⁷

(2) As for Jonah 4:6–7, three aspects deserve attention:

a) God³⁵⁸ causes a plant to grow over Jonah's head, a castor-oil plant according to the common interpretation.³⁵⁹ The purpose is immediately expressed: "to provide shade for his head and to save him from suffering". This action of God appears to be wholly unexpected and, in

³⁵⁴ For this reason, scholars have asked whether it was not placed elsewhere originally and, more precisely, after Jonah 3:4, that is, after Jonah utters his message of condemnation for Nineveh. For a more detailed study of the question, which we will not be treating here, cf., for example, P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 134–136, and, in particular, N. LOHFINK, "Jona ging zur Stadt hinaus", 202–203. In any case, no textual witness (LXX, Qumran) confirms that verse 5 is found after Jonah 3:4.

³⁵⁵ P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona*, 219: "Più che essere un riparo, la capanne di frasche che egli si costruisce è una vedetta, un osservatorio, dal quale egli intende godersi tutto lo spettacolo del tremendo giudizio divino."

³⁵⁶ For this idea, see also R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 147, who speaks of a "Spannungsmoment".

³⁵⁷ For a similar idea, cf. P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 206–207.

³⁵⁸ In this connection, it is notable that the text utilises different ways of referring to God: in verse 6, we find יהוה אלהים; in verse 7, יהוה אלהים; and, in vv. 8 and 9, אלהים. It is unlikely that this choice of divine names is accidental, but it appears difficult to explain this phenomenon from criteria of style (cf., for example, P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 208) or content (R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 148).

³⁵⁹ On the nature of the plant and its possible symbolism, in addition to the commentaries, cf., for example, B.P. ROBINSON, "Jonah's Qiqayon Plant".

fact, opens a new scene in which a silent dialogue between God and Jonah continues to unfold. As we saw in verse 4, this was interrupted on account of the prophet's anger. He is so angry as to long for death and, instead of answering God's question (verse 4), he prefers silence. In the light of this attitude, God chooses another way to interact with the prophet. If verbal dialogue is now impossible, God continues to address Jonah through actions that clearly hide a message for him.³⁶⁰ This aspect is normally passed over by commentators,³⁶¹ but it is interesting to note that, in this "silent discourse", God continues to interact with Jonah even if he does not intervene directly on the prophet's person but on nature. Once again, God manifests an attitude of great kindness towards his prophet³⁶²: shelter from the heat and freedom from suffering are God's purposes in making the plant grow.

b) In particular, we note that the word רָעָה acts as a hook with verse 1 where "the evil" expresses Jonah's displeasure and anger in observing God's repenting with regard to Nineveh. In verse 6, then, if, on the one hand, this term seems to be taking up the theme of Jonah's anger, on the other hand, it is alluding also to the imminent disaster, namely, to the great heat which would soon have enveloped him.³⁶³ Thus, by means of the castor-oil plant, God wishes to save Jonah from his evil (לְהַצִּיל לוֹ מִרָעָתוֹ), that is, to calm his anger by employing an expedient which gives him cheer and preserves him from the disaster that awaits him. The growth of the plant does indeed cheer Jonah considerably. Through opposition, the expression שְׂמָחָה גְדוּלָה seems to be linked to the "great evil" (רָעָה גְדוּלָה) ascribed to the prophet in verse 1.³⁶⁴ In a certain sense, verse 6 reverses the scheme in verse 1. There, God's merciful action towards the Ninevites is complemented by a negative reaction on the part of Jonah (וַיִּחַר לוֹ רָעָה גְדוּלָה). In verse 6, the merciful action of God is complemented by a positive reaction on the part of Jonah (שְׂמָחָה גְדוּלָה).

³⁶⁰ For J.H. WALTON, "The object Lesson of Jonah 4:5–7 and the purpose of the Book of Jonah", 49, The message of Jonah 4:5–7 constitutes a practical demonstration with aim of "[putting] Jonah in Nineveh's shoes". Later in the article, Walton reflects on: 1) the grace of God which is received without any human merit; 2) the freedom of God 3) the inadequate powers of the Ninevites who will consequently be punished by him. In our opinion, this author is introducing theological categories which do not always seem relevant because they cannot be found in the book.

³⁶¹ With the exception of P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 415 ("Versuch, den Gesprächsfaden ... nicht einfach abreißen zu lassen").

³⁶² See also J.A. LOADER, "Gottes Umkehr und prophetische Absurdität", 335: who notes that God shows mercy not only on the Ninevites who repent but also on Jonah who is unable to understand God's acting.

³⁶³ For a different interpretation, cf. W. RUDOLPH, *Joel – Amos – Obadja – Jona*, 366, for whom the substantive refers primarily to verse 1.

³⁶⁴ For a similar idea, cf. also J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 95; H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 171, writes that, while the first phrase is accounted for by the presence of the plant, the second should not be eliminated because it serves to create a link with what is said in verse 4, "thus linking Yahweh's illustrative, didactic game with the occasion which made the instruction necessary – Jonah's spiteful ill-will".

[...] וַיִּשְׂמַח). Indeed, this is the only verse in which the attitude of the prophet, described from the beginning as a rebel prophet, who escapes, who asserts himself, appears drastically different. He seems finally to be reacting positively to God's action. It is an act of kindness by God which thus procures for him a situation in which he too can experience to a certain degree the salvation and so the joy that comes from his God. On closer inspection, however, even if God acts on behalf of his prophet, Jonah's joy, even if described as "great", appears ephemeral: it does not become the basis for a real change in the prophet. In fact, the great joy which gladdens him will not replace the great evil and anger mentioned in verse 1. In the narrative, it will not even constitute a reason for praise of YHWH³⁶⁵ who, despite Jonah's behaviour, has acted towards him by showing mercy and kindness. Thus, the salvation which God wishes to procure for him seems to remain in suspense and, actually, seems to be overlooked by Jonah who wobbles between despair and joy. In this sense, one notes that no real change takes place in Jonah, and that is all the more true if one observes the way in which he reacts to the subsequent events.³⁶⁶ In fact, God suddenly changes the situation of well-being in which the prophet finds himself into a situation which threatens his very existence.

c) Once again, God intervenes in the life of the prophet, not by means of direct action on him but by acting on the creation. First of all, he sends a worm which causes the plant to wither and, then, a hot east wind which causes the sun to strike Jonah's head violently.³⁶⁷ Through these natural elements, therefore, God once again manifests his lordship over the creation and over Jonah's own life, thus giving proof of his full freedom: he shows himself exercising his will as he may choose. Again, Jonah's reaction to what God has done is negative. For the second time, he seeks to be able to die rather than to live.³⁶⁸ At first sight, this reaction would seem to be dictated by the state of physical distress in which the prophet finds himself. In reality, however, it seems to be dictated once again by the grudge which the prophet shows in the face of the action and very nature of the God whom he professes (Jonah 4:2). In particular, this grudge would seem to be linked to this possibility of change on the part of God who acts on the creation and on his creatures according to his pleasure. Jonah seems to grasp all the significance

³⁶⁵ See also P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 409, who notes that Jonah seems passive.

³⁶⁶ In this connection, with reference to the change in Jonah, who from despair becomes full of joy, cf. H.W. WOLFF, *Jonah and Obadiah*, 171, who underlines the fact that the text here becomes highly ironic: "The irony is unmistakable: the change has nothing to do with Nineveh, and the problem of God's word and God's justice. It is due solely to Jonah's own trivial sense of well-being".

³⁶⁷ In this context, we pass over the details concerned with the nature of the worm, its effects on the plant and the climatic features referred to in the text. For this, cf. the commentaries, as, for example, J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 301-303.

³⁶⁸ In this connection, J. LIMBURG, *Jonah*, 96, writes: "The encounters with the plant, the worm, and the wind have not proved to be educational experiences for the prophet."

of this also because of the joy which he has just experienced. Now he finds himself in a situation in which he feels all his inadequacy in the face of the God in whose hands his life lies. Since the prophet knows that YHWH is a merciful God, deep down he could still hope that his fate would not end there but that God would act again with mercy to him, overturning his disastrous situation into one of salvation. In the face of this possibility, however he confirms his preference for death over life, that is, wishing to escape somehow, and once for all, from his power and even his mercy. However, this time too, God does not respond to Jonah by satisfying his request.³⁶⁹ Although remaining in the background, it is not taken seriously by God who thus seems to wish to confirm silently that the power of decision over life and death, even that of the prophet, does not belong to the latter or to any other man but only to God himself. At bottom, it is precisely this that God is manifesting both in the events with the Ninevites and in the life of Jonah. Liberation from evil and the power over life and death depend on the freedom of God who always acts according to justice and mercy.³⁷⁰

(3) This is what also emerges from verse 9 where there is a repetition of God's question to Jonah's negative reaction: "Is it right that you are angry about the castor-oil plant?" (הֲרָהֵב הַהֵיטֵב (עַל-הַקִּיקְיוֹן לְךָ)). Here, God is insisting on wanting to make Jonah reflect on his anger. Once again, it is a symptom of profound disapproval of God's action. Although this anger now seems to be connected with the castor-oil plant, it hides something more. In fact, through God's reiteration of the question, although it carries with itself a new element, that is, the mention of the castor-oil plant, God is highlighting the inappropriate attitude of Jonah who responds this time by also putting his fury into words: "it is right that I am angry even to death" (הֵיטֵב הֲרָהֵב לִי עַד-מָוֶת). As formulated, God's question would have expected a negative response.³⁷¹ Jonah, however, does not worry about displaying his anger and disapproval, even declaring that it is "good, right" that he is angry even to death.³⁷² Although Jonah's response reveals his incomprehension with regard to the lesson which God wanted him to draw from the incident with the plant,³⁷³ it opens

³⁶⁹ This aspect remains unclear in R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 152, who states: "Der dem Propheten fremde Gott läßt diesen nun aber nicht allein."

³⁷⁰ H.W. WOLFF, *Jonah and Obadiah*, 172, points out that Jonah's response could only be negative. Otherwise, in fact, Jonah would also have had to accept at the same time God's freedom with regard to the pardon which he had given to Nineveh.

³⁷¹ Relating to that, PH. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 214, writes: "The divine rhetoric has not worked."

³⁷² Cf., also, H.W. WOLFF, *Jonah and Obadiah*, 173; P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 215: "They [i.e. the words of Jonah] end, as his action began, opposing YHWH."

³⁷³ In this connection, H.W. WOLFF, *Jonah and Obadiah*, 172, writes: "Earlier, Jonah was indignant because Yahweh took pity on Nineveh. Now it is self-pity that incites his indignation. By showing Jonah as ready to die because there is no more shade, the satirist exposes the fact that his first expression of unwillingness was also deeply rooted in self-pity, not in genuine concern about the validity of God's word and his justice."

once again the possibility of a direct dialogue between the two. In particular, it allows God to continue his discourse. In this way, verse 9 performs a rhetorical role in the dialogue: God wants to make Jonah reflect and bring him to an understanding of the final message. The aim of verse 9 is to show that the growing and dying of the plant has a pedagogic value: it is meant to show Jonah what God wants to communicate to him. Here too, there is a manifestation of his mercy towards Jonah. God seems not at all disposed to wish to abandon his intention of bringing Jonah to the acquiring and accepting of a truth that goes well beyond his vision which, on several occasions, has proved inadequate.³⁷⁴ In fact, the death of the plant and the sweltering sun will not cause Jonah's death; in the account, it does not even seem to be a punishment. If anything, as has been said, it is a silent dialogue through which God is trying to bring Jonah back from the idea he has of God and, in the end, his relation with him to a truth that is much more profound and less self-referential. With this in mind, the events narrated find in 10–11 the interpretative keys which allow Jonah's story to be focalised within an horizon of meaning which is not human but divine.

(4) Verses 10–11 conclude God's words to Jonah. The following analysis is divided into eight sections.

a) The two verses are constructed according to a parallel structure which clearly links them together. Verse 10 refers to Jonah and his reaction to the plant. Verse 11 contains an *a fortiori* argument in which, for the third time, God poses a rhetorical question to his interlocutor with the intention of arousing in him a reflection and, therefore, a response which takes its cue from the premise which is put forward in verse 10 and which is on the lines of the solution which the question itself presupposes.

b) In our exegesis of vv. 10–11, we are following the *opinio communis* which sees in verse 11 the presence of a rhetorical question. This reading of the verse has been strongly criticised by some recent authors.³⁷⁵ In addition to leaning on philological arguments, which are not sufficient in themselves for reaching definitive conclusions, these scholars base themselves on arguments of a theological nature. In particular, they start out from three assumptions:

– These authors take for granted that God is able to destroy a city and its inhabitants, even Jerusalem.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ For a more detailed study of the relationship between human self-pity and God's suffering in the light of other OT texts, see e.g. S.H. BLANK, "Doest thou well to be Angry? A Study in Self-Pity", *passim*.

³⁷⁵ For a brief overview, see P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 433–434.

³⁷⁶ P. GUILLAUME, "Caution: Rhetorical Question!", 16 : "Even Zion, the mountain of the Lord has been utterly destroyed".

– When the book of Jonah was written, its readers knew that Nineveh had already been destroyed by Nabopolassar in 612 B.C. Therefore, the readers are led to conclude that the outcome of the story is the destruction of Nineveh and not its salvation.³⁷⁷

– These authors underline the fact that God is trustworthy and that, therefore, he cannot contradict himself or change his mind so that one cannot admit any possibility of a repenting on the part of God, not even following a radical change of conduct such as that of the Ninevites.³⁷⁸

In this connection, we can mount three objections:

– Historical events, such as the destruction of Jerusalem, cannot be used to influence the understanding of Jonah 4:11 since the book of Jonah is not an historical text but belongs to the didactic genre and, as such, employs fictitious elements.

– Similarly, the effective destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C. does not prevent the writing of a fictitious account of theological value of a possible way of salvation proposed by God to the Ninevites.

– Moreover, these authors risk compromising the idea of divine repentance present in the book of Jonah since they confuse it with a lack of trustworthiness on God's part. In particular, what emerges is that these authors do not consider sufficiently what is stated by the prophet in Jonah 4:2 through the “formula of grace”, namely, that the God of Jonah is one who is merciful and repents of evil.³⁷⁹

c) As emerges from the text, verses 10–11 are actually constructed according to symmetrical parallelism and make up a subsection in itself in which its internal lexical links offer thematic links with the rest of the narrative.³⁸⁰

	v. 10	v. 11	
A	אָתָּה חֹסֶת עַל־הַקִּיקָיוֹן	וְאָנִי לֹא אֲחוּס עַל־נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה	A ^I
B	אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָמְלָתָּ בּוֹ וְלֹא גִדַּלְתָּ	אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבֶּה הַרְבֵּה מִשְׁתִּים־עֲשָׂרָה רַבּוֹ אָדָם	B ^I
C	אֲבָד שְׁבוֹן־לִילָה הִנֵּה וּבּוֹן־לִילָה	אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע בֵּין־יָמֵינוּ לְשִׂמְאֹלוֹ	C ^I
		וּבִהְמָה רַבָּה	D

In the first stich of both the verses, there is a main clause (A-A^I). Here, we note the presence of the personal pronoun (אָתָּה and אָנִי) and the use of the same verbal root (חוס) constructed with

³⁷⁷ ID., “Caution: Rhetorical Question!”, 15; ID., “The End of Jonah is the Beginning of Wisdom”, 247. For a similar point of view, see T.M. BOLIN, “Should I not also Pity Nineveh?”, 119.

³⁷⁸ ID., “Caution: Rhetorical Question!”, 15: “...our Bibles consistently turn God into a liar [*sic!*] by suggesting that God is too squeamish to stomach the destruction of a megalopolis, people, cattle and all”; see also A. COOPER, “In Praise of Divine Caprice: The Significance of the Book of Jonah”, 154.

³⁷⁹ See also P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 434.

³⁸⁰ For a similar table, see P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 216.

the preposition לַע + substantive, the only difference being that, in verse 11, the verb is accompanied by the negation (אֵל). The other two stichs of the respective verses are made up of two relative clauses which are followed by a contrasting analogy. Both B and B¹ allude to greatness, the one, to the plant which Jonah did not cause to grow (וְלֹא גִדְלָתוֹ) and the other, respectively, to the great city of Nineveh (הַעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה). However, B highlights the absence of care and the non-involvement of Jonah in the growth of the plant. This element does not have a precise correspondence in B¹ where, instead, the subject is the number of the inhabitants of Nineveh and their powerlessness. C and C¹ compare the small plant (שִׁבְרֵי-לֵלָה) and the ignorance of the inhabitants of Nineveh (אֲשֶׁר-לֹא-יָדְעוּ) who, like a new-born infant, do not know how to distinguish their right hand from the left.³⁸¹ This is followed by the coda (D) which mentions the animals.

d) On the basis of this way of arguing by God, Jonah's experience and attitude in the face of what has happened becomes the basis on which God seems to wish to build some kind of analogy between his way of acting towards the Ninevites and that of Jonah towards the growing and dying of the plant. However, this analogy will not result in a justification of Jonah's attitude or an equivalence between it and that of God. Rather, it has the aim of transcending it, allowing a glimpse, by contrast, of another possible perspective compared with that which Jonah seems to know well, that is, the disappointment which gives vent to rebellion and despair. God's reasoning, then, which is based on experiential data which the prophet himself has now acquired, is an attempt to provide Jonah (and with him the reader) with an interpretative key different from reality, that is, one which allows the valuation of events according to different categories. In this way, God wishes to correct the attitude of Jonah who is called to reflect and to see the reality of things from another angle. In the light of YHWH's concluding discourse, Jonah has to understand the divine perspective and, in the last analysis, make it his own.

e) The starting point of God's argument is taken from the prophet's reaction to the death of the plant which is set in parallel with his own action with regard to Nineveh. This reaction is expressed for both by means of the verb חָס. This is a verb which occurs in the Old Testament around 24 times, chiefly in Deuteronomy or Ezekiel. When used without negation, the verb expresses the positive attitude of kindness and help on the part of the agent with regard to the object to which it refers.³⁸² In this sense, its meaning oscillates between "having kindness" and "having mercy on, sparing" something or someone (cf., for example, Ezek 20:17). Often, however, it is employed in a negative sense, in a context of judgement or punishment where it

³⁸¹ For this structure, cf., also, J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 308–309; P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 216–217.

³⁸² For the use of this verb, cf. S. WAGNER, art. חָס *chûs*, 271–277; J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 309.

assumes the opposite meaning, that is, “not having mercy” (cf., for example, Ezek 5:11). As for its meaning in the book of Jonah, scholars have debated hard as to how to render the verb *חָוַס*.³⁸³ If the sense were that of “having mercy” *tout court*, the use of this verb in Jonah 4:10 would seem, at first glance, to be inappropriate.³⁸⁴ In fact, Jonah’s anger seems to have nothing to do with a feeling of mercy with regard to the birth and death of the plant. Indeed, the anger described in the verses immediately preceding verse 10 seems more bound up, on the one hand, with the withdrawal of the shelter which Jonah undergoes, on the other hand, with the fact that God is acting beyond the control of the prophet’s will. However, one can note that, in verse 10, if, on the one hand, the verb *חָוַס* is closely connected to the theme of Jonah’s anger, on the other hand, as said previously, it acts as a preliminary to what God will say immediately afterwards in his argument *a fortiori*. This permits the thought that, in verse 10, the verb *חָוַס* is to be understood in its weaker significance, that is, that of “taking thought for, concerned about”, and that with reference to Jonah who, in this sense, is angry because of the death of the castor-oil plant.³⁸⁵ In verse 11, where the verb *חָוַס* appears in connection with God’s repenting with regard to Nineveh and where this is expressed by reinforcing the value of the idea already assumed to be true for Jonah, the verb seems to take on the meaning which refers precisely to “having mercy”, “sparing” from a punishment.³⁸⁶

f) In this way, that is, by referring to kindness and mercy, God is alluding to his repenting (Jonah 3:10) and to the content of the formula of grace in Jonah 4:2 which precisely emphasises the characteristic and essential aspect of God’s actions which follows no other logic than that of mercy and pity. Even if this allusion leaps to the eyes, one notes, however, that the text is

³⁸³ See e.g. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 309–310.

³⁸⁴ P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 218: “The concept [i.e. “to have pity, compassion”] conveys fits well Yhwh, who has repented toward Nineveh (3:10) but seems altogether inappropriate for Jonah. Nowhere in the narrative has he shown pity, for the plant or anything else (Self-pity is another matter).”

³⁸⁵ In this connection, cf., also, H.W. WOLFF, *Jonah and Obadiah*, 173.

³⁸⁶ H.W. WOLFF, *Jonah and Obadiah*, 173, explains the slipping from the meaning of “to be sad” and in the particular case of Jonah 4:10: “to grieve pityingly” in the sense of “having mercy” in verse 11, with reference to the fact that the first time the verb *חָוַס* refers to a thing (namely, the plant; for *חָוַס* referring to an object, see also Gen 45:20: *עַל-פְּלִיָּכָם*), and the second time to people (that is, the Ninevites; for *חָוַס* referring to people, see also, for example, Ps 72:13: *יָהֹס עַל-דָּל וְאֶפְיֹן*). In fact, by translating *חָוַס* in verse 10 with “to grieve pityingly”, H.W. WOLFF is actually underlining the ironic procedure which the author employs to remark upon the opposite fact, namely that, in reality, Jonah does not experience any compassion for the plant. According to P. TRIBLE, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 218–219, however, this explanation is inadequate; in fact, she states: “The argument makes the dubious claim that because the plant, unlike the people of Nineveh, is nonhuman, it cannot be the object of pity.” Also, J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 309 prefers to translate with “to grieve over (the plant)” in verse 10 and “to have not spared” in verse 11. He takes his inspiration from Jerome who renders respectively with *tu doles* in verse 10 and with *ego non parcam* in verse 11, which is an attempt to find a compromise for the translation of the verb in the respective verses in relation to the context.

being expressed according to new categories compared with what was said in Jonah 3:10 and in the formula of grace in Jonah 4:2. In other words, God is not disputing with Jonah the validity or not of what was said in Jonah 4:2, but the text is introducing another terminology to speak of God's way of acting and the motivations which lie at the base of being. In fact, in the context of the book of Jonah, the verb *חוס* seems to take on a wholly particular value, above all regarding the content of 4:11. Here, it is creating a semantic link with what was said in Jonah 3:10 and in Jonah 4:2 but, at the same time, it finds itself in relation to the idea of giving life. This final link is found, first, in Jonah 4:10b where it is said that Jonah is concerned for the plant "for which he did not labour and which he did not make to grow" (אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָמַלְתָּ בּוֹ וְלֹא גִדַּלְתָּו). Although generic and not particularly characteristic of creationist language, the two verbs used here, *עמל* and *גדל*, refer to the existence of the plant. In other words, Jonah is able to be sorry for the death of the plant, even if it was not he who had laboured to make it sprout and grow. As for the analogy between verses 10–11, what is striking is the fact that verse 11 does not use the terms *עמל* and *גדל* with reference to the Ninevites, despite taking up the same verb *חוס* with reference to the action of God in his dealings with the city. The rhetorical question suggests, therefore, that God has an attitude analogous to that of Jonah, that is, just as the latter is upset over the plant so also God experiences pity for Nineveh. At the same time, however, the rhetorical question is elliptical, that is, it allows the understanding that God is the one who laboured and made the plant to grow, on the one hand, and the inhabitants of Nineveh, on the other, animals included.³⁸⁷ Therefore, God will have mercy on Nineveh and on all its inhabitants since between him and them there exists a primordial and intimate link which goes beyond all possible iniquity and even membership or not of the people of Israel. Even if not put into words explicitly, this link allows us to understand that it consists in the fact that God has given them their existence. This aspect, however, is not limited to the fact that God is at the origin of life of the Ninevites and so of every being living in the city but also embraces the idea that he is the only one who can give it and guarantee it. We can therefore conclude that God was merciful to Nineveh because He who is at the origin of life can only will life for his creatures. Even if not clearly expressed in the narrative, this idea is inferred from the fact that God strives to warn the Ninevites of their evil and spare them from destruction.

g) God has mercy on his creatures all the more if they are found to be committing wicked actions totally unaware of this. In this connection, in fact, the text expresses itself with respect

³⁸⁷ See also R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 156–157. However, the exact correspondences and differences between the two verses and the elliptical character of verse 11 are not taken into consideration sufficiently.

to the Ninevites by using an expression which seems to render their total inadequacy: they are human beings (אָדָם) who do not know how to tell their right hand from their left". This expression too has been the object of different interpretations on the part of specialists of the book of Jonah.³⁸⁸ The basic idea, if one reads it together with what was said about the plant which was born and died in one day, seems to be alluding to a kind of foolishness, that is, to that precise powerlessness of one who does not know even how to distinguish his right hand from the left, something which in itself is attributable only to very small infants. Perhaps, in Jonah 4:11, this expression is alluding to a lack of orientation in one's way of life.³⁸⁹ In this connection, it is worth noting that it is the verb יָדָע that occurs here. In verse 11, it is expressed in the negative while, in verse 2, the same verb is employed without the negative and with reference to Jonah. The object of Jonah's knowledge concerns the merciful nature of God who acts with kindness and generosity and repents of evil. The object of the non-awareness of the Ninevites concerns the not knowing how to distinguish their right hand from their left. Once again, the author seems to be employing a sort of mirror game which puts the Jonah and the Ninevites in relation to each other. The Ninevites who have no awareness of how they stand in the world, although they had believed in Elohim (Jonah 3:5)³⁹⁰, are the recipients of the mercy of God by virtue of the fact that they are his creatures.

h) Jonah, who actually pre-empts the actions of God by saying that he knows his nature, is called, however, to reflect on the object of his knowledge: who challenges God? Doesn't he have to be merciful in his dealings with Nineveh? If Jonah is upset at the death of the plant, why should God not have mercy on the inhabitants of Nineveh.³⁹¹ In this sense, the pedagogic expedients, like the *a fortiori* argument and the rhetorical questions, serve to set Jonah (and the reader) in front of himself so that he can reflect on the crucial points of his relation of faith with

³⁸⁸ The interpretation of this phrase is very controversial. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah*, 314, assumes that the expression alludes to human weakness and mortality. Some authors go as far as saying that the Ninevites lack ethical consciousness, e.g. R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'*, 157; P. HÖFFKEN, "Das Ende des Jonabuches", 293; for further details, see the commentaries, e.g. P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 452–453). But why are the Ninevites able to "turn from their evil ways" (Jonah 3:8)?

³⁸⁹ See also P. WEIMAR, *Jona*, 453.

³⁹⁰ For a similar interpretation, cf. P. HÖFFKEN, "Das Ende des Jonabuches", 293. However, Höffken maintains that, in chapter 3, God recognises the fact that the Ninevites are abandoning their wicked conduct. At the end of chapter 4, instead, because they are his creatures, God is forgoing punishing those who are even incapable of acting according to the moral norms.

³⁹¹ T. ABUSCH, "Jonah and God: Plants, Beasts, and Humans in the Book of Jonah", 151, argues as follows: "If Jonah cares for (חַיִּים) non-humans (verse 10 קִיקִיּוֹן) as God cares for (חַיִּים) both humans (verse 11 גִּיּוֹרָה . . . אָדָם) and non-humans (verse 11 בְּהֵמָה), and since God cares for humans as God cares for non-humans, then should not Jonah also care for humans as Jonah cares for non-humans?" The problem with this interpretation is that it cannot be taken for granted that Jonah does not care for humans in general. In fact, his anger is provoked by God's mercy to the Ninevites. Furthermore, the importance of the idea of creation by God is not taken into consideration by Abusch.

God and of the vision which he has of others, that is, of the non-Israelites, within the framework of this relation. In other words, Jonah is also called by God to a change which consists in the overriding of what now seems to be a rather rigid vision. With a subtle and ironic procedure, the author highlights that if, on the one hand, Jonah says that he knows God and his mercy, on the other hand, he does not understand its true meaning and its range.

δ) Concluding remarks

In Jonah 4:10–11, the author places God’s discourse in a sort of play of contrasts in which God seems to explain the reasons behind his own way of acting. Just as, in the first four verses of chapter 4, Jonah justifies his initial rebellion on the grounds that he was aware of adhering to a merciful God, so God reveals the reasons why he has been merciful towards the Ninevites. They are based on his having mercy. If, on the one hand, this takes account of the repentance of Nineveh (Jonah 3:9: “God saw their works”), on the other hand, it cannot obscure the datum of creation: God is the one who has given life to all his creatures³⁹² and also, therefore, to the inhabitants of Nineveh in their totality, animals included.³⁹³ By virtue of this principle of creation, anger and destruction cannot have the last word. The God who has called his creatures into existence cannot desire their death: the call to life has to be realised in life itself. In this sense, where necessary, God does not renounce exercising the judgement of condemnation, but that is something which aims at bringing about a change which conforms to the very life that has been given. If, that is, this is true for Israel, which, at several turns in its history, has known the anger of God and his repenting, it now becomes valid for non-Israelites and their animals. God, who is the Lord of life, is also its protector and governor. In the text of Jonah, therefore, this profound link between God and man is played out in different categories. Here, the covenant, like the Torah, does not play any role, and they do not form part of a scheme which is not applied or applicable to the Ninevites. In this connection, we note that the formula of grace which is found in Jonah 4:2 and which, here as elsewhere, has as its proper background the particular link between God and the people of Israel, remains a truth which, even if it is contested by the prophet in the book of Jonah, is not put up for discussion *per se* by God. However, the pages of this book seem to be putting forward a further way of understanding and

³⁹² This can be concluded from the declaration made by Jonah himself in Jonah 1:9; see M. ROTH, *Israel und die Völker im Zwölfprophetenbuch*, 135.

³⁹³ T.M. BOLIN, “Jonah 4:11 and the Problem of Exegetical Anachronism”, 109, argues that “Yahweh’s reference to animals in Jonah 4:11 can be best explained in light of the fundamental ancient religious practise of animal sacrifice”. However, unlike Jonah 1:16, the concluding verse of the book does not allow the drawing of such a conclusion. Why should the author of the Book of Jonah refer to an animal offering without using a specific vocabulary?

speaking of YHWH. If, on the one hand, he established a special link with Israel based on mercy the foundation of which is his faithfulness to the covenant, on the other hand, he has a care for living beings, pouring out his mercy on them in the same way. This happens by virtue of that link which precedes every other bond and which can be reduced to the fact that it is he who has given life to every living thing. This call to life does not rule out the danger of destruction and death; nonetheless, it remains the principle which binds God to his creatures for whom he can only use every expedient, even the threat of destruction, so as then to exercise his mercy.

3. Conclusions

In the light of the analysis of chapters 1, 3 and 4, it seems the time to put forward in what follows the main points of our reflection and of our conclusions concerning the theme of the relation between God, Israel and the nations in the book of Jonah.

a) The initial theological problem and the aim of the book

The book of Jonah is placed within the Old Testament in continuity and in rupture with some of the theological ideas which dominate the latter. In fact, though brief, the book is seeking to tackle one of the themes which must probably have become urgent in the light of the historical and sociological changes confronted by Israel after the Exile: how to understand the relation with the other peoples in the light of Israel's own special calling received from YHWH right from the beginnings? In what way to think or rethink the traditional theological categories, trying to extend their validity beyond the borders of Israel? The book of Jonah seems to wish to tackle these questions. However, although they underlie the narrative, it does not wish to provide immediate solutions but to present the questions bound up with them in all their problematic nature. In this sense, the book of Jonah seems to be placing itself on that ridge which, although not abandoning the path on which Israel based its exclusive relationship with YHWH, nevertheless allows the glimpsing of new horizons which are situated precisely on the solid path of its history in relation to him. In this sense, it is possible to speak of a wider scope proposed by the book with regard to the relationship between Israel, YHWH and the other peoples, without, however, repudiating any personal convictions or outlining solutions that are immediate and clear-cut. They certainly leave room for opposition and doubt, and these the character of Jonah expresses in all their weight. In fact, through his reticence in, first of all, accepting the mission given him by YHWH and, then, rejecting the latter's merciful action, he displays the whole difficult discussion around the relation with the non-Israelites and the place that they have to occupy in the salvific logic of YHWH. The author of the book of Jonah thus

has to find modalities and dynamics of thought which transcend those salvific paradigms held valid till that time.

b) Was the destruction of Nineveh only postponed?

However, before proceeding to outline the conclusions of our analysis, it is a good idea to make clear that, as has been mentioned, for some authors, above all recently, such a reading does not constitute the fundamental message of the book. In fact, rather than viewing this narrative as an attempt to launch a debate of ideas and questions about the difficult interaction between the salvation of the non-Israelites and the special relationship between God and Israel, these scholars prefer to interpret the text as a narrative in which the conclusion can be read only in a single sense. That is, as a clear barrier against the possibility of a repenting by YHWH in his dealings with the Ninevites whose destruction would be only postponed not definitively cancelled. In this sense, these authors read the book by taking God and Jonah as absolute protagonists together with their reciprocal relation in which the sailors and the Ninevites play an only marginal role. In other words, the presence of the sailors and the Ninevites in the account would be only functional to the emergence of the problematic relationship between Jonah and God. In the light of our analysis, however, we think that we must distance ourselves from such a reading for various reasons. On the one hand, because, even from a syntactico-grammatical point of view, the conclusion of the book does not lead to an interpretation that is univocally negative; on the other hand, because the final verses of the book have to be read in the context of the narrative as a whole in which the salvation of the sailors from the danger of the storm, like the salvation of the Ninevites, which actually occurs through the “repenting of God”, are elements which cannot pass by unobserved or be avoided. In fact, as we have tried to point out in the course of our analysis, even if the text seems to be presenting isolated events in the first and second parts, in reality, it contains links which can be associated with common themes and which, giving rhythm to the whole narrative, find their ultimate meaning in chapter 4 which has to be read precisely in a way that is consistent with what has gone before in the story. It constitutes a kind of synthesis where the ideas of creation, lordship and the mercy of God find their point of convergence by setting the entire account within a very precise optic: YHWH is a merciful God who wishes to effect his salvation by virtue of that very close and essential relation which binds him to living beings through the act of creation.

c) The links of content between the two parts of the book

The four principal narrative sections of the book of Jonah focus basically on several scenes: the prophet's flight in the face of his mission from God; the consequent storm at sea which involves the sailors who end up giving thanks and offering gifts to YHWH; Jonah's being swallowed by the huge whale in whose belly he remains for three days; Jonah's announcement to Nineveh which causes the change in all its inhabitants with the consequent repenting by God; and the final dialogue between Jonah and God. In particular, the events narrated in chapters 1 and 3, respectively, pair up not only because of the resumption in chapter 3 of the personal doings of Jonah who, after having fled, now obeys YHWH's command, carrying his message to Nineveh, but also because we find common thematic elements, prime among them that concerning the presence of figures who do not belong to the people of Israel and who play an important role in both scenes. In fact, in the respective two chapters, these figures are called into play in the laborious *vis-à-vis* between Jonah and God. If we start off from the conclusion of the story, we understand how the thematic nucleus of the book of Jonah seems to revolve around these three relational poles; God and Jonah; Jonah and the non-Israelites; God and the non-Israelites. Indeed, in this connection, the presence of the non-Israelites in both the episodes recounted in chapters 1 and 3 does not seem at all accidental.

d) The attitude of the sailors and the reaction of YHWH

Although Jonah's initial rebellion against God's command allows him to flee from the confrontation with Nineveh, it nonetheless puts the prophet into a direct relationship with the non-Israelites who, in this particular case, are the sailors who make up the crew of the ship in which he attempts to flee. In the face of the sea's fury because of the storm and with the purpose of escaping the danger, the text tells us that the members of the crew pray each to his own god and that the captain urges Jonah to do likewise in the hope that the latter's God can intervene on their behalf. In the whole of the narrative which concerns them, the attitude of the sailors and their captain is described as one that is particularly correct and pious. In fact, they do not hesitate to invoke their divinities and to wish to understand the origin of their misfortune. Once the lot falls on Jonah and after they have understood the gravity of his sin, the sailors are ready to do whatever is necessary to calm the sea and, so, to placate the wrath of YHWH, the God whom Jonah had professed before them. However, the prophet's proposed solution faces the sailors with a difficult moral choice and, to avoid throwing him into the sea, they try again to row, hoping to be able to save themselves. When every expedient has failed, they call to YHWH with a prayer that Jonah's blood does not fall on them. They throw him into the sea and, as a

result of the stilling of the storm, they offer YHWH sacrifices and vows. In all the passages which involve the sailors, we note the description of a way of acting which has never anything to do with a negative or 'blameworthy' attitude to Jonah's God. Rather, they end up fearing and calling on YHWH to the point of offering him vows and sacrifices of thanksgiving. Moreover, we note that YHWH himself pays heed to their prayers and their actions and consequently grants them their salvation. We could say that, despite the fact that they are non-Israelites, the sailors' attitude is revealed in a whole series of acts which allow a glimpse of their positive openness to the divine and, particularly, to YHWH to whom, in the final analysis, they commit their lives, letting him perform what he wills to do.

e) The attitude of the Ninevites and the reaction of YHWH

Although parallel to that of the sailors in that they do not belong to the people of Israel, the starting point of the Ninevites is different in several aspects. First of all, they are presented as being gravely culpable in the eyes of YHWH, and that, not only because it is said expressly in the text but also because of the symbolic value of this city on account of its conflicts and ancient enmity with Israel. Moreover, rather than in their aspect as individuals, as in the case of the sailors, they are represented as a corporate unity as inhabitants of Nineveh and so all forming part of the same people.

Starting from these elements, it would seem that the narrative of Jonah presents a kind of *crescendo* in which the prophet's contact with the non-Israelites happens first in a rather attenuated form: the group of sailors seems to be being sketched as a kind of pious and morally correct collection of individuals who, despite their different origins and membership of other faiths which even differ among themselves, manifest correct behaviour and are not opposed to calling on YHWH and worshipping him by offering sacrifices and vows. In a second stage, in his contact with the Ninevites, Jonah is confronted with another category of non-Israelites whose impact appears to be stronger. They are a people who have provoked the wrath of YHWH because of their wicked conduct.³⁹⁴

It is from this guilty condition and because of the threat of destruction that they change their behaviour followed by all those rites of self-abasement which manifest their intention to make amendment and to subject themselves to the God of Jonah. In this, they show their immediate adhesion to the message announced to them and their hope of being saved. In this sense, it is

³⁹⁴ An aspect which is underlined by various authors is the fact that the Ninevites were the enemies of Israel (for example, J. JEREMIAS, "Die Sicht der Völker im Jonabuch (Jona 1 und Jona 3)", 564, but this theme is not mentioned explicitly in the book of Jonah.

their radical change of behaviour which is the reason for God, in his turn, to change: he repents of the evil which he had thought to inflict on them.

f) Two accounts that are complementary

In these two accounts, therefore, we are faced with a process of openness of the part of persons who do not belong to Jonah's people, and both cases conclude with a notable change: adhesion and submission to Jonah's God. Although they present different assumptions, the contours of the changes described lead to a similar outcome, namely the salvation which is YHWH's decision. He acts thus, on the one hand, to work in conformity with the attitude of the sailors and the behaviour of the Ninevites who change their wicked conduct in a radical way. On the other hand, he acts towards both groups in showing that he is able to give salvation and that he is over the powers of the creation. In the specific case of the Ninevites, he puts himself even above their guilt by virtue of his being at the origin of their very life and because of the fact that he is a merciful God and one who repents of evil.

One could say, therefore, that the two accounts complement each other by allowing a glimpse of different kinds of attitudes on the part of individuals who do not belong to the people of Israel, groups to which YHWH responds in a positive manner, that is, by taking seriously their requests and their respective modes of reacting to his powerful presence. He does this by implementing strategies and pedagogic techniques which take into consideration the starting point of each group. In the specific case of chapter 1, the sailors relate to YHWH, whose name they know, by entering into a direct dialogue with him through prayer and the offering of vows and sacrifices through which they express their recognition of and submission to YHWH as the only God able to subjugate the powers of nature and to determine their salvation. In the case of the Ninevites, this relation is mediated by the presence of Jonah who acts as spokesman for the message of God to which they pay immediate heed. Before the one whom they know as "Elohim", they acknowledge their guilt and the need to make good the evil which they have committed.

Finally, with reference to the change in the one or other group of non-Israelites, a difference is noted. The details of the sailors' change are made concrete in an adhesion to the God of Jonah which, in particular, is manifested with prayer and the offering of thanks through vows and sacrifices. In this connection, however, it is necessary to point out that the details of the sailors' adhesion to Jonah's God remain vague: if, on the one hand, they are not opposed to calling on YHWH and offering him sacrifices, on the other hand, the text does not say that this adhesion will lead the sailors to a lasting and unambiguous relationship with YHWH. Therefore, we do

not know if all this will lead the sailors to become in some way part of that people to which Jonah belongs, or, in more concrete terms, become proselytes and be converted. Nevertheless, what we can affirm is that the vows and sacrifices actually express a profound way of understanding and adhering to the God of Jonah. In particular, the vows and sacrifices offered lead to the thought that the sailors are binding themselves to YHWH in a concrete way, having experienced all his power over the forces of nature and, at the same time, his power over their lives. In this sense, the hope the captain expresses in the intervention of Jonah's God is not disappointed but, rather, finds a positive confirmation in the outcome of their misfortune. Just as they hoped, the captain and his crew have indeed found out that YHWH, the God of Jonah, is really "the God of heaven, the one who made the sea and the dry land". It is from this knowledge, received first of all from the words of Jonah, and, at a second stage, experienced in the concrete events of the storm and the danger of death, that they attain a great fear for YHWH. That same fear which they had experienced in listening to the story of Jonah and the sin with which he was tainted in the eyes of his God is now transformed into a full recognition of his personal power and of his divinity. He stands above all the concrete and personal implications of salvation in the lives of each one of them. In this, the text seems to be suggesting, once again, that YHWH is also God of the non-Israelites, namely those who are accustomed to calling on other gods and, as has been said, precisely in relation to this last aspect, he reveals himself to be a powerful God who stands above all the other divinities.

From this originate the vows and sacrifices which the sailors make, no longer people foreign to the knowledge of the God of Israel, that is, people who are totally ignorant of his existence and of his real lordship over the whole of the created world, but, as they have become, people aware of the fact that from now on their destiny as sailors and men will be for ever subject to his will and his power. That is why the vows and sacrifices which they offer assume a somewhat enduring value. Through their vows, they express the unbreakable bond which they now have with him. In fact, through their sacrifices, they express thanks for the salvation they have obtained and the recognition of YHWH as a God who is to be feared and as the God who made the sea and the dry land, and on whom to set their hope in the hour of misfortune. That will not make the sailors into "cradle" Israelites, with all the obligations and provisions with which YHWH has bound himself to Israel, but will set them in the ranks of those who, having known him and experienced his power, will not fail to fear him and worship him.

As for the Ninevites, the features of their adhering to the God of Israel seem to be slightly clearer. The rites of self-abasement which presuppose hope in the God of Jonah and their belief in him, are described in the same way as for Moses and Israel when they believed in YHWH in

the light of the wonders which he worked on their behalf (Exod 14:31). However, not even for the Ninevites does the text sketch a precise picture regarding the status of its inhabitants after their adhering in faith to the God of Jonah.³⁹⁵ Are their rites of self-abasement less important than the sacrifices and vows of the sailors?³⁹⁶ If so, do their rites and their prayers reflect only a more or less temporary change of conduct but not a true conversion?³⁹⁷ And does this imply that they continue to worship their gods?³⁹⁸ Admittedly, it would be interesting to draw more conclusions from the text, but the fact remains that chapter 3 seems to ignore the categories important for modern exegesis such as conversion or exclusive faith. What can be said for certain is that, with reference to the Ninevites, the text does not speak of the creation of another people for whom YHWH reserves his favours in a specific and privileged way and to whom he entrusts precise laws to be observed. The text does not even speak of a people who, in the light of its change, will be distinguished from others by any kind of distinctive sign. However, a not insignificant element concerns the fact that the text specifies that the Ninevites “believe”. The verb used here has a more specific meaning compared with that used to speak of the sailors’ adhering to YHWH. The believing of the Ninevites echoes, even if distantly, Abraham’s experience of faith at the moment of his call (Gen 15:6). In fact, the inhabitants of Nineveh believe before they know the identity of the God from whom the message comes and before having a concrete experience of him. For the Ninevites, believing will constitute the *conditio sine qua non* from which, together with the rites of self-abasement which follow, they seem to wish to express precisely, on the one hand, faith in the God of Jonah, and, on the other, a kind of link which lays the foundation for the restoration of a situation of “justice” between them and him in which the evil done in the past no longer plays any role. Furthermore, the rites of self-abasement and the change of conduct will constitute the living proof of a real and sincere commitment to the God of Jonah. All this will guarantee his favour and will be the prelude to the repenting of God which, by virtue of his being merciful, will choose to procure for them no longer destruction but salvation. Therefore, the faith and repentance of the Ninevites finally lead the latter once again to a real and profound knowledge of the God of Jonah as the one who dominates events and who makes decisions over their lives. The Nineveh event closes with the experience of a God who shows himself merciful, the one who, in the face of faith and change,

³⁹⁵ See E. BONS, “YHWH und die Völker”, 22.

³⁹⁶ For this opinion, see, for example, R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen ‘Verweigerung’ und ‘Gehorsam’*, 133.

³⁹⁷ For this hypothesis, see, for example, H. GESE, “Jona ben Amittai und das Jonabuch”, 129; J. DAY, “Problems in interpretation of the Book of Jonah”, 43; V. HAARMANN, *JHWH-Verehrer der Völker*, 187.

³⁹⁸ See J. JEREMIAS, “Die Sicht der Völker im Jonabuch (Jona 1 und Jona 3)”, 556.

ceases from his anger and procures salvation. Even if, as has already been said for the sailors, Nineveh does not belong to Israel through genealogical descent, it is presented by the book of Jonah as standing in direct line with the latter by virtue of its faith. This seems to be the common terrain where Israel can ideally meet those who, although free from the covenant, cherish a common relation with Elohim.

g) The function of the theology of creation

The sailors, and still more explicitly the Ninevites, are inserted into the broader setting of creation. The latter, as creatures prepared to change and by virtue of the mercy belonging to the God of Israel, are described as worthy of the divine care.

In this connection, it is right to point out that the text of Jonah emphasises the importance of the theology of creation. Already, in the first chapter, YHWH is presented as the God who governs and who is the Lord of the creation. As has been said, moreover, by contrast with the other gods addressed by the sailors, he is presented as the only one who is able to exercise direct and effective action over the elements of the creation which submits to his will. The same happens in chapter 4 where YHWH is the one who makes the plant grow and causes it to wither by sending the worm, just as he is the one who makes the hot wind blow. Throughout the narrative, therefore, God reveals himself as the Lord of the creation. This aspect does not play a marginal role but, on the contrary, is one of the central ideas which prompts the book of Jonah to speak of the relation between God and the non-Israelites and between Jonah and God in relation to them. This is highlighted especially in the conclusion of the narrative which, as has been said, provides the interpretative key to the entire book. In particular, we find here an implicit connection which concerns the close link between creation and salvation. Here, in fact, the salvific action of God is presented in a direct line with his creative action. The latter constitutes the starting point from which the text intends in some way to explain the mercy which God extends to those peoples, like the Ninevites, who do not belong to the lineage of Israel. In this sense, YHWH shows interest and care even for the non-Israelites on the grounds that they too are his creatures and that they need a salvation which otherwise they could not have procured by themselves. They need an announcement of disaster to take responsibility for the evil they have done and, so, to believe and change their behaviour. God's intervention on their behalf is an extraordinary one because of their repentance over the condemnation that he had reserved for them but, at the same time, an intervention which highlights the merciful aspect which is a precise characterisation of the identity of the God of Israel. In this way, he is a God who reveals himself both to the non-Israelites and to Jonah and the people whom he represents

as the one and true merciful God, the one who alone has dominion over the creation and who decides the life, the death and, ultimately, the destiny of men.

h) A didactic narrative

As a didactic text, the book of Jonah is thus directed chiefly at its readers. It places Jonah, and so the reader of his story, before a new theological message. This concerns, on the one hand, the benevolent disposition of YHWH in saving the people who call on him, as in the case of the sailors, on the other hand, his merciful disposition, ready to accept the change of behaviour on the part of a people who, though not Israel, believe in him. Basically, although the threat of destruction is present in the book, it has only a transitory role, suggesting that the wrath of God is not an end in itself but that it has a pedagogic value, and one that must, therefore, lead to a change which, ultimately, is consistent with the life that has been received.

In the light of these considerations, it seems important to stress that, in relation to the non-Israelites, the author of the book of Jonah, is indicating to his reader a possible path so that, on the one hand, the relation between the non-Israelites and YHWH, the God of Israel, may be legitimised, and, on the other hand and almost in a pedagogic way, indicating *how* this relation can, in fact, be realised. In this connection, the terms do not seem distant from those dictated to Israel itself from whom God seeks faith and obedience to his will. Here, however, everything seems to be being played out in terms that are more universal and, so to speak, natural. In fact, so that the mercy and the salvation of God may be fulfilled, the references here do not focus on the Law or on the category of covenant – elements which mark out the unique relationship between God and his people – but on what seems to be none other than a universal law. If, on the one hand, this concerns the rejecting of evil, on the other, it demands the recognition that there is a God, the God of Israel, who is the Lord of all creation and history and, not least, who has a very clear identity. He is the God of Jonah, the one who is able to turn evil into good, to dominate the forces of nature and to transform the trustful hope reposed in him into the certainty of a sure and merciful salvation. From the text there seems to emerge the idea that he is also the God of those who do not belong to the people of Israel and do not share its history of relation with him, and who, for the most, are tainted, as in the case of Nineveh, with grave crimes. If one thinks of Israel as a people for whom God reserves a relationship which would appear unique and exclusive, the text of Jonah demands a reckoning with the exclusiveness of this relationship. This is the theme which the sacred author wishes to place at the centre of his reflection, and, this time, proceeding not from a narrowly and exclusive Jewish context, but, on the contrary, starting out from the relationship which God seeks expressly to have also with the

non-Israelites (Jonah 1:1–2; 3:10; 4:10–11). In this way, the literary fiction of Jonah would be pressing Israel to reconsider its position in its relationship with the foreign nations,³⁹⁹ as it had been shaped over the centuries: in some way, Israel had to adapt to and accept the fact that the God of the patriarchs is also the God who reveals himself to the non-Israelites and who indicates possible ways for them too to be able to attain his salvation.

³⁹⁹ For this idea, see also S. GILLMAYR-BUCHER, “Jonah and the Other”, 206.217.

Chapter 2: Psalm 33 (MT and LXX)

1. Introduction: Observations on the *status quaestionis* and conclusions relating to the starting point of our exegesis of the Psalm

a) Preliminary observations

Contemporary analysis of Psalm 33 is necessarily faced with a multiplicity of studies, even authoritative ones, which go back over more than a century and which have decisively influenced research on the subject to the present day. Thus, if, on the one hand, it is indispensable to be aware of the major tendencies which have characterised the exegesis of Psalm 33 till now, on the other hand, it is necessary to know how to distinguish between the well-trodden paths and the questions which still remain open because neglected by previous studies of the psalm.

Without claiming to be presenting an exhaustive *status quaestionis* which goes into all the ramifications of the exegesis of the text, it seems appropriate to summarise here the major approaches and tendencies of research over approximately the last 100 years, and, in particular, the currents which still have a visible influence in the recent commentaries. This step will permit us to establish the principal questions to which our research intends to respond with the aim of marking out those exegetical paths which have not yet been trodden.

b) The question of the literary genre and the “*Sitz im Leben*”

Psalm 33 (32) is counted among the hymns of praise to God on account of its particular linguistic form.¹ In fact, it is structured according to the characteristics and elements which associate it with this genre. These can be identified fairly easily. In what follows, we record some of the more evident ones, for example:

- The presence of a rather emphatic introduction which consists in an invitation to rejoice and which, as often happens in these cases, is expressed with the imperative in the second person plural (verse 2: יִרְיֶה, “praise”).
- The name of God is placed in emphatic position: He alone is the object of praise (verse 1).

¹ See H. GUNKEL, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, 32; Gunkel was followed by many commentators who were inspired by his “Formgeschichte” approach; see e.g. J. BECKER, *Wege der Psalmenexegese*, 13. Among the authors influenced by Gunkel, cf. also E. PODECHARD, *Le Psautier I*, 151; G. CASTELLINO, *Il libro dei Salmi*, 460; P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 270–271. For a more detailed presentation of the approaches of Gunkel, Mowinckel and their followers, cf. C. KÖRTING, “The Psalms – Their Cultic Setting, Forms and Traditions”, 541–543.

– There is explicit mention of the instruments for accompanying the song of joy (v. 2), as well as a specification of the category of people called upon to acclaim God (v. 1: יְשָׁרִים, “the just”). Moreover, faced with the magnificence of God, the psalmist extends his invitation to other living beings in a cosmic dimension: “all the inhabitants of the earth” (v. 8: כָּל־יִשְׁכְּבֵי תְהַלֵּל) have to honour and fear him. In particular, verses 1–3, as a group, are to be ascribed to the stereotypical formulae which introduce the *motif* of praise and which are peculiar to the hymns.²

Starting off from here, some scholars have tried to identify in more detail what kind of hymn this is. For Sigmund Mowinckel, Psalm 33 should be numbered among the enthronement hymns because of various features:

- Psalm 33 celebrates God as king through the invitation to sing “a new song” (cf. Ps 96: 1; 98:1).
- The creation plays an important role in relation to the glory to be rendered to God.
- Finally, since it is said that God is surrounded by a just court and that his judgement also extends to all the nations.³

In the wake of Mowinckel, Arthur Weiser seeks to locate our psalm in a specific liturgical context. For Weiser, however, it would be a festal liturgical hymn used, in particular, to celebrate the feast of the covenant which was held at New Year.⁴ This idea was formulated further by Jean-Marcel Vincent according to whom Psalm 33 could have been composed “for the liturgy of the great feasts of the first temple”.⁵

Mowinckel’s and Weiser’s approach turns out to be hypothetical since, on the one hand, it is not possible to prove an origin for the psalms that is directly linked to the cult, and the royal background of many psalms is not confirmed by the texts themselves; and, on the other hand, the theory rests on the hypothesis of the existence of a feast, of the enthronement or the covenant, the historical traces of which are well-nigh non-existent.⁶ Today, therefore, this viewpoint turns out to be limited. Furthermore, in ascribing numerous psalms into large categories, scholars are not taking sufficient account of the specific elements which actually characterise each psalm. In this sense, it seems appropriate in the present study to take up some

² See H. GUNKEL, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, 33.35–36.

³ See S. MOWINCKEL, *Psalm Studies. Volume 1*, 183. J.M. VINCENT, “Recherches exégétiques sur le Psalme XXXIII”, 451, also agrees that this is a hymn of the enthronement of YHWH. In particular, according to this author, Psalm 33 would be very similar to the songs of praise of the *summus deus*, present in all the religions of the Ancient Middle East.

⁴ See A. WEISER, *The Psalms*, 289.

⁵ J. M. VINCENT, “Recherches exégétiques sur le Psalme XXXIII”, 444 e 451.

⁶ Among the authors who summarise the objections to the approach of Mowinckel and his followers, we can mention J. BECKER, *Wege der Psalmenexegese*, 21.49–51; R.J. TOURNAY, *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms*, 25–26; D. SCAIOLA, “Libro dei Salmi”, 127–128.

elements which we think will prove useful for the understanding of the psalm but with an eye open to avoid falling into hypothetical readings which risk being placed in precise but largely indemonstrable contexts.

In connection with what we have noted in this section, it seems important to bear in mind some themes, such as that of the “new song” and the call to fear YHWH addressed to all the inhabitants of the world. In particular, it will be necessary to ask about the meaning and implications of the “new song” and on the identity of the individuals called on in the psalm with the appellative, “inhabitants of the earth”. As we shall see in the following sections, these themes, which seem to constitute the weight-bearing beams of the subjects treated by the psalm, have been accorded scant attention in the exegesis of the past hundred years or, even if taken into consideration, they have been seen as marginal elements in our opinion.

c) The question of the sapiential nature of the psalm

Rather than going into details about some questions concerning the specific cultic *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 33 or its possible literary genre, some scholars seek to define the social *milieu* of the psalm. These authors give especial emphasis to the sapiential character of the hymn.⁷ Also, because of its alphabetical composition, it would be a psalm of an anthological character so that its arrangement of ideas would not be well-coordinated, and the themes treated would be relatively independent and disconnected from one another.⁸ In this sense, according to Alfons Deissler, Psalm 33 would contain teachings of a differing nature intended for education in the post-Exilic period.⁹

The difficulty in tracing a common thread linking the various themes of the psalm is due, above all, to the fact that, just as it is shaped syntactically and with its alphabetical profile, the psalm does not present, at first sight, visible elements of connection between one statement and

⁷ J. CALÈS, *Le Livre des Psaumes*, I, 360; J.L. MAYS, “The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter”, 5, counts it, among others, in the ‘Wisdom-Psalms’, thus described because of their vocabulary and their markedly sapiential themes. In particular, according to Mays, the principal theme of Psalm 33 would be the importance of obedience to the Torah.

⁸ This idea is found already in a commentary of the end of the nineteenth century, cf. B. DUHM, *Die Psalmen erklärt*, 96: “Allerlei rühmende Aussagen über Jahwe, ohne geschlossenen Zusammenhang und bestimmten Grundgedanken.” Cf. also H. GUNKEL, *Die Psalmen*, 139; H.P. MATHYS, *Dichter und Beter*, 255.

⁹ For this approach, see A. DEISSLER, “Der anthologische Charakter des Psalmes 33 (32)”; S. GAHLER, *Gott der Schöpfung – Gott des Heils, passim*.

another, thus leaving room for a plurality of different hypotheses as to its structure and its internal arrangement.¹⁰

This reading of the psalm has not always won acceptance. In fact, ranged against this view are other scholars who maintain that Psalm 33 is actually presenting ideas that are interdependent and which develop in particular the unitary theme of the sovereignty of YHWH who is proclaimed worthy of praise: on the one hand, because he is the undisputed champion of creation, and, on the other hand, as the invincible Lord of history.¹¹ In particular, Peter C. Craigie claims that the plurality and interdependence of the themes treated, identified by him as creation, history, the covenant and the human response through faith and the cult, are fundamental and inseparable because they are such for Jewish belief itself.¹²

In the light of these differences over the literary character of the psalm, it seems appropriate to analyse the text from a new perspective. That is: we shall highlight, on the one hand, the elements which give the text a continuity in content and, on the other hand, the breaks and the transitions which confer a development on the text and an evolution of the subjects treated. In fact, even if the psalm presents a procedure that is clearly alphabetical, this does not exclude it from recording themes and assumptions that are interconnected.

d) The question of dating

As for the dating of the psalm, various hypotheses have been advanced which rest on criteria that are chiefly linguistic, stylistic and concerned with content. None of these criteria, however, permits us to reach a definitive answer. According to some, for example, it is not to be excluded that the composition of the psalm is bound up with the cult of the monarchical period.¹³ However, this kind of hypothesis turns out to be confused because it is not actually supported by arguments founded on really strict criteria such as, for example, the presence of historical allusions in the text or terms and stylistic elements which demonstrate an actual origin for it in

¹⁰ For a good summary of the structural approaches to Psalm 33 and for his personal suggestion, cf. J. VERMEYLEN, "Quand la structure révèle un sens: Les Psaumes 'quasi-alphabétiques' 33 et 103", 297–302.

¹¹ Thus, according to FRANZ DELITZSCH, *Die Psalmen*, 268–269, the central idea of the psalm lies in the call to praise God because he is worthy of praise as "Weltschöpfe(r) im Reiche der Natur" and as "unwiderstehliche(r) Herrsche(r) in der Geschichte". *Mutatis mutandis*, for J. CALÈS, *Le Livre des Psaumes*, I, 361, the psalm's *leitmotiv* would be the call to the praise of God who is distinguished for his highest and multiple qualities; D. JACOBSON, "Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm", 108, identifies the principal theme of Psalm 33 with the metaphor of the creation by God through his word; according to her, this plays a central role throughout the psalm.

¹² P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 275: "In Ps 33, there are integrated some of the most basic themes of Hebrew theology: creation, history, covenant, and the human response of worship".

¹³ See P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 271.

the pre-Exilic period.¹⁴ In general, the commonest tendency is to place the text in the post-Exilic period. Its supporters, however, do not contribute any particular chronological details with regard to a possible *terminus post quem* for the redaction.¹⁵ In any case, after the discovery of the Dead Sea manuscripts, we can establish the approximate *terminus ante quem* since Psalm 33 is attested in the Qumran manuscripts, especially 4QPs^a (= 4Q83) and 4QPs^q (= 4Q98). The first goes back probably to the second century B.C., while the second dates, presumably, from the end of the first century B.C. or the beginning of the first century A.D.¹⁶ Therefore, the *terminus ante quem* of the psalm could coincide with the second century B.C.¹⁷

Far from wishing to give a precise date for the psalm, it seems more important to remember those data which suggest a temporal location of the psalm very probably in the post-Exilic period and, perhaps, in the first half of the Hellenistic age.

e) Preliminary conclusions: the starting point for our study of Psalm 33

The present study does not intend to classify Psalm 33 according to a clearly defined *Sitz im Leben*, for example, that relating to the cultural environment, because such an attempt could never arrive at definitive conclusions and mark out certain horizons for the very fact that its assumptions are too hypothetical. What seems more important for our study, rather, is to examine in a new light the themes recorded in the text with the aim of orienting our understanding of it. Psalm 33, in fact, tackles a crucial question in the panorama of the relations between Israel, its God and the nations. In fact, it presents an intriguing and masterly interweaving of particular history and a universal dimension, that of the creation, which, if, on the one hand, it singles out Israel *tout court*, on the other hand, is also concerned with all the men and nations of the earth, who are mentioned explicitly in the psalm, and, nevertheless, called on to fear YHWH (verse 8).

¹⁴ Cf. already, J. CALÈS, *Le Livre des Psaumes*, I, 363, who, in connection with the attempts to date Psalm 33, affirms the impossibility of giving this hymn a precise temporal location, writing: “le mieux est de confesser notre ignorance”.

¹⁵ Cf., for example, E. PODECHARD, *Le Psautier*, 154 who, limits himself to noting that Psalm 33 shows a certain dependence on Genesis 1 and on Deutero-Isaiah and so its date cannot be made to go back before the Exile. H.P. MATHYS, *Dichter und Beter*, 251, speaks simply of the psalm as a “late product” (“Spätprodukt”) on account of its literary form and its content. E. ZENGER, ““Es sei deine Liebe, JHWH, über uns!””, 360, highlights that Psalm 33 reflects the experience of the Exile but gives no further details as to the period of its composition.

¹⁶ Cf. A. LANGE, *Handbuch der Textfunde vom Toten Meer. Band I*, 377.390.

¹⁷ For this conclusion, cf. also M. WITTE, *Das neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33*, 30–34, who, with the aim of dating Psalm 33, bases himself on possible similarities between the psalm and 4Q511, frag. 10, 7–12 and Sir 39:17 (manuscript B). However, both texts are so fragmentary that it seems very hypothetical to use them for dating Psalm 33.

On a first reading, in fact, some elements seem to emerge with a certain clarity. The psalm appears to have as its direct addressees two categories of people: “the just” (verse 1) who have to render glory to God, and “all the inhabitants of the world” (verse 8) who have to fear him. Around these two exhortations – the only ones in the whole body of the text, if one excludes the final verse addressed to YHWH (verse 22) – is arranged the theme of the lordship of God, who is faithful and merciful (verse 5b), who is described against the background of the creation and that of history. He it is, in fact, who created everything by his word (verse 6), who destroys the plans of the nations (verse 10), and who observes all human beings from on high (verse 13), judging their works (verse 15), “to free from death and to keep alive in famine” those who listen to him and trust in his love (verses 18–19). In the light of these statements, which have the tone of praise, the psalm closes with a kind of confession of faith in YHWH on the part of the speaker who is speaking in the name of a “we”, which includes those who have trusted in God and who, because of that, rejoice in him (verse 21).

If we look at the composition of the psalm, where the tones employed imply the magnificence of God because of his creation of all that exists and his lordship over all men on earth and over things created, we ask ourselves to whom the psalm is referring in order to understand who has to participate in this solemn act of praise to which the speaker is calling.

Despite a certain type of idea around which the majority of studies have revolved until now and to which we shall return in our analysis of the text, what leaps to the eyes is the fact that, if, on the one hand, the text makes explicit mention of “all the men of the earth”, on the other hand, it never speaks explicitly of Israel, of its history and its relation to YHWH. In this way, the approaches which seem to locate Psalm 33 in a particular environment of Israel and think of it as concerning the cult or a particular feast seem to be neglecting aspects of the content of the psalm which are really not marginal.

We begin with the assumption that two categories of people are being singled out explicitly in the psalm, “the just/the right” (verse 1) and “and all the inhabitants of the earth” (verses 8 and 12). In the interpretation of these categories, at least three questions seem possible *a priori*:

- Could the psalm be referring to the “just/right” and to “all the inhabitants of the earth” without intending a real distinction between the two categories? In other terms, although using two expressions, the “just/right” and “all the inhabitants of the earth”, in the final analysis, is the psalm dealing with Israel, setting the non-Israelites on one side?
- Admitting that the psalm is making a distinction between the different human categories, that is between Israelites and non-Israelites, what is the role that Israel plays in this psalm and what that of the non-Israelites? Moreover, is it necessary to understand the “just/right” as those

who, already knowing and worshipping YHWH, are invited to the praise of God, or is that possible for the “others”, that is, all those who inhabit the earth?

– Are we to suppose that the psalm is not making a real distinction between Israelites and non-Israelites? Could it be addressed, in the final analysis, to the whole of humanity even if it uses the two categories of the “just and right” and “all the inhabitants of the earth”? In other words, is Psalm 33 evoking a single humanity which it calls on to praise the Lord? If that were possible, moreover, are there preconditions from which all men must start out in order to be admitted to the praise of YHWH? Finally, if this were true, how are we to interpret the “new song” (verse 2) which has led to the description of the psalm as a hymn?

In the following sections, we shall try to answer these questions, taking into consideration also the already existing studies on the subject, their exegetical assumptions and possible prejudices, and, finally, their conclusions. In particular, we shall seek to understand how their authors have interpreted the lack of any explicit mention of Israel, on the one hand, on the other, the expressions which seem to designate humanity as a whole as the privileged recipient of the psalm. In the light of that, we shall identify some ways of reading which seem to us to be still possible and which present a perspective different from the traditional approaches.

2. Exegetical analysis

a) The Masoretic Text of the psalm

α) Introductory remarks

First of all, we shall present the Masoretic Text (= MT) with a translation at the side. This translation does not yet presuppose a detailed exegetical reflection but will be useful as a first approach to the understanding of the psalm. As we shall see, it does not present significant difficulties of textual interpretation because the psalm does not contain words that are particularly rare or expressions hard to understand. Verse 7 is an exception which will require a more detailed treatment. There will then be sections with a detailed analysis of the more important verses in the light of the preliminary questions posed above. After this analysis of the MT, we shall examine the text of the LXX. This confers new emphases on the psalm and a deepening of the message already present in the MT. Finally, we shall devote the closing sections to the conclusions and important points from our exegesis of the psalm.

β) Text and working translation

1a	רְנְנוּ צְדִיקִים בַּיהוָה	Rejoice in YHWH, you just,
b	לְיִשְׂרָאֵל תְּהַלֵּל:	praise befits the right.

2a	הודו ליהנה בכנור	Give thanks to YHWH on the lyre,
b	בנגבל עשור זמרו־לו:	play for him on the ten-stringed lyre.
3a	שירו־לו שיר חדש	Sing to him a new song,
b	היטיבו נגן בתרועה	play skilfully on the strings, with a loud shout.
4a	כִּי־יִשָּׁר דְּבַר־יְהוָה	For the word of YHWH [is] upright,
b	וְכָל־מַעֲשָׂהוּ בְּאֱמוּנָה:	and all his work [is done] in faithfulness.
5a	אֱהָב צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט	He loves righteousness and justice,
b	תִּסְדֵּד יְהוָה מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ:	the earth is full of the goodness of YHWH.
6a	בְּדִבַּר יְהוָה שָׁמַיִם נַעֲשׂוּ	By the word of YHWH the heavens were made,
b	וּבְרוּחַ פִּיּוֹ כָּל־צָבָאָם:	and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
7a	כַּגֶּסֶס כַּנָּד מֵי הַיָּם	[He, who] gathers the waters of the sea like a dam,
b	נִתֵּן בְּאֲצֻרוֹת תְּהוֹמוֹת:	[who] puts the deeps in storehouses.
8a	יִירָאוּ מִיְהוָה כָּל־הָאָרֶץ	Let the whole earth fear YHWH,
b	מִמָּגוֹ יִגְוֹרוּ כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֶל:	let all who dwell in the world revere him.
9a	כִּי הוּא אָמַר	For he spoke,
b	וַיְהִי	and it came to be,
c	הוּא־צִוָּה	he commanded,
d	וַיַּעֲמֵד:	and it stood firm.
10a	יְהוָה הַפִּיר עֲצַת־גּוֹיִם	YHWH thwarts the plan of nations,
b	הֵנִיא מִחֲשָׁבוֹת עַמִּים:	frustrates the counsels of peoples.
11a	עֲצַת יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם תַּעֲמֵד	[But] YHWH's plan stands fast for ever,
b	מִחֲשָׁבוֹת לִבּוֹ לְדֹר וָדֹר:	the counsels of his heart from age to age.
12a	אַשְׁרֵי הַגּוֹי	Blessed is the nation
b	אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו	whose God is YHWH,
c	הָעָם	[blessed] the people
d	בָּחַר לְנַחֲלָה לּוֹ:	he has chosen as his heritage.
13a	מִשָּׁמַיִם הַבֵּיט יְהוָה	From heaven YHWH looks [down],
b	רָאָה אֶת־כָּל־בְּנֵי הָאָדָם:	he sees all the sons of men.
14a	מִמְכוֹן־שִׁבְתּוֹ	From the place of his dwelling
b	הַשְּׁגִיחַ אֶל כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ:	he looks on all the inhabitants of the earth,
15a	הַיֹּצֵר יְחַד לִפְּם	[he] who fashions their heart individually ¹⁸ ,
b	הַמְּבִין אֶל־כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם:	who understands all their works.
16a	אִין־הַמֶּלֶךְ נוֹשָׁע בְּרַב־חַיִל	No king is saved by his great army,
b	גִּבּוֹר לֹא־יִנָּצַל בְּרַב־כֹּחַ:	a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
17a	שָׁקֵר הַסּוֹס לְתִשׁוּעָה	A vain hope [literally : a lie] is the horse for safety,
b	וּבְרַב חַיִלּוֹ לֹא יִמְלֹט:	[even] by its great power it will not save.
18a	הִנֵּה עֵין יְהוָה אֶל־יִרְאַיוֹ	Behold, the eye of YHWH [is] on those who fear
b	לְמַנְחָלִים לְחֶסֶדּוֹ:	him,
19a	לְהַצִּיל מִמָּוֶת נַפְשָׁם	to deliver their soul from death
b	וּלְחַיּוֹתָם בְּרָעֵב:	and to keep them alive in famine.
20a	נַפְשׁנוּ חֹפְתָה לַיהוָה	Our soul waits for YHWH,
b	עֲזָרָנוּ וּמִגְּנָנוּ הוּא:	he is our help and our shield.
21a	כִּי־יִבּוֹ יִשְׂמַח לִבְנוֹ	For in him our heart will rejoice,

¹⁸ For this translation, which follows the LXX (κατὰ μόνας) and the Vulgate (*singillatim*), see e.g. F. DELITZSCH, *Die Psalmen*, 269. N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 95, holds that *יחד* binds together the two participial clauses of verse 15. He translates the verse as follows: “(he,) who has (both) fashioned the hearts of them all, (and) observed all their deeds.”

b	כִּי בְּשֵׁם קִדְשׁוֹ בָּטַחְנוּ:	because in his holy name we have trusted.
22a	יְהִי־חַסְדְּךָ יְהוָה עָלֵינוּ	Let your goodness be on us, YHWH,
b	כַּאֲשֶׁר יִחְלְנוּ לָךְ:	as we hope in you.

γ) Exegetical observations

Verses 1–3

(1) In this section, we shall examine verses 1–3 which make up the introduction of the psalm. This is characterised by five plural imperatives, a feature which distinguishes these verses from all those that follow. In fact, this element is attested only here, and we do not find elsewhere in the psalm a “you” addressed by the speaker.¹⁹ The function of the imperatives is to call on a group of addressees to praise God or sing to him.²⁰ In these verses, no reason is given yet for this summons. Why praise God? The answers will be given in the following verses where the particle *כִּי* occurs twice (verses 4 and 9). However, before concerning ourselves immediately with these matters, it is necessary to focus first on verses 1–3 and their message.

(2) One of the seemingly more important questions regards the identity of the addressees whom the psalm is speaking to right from the beginning. In this sense, the first question that we shall raise focuses on the categories of the “just” and the “right” mentioned in verse 1: who are they? What are the reasons given for them to give praise to and exult in YHWH? With the help of these reasons, can we deduce something more about the identity of the just and the right? To answer our questions, it is necessary to proceed with great methodological prudence. In this first stage of our enquiry, it seems important to start from the biblical text itself. Even if this option can be taken for granted, it is indispensable, on the one hand, to be aware of the already existing exegesis of the psalm and its tendencies; on the other hand, it is necessary to take one’s distance from certain of its assumptions which risk having a negative influence on how we understand the text. This will give us the possibility of discerning what are the more or less implicit meanings which Psalm 33 contains already from the beginning.

(3) In verses 1–3, the anonymous speaker begins to speak in order to issue a summons to praise the Lord. In verse 1, he addresses the “just” (צַדִּיקִים), and this summons is completed by the second half of the verse where it is said that “praise befits the right” (לִישָׁרִים נְאֻנָּה תְהִלָּה). In the Hebrew Bible, when it is used in relation to man, the pair “the just/the right” usually has a strong ethical connotation and refers to the observance of the commandments and, more

¹⁹ See also N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 97.

²⁰ Cf. the commentaries, for example, L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *Salmi*, I, 580. Cf., additionally, N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 97–98.

generally, to the fulfilling of conduct that is right, just.²¹ In itself, this idea is neither wrong nor particularly original, but it carries with itself the risk of resulting in an exegesis which is in a certain sense already weakened by a specific presupposition. In fact, if the interpretation which immediately links the category of the just/right with those who belong to the people of Israel seems, as we shall see in what follows to be already taken as a certainty by scholars, on the one hand, on the other, it has given room for a reading of Psalm 33 which often seems to be pointed in a single direction. In other words, according to a good number of the exegetes who have worked on Psalm 33, before or in the wake of the *Formgeschichte* approach and/or of a cultic reading of the text, the being צדיקים / ישרים would be *tout court* the exclusive prerogative of the pious Israelite. In fact, from the existing studies on Psalm 33, it emerges that what we have here are terms that are generally intended to indicate the community of the faithful who belong to the people of Israel.²² This conclusion is not surprising. Once one has postulated a cultic *Sitz im Leben* for the psalm and identified the protagonist of this cultic action in the community of Israel, the interpretation of the text can lead only to the thesis that the psalm is addressed to the Israelites *tout court*.

(4) However, with a more careful analysis which takes into account the whole context of the psalm, we ask if a reading like this does not determine a univocal interpretation, to the detriment of a reading which includes other people, over and above Israel, and, in general, all the other individuals who occur in the rest of the psalm. In fact, a reading in only this way risks understanding the whole text according to a single interpretative key: Israel would be the sole

²¹ For the meaning of these terms in Psalm 33, cf., already, F. DELITZSCH, *Die Psalmen*, 267. For a good summary of the use of the terms צדיקים and ישרים in general, cf., respectively, W. MAYER, H. RINGGREN, L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, art. ישרים *jāšar*, 465–471, and B. JOHNSON, H. RINGGREN, art. צדיק *šādaq*, 257–259.

²² This interpretation is already implied by some commentators, for example, F. DELITZSCH, *Die Psalmen*, 267: “Der ... Aufruf ergeht an die Gerechten und Geraden, denen es ernstlich um gottgemäße gottgefällige Gestalt ihres Lebens zu thun ist ...”; C.A. BRIGGS, E.G. BRIGGS, *The Book of Psalms*, I, 286, who comment on the call to praise God like this: “... the sacred shout expressing the enthusiasm of *praise* in the temple worship, which was appropriate to the place and *becoming* to those entitled to worship there. These are the *righteous//upright*, in the later sense of those zealous for the Law and institutions of Israel, and living in strict conformity thereto”. For a similar interpretation, cf., also, H. GUNKEL, *Die Psalmen*, 140, who, with reference to the “just” and the “right”, observes: “Ehrentamen der Kultusgemeinde im Hymnus”. See also J. CALES, *Le Livre des Psaumes*, I, 359: “Le psalmiste exhorte les Israélites fidèles à pousser des acclamations joyeuses en l’honneur de Iahvé.” According to G. CASTELLINO, *Il libro dei Salmi*, 460, both adjectives are “termini usuali per indicare la comunità dei fedeli”. See, furthermore, J.M. VINCENT, “Recherches exégétiques sur le Psaume XXXIII”, 452: “Il est certain que *šaddîq(im)* n’a pas le sens restrictif de parti, mais au contraire le sens inclusif de *communauté cultuelle*. Le *šaddîq* est celui qui appartient au peuple choisi selon le plan bienveillant de Dieu pour le rétablissement de l’ordre créé, l’Israélite, celui qui assiste au culte du vrai Dieu.” For a similar reading, cf., also, A. LANCELLOTTI, *I Salmi*, 233–234: “È un canto nuovo messo in bocca ai giusti e retti (e cioè ai figli di Israele), che sono il popolo felice che Jahwèh si è scelto per sua eredità.”

addressee of the Psalm. If this way of proceeding were plausible, how does one interpret the call to “all the inhabitants of the earth” to fear YHWH (verse 8) and, more generally, the statement relating to the fact that God is watching from on high over all the inhabitants of the earth and the fact that he scrutinises all their actions (verses 13 and 15)? For now, it seems more appropriate to leave room for other lines of thought so as to avoid from the start giving the psalm a reading which bars the way to other categories in the text. So then, we ask: is a less univocal interpretation of the “just” and the “right” in verse 1 legitimate? At this point, it seems appropriate to proceed with a more detailed analysis of the vocabulary in the first three verses, with the aid of other texts which employ the same vocabulary in a similar arrangement so as to grasp better whether it refers in itself to concepts and categories which are quite precise and employed always and only in a univocal way. First, however, we shall concentrate on the immediate context of the psalm where the terms occur. If we observe verse 1 closely, we can note a chiasmic construction:



This chiasmic correspondence allows us to make three observations:

- Among the terms making up the verse, we can point out a correspondence of position and significance: “the just” (צְדִיקִים) who are called on to exult (רָנְנוּ) are also those who are the “right” (יִשְׂרָאֵל).²³ In this way, the two terms are being used in a complementary way, with a further *nuance* of meaning by which the second term is specifying and defining the first.
- The summons to exult in YHWH does not sound strange: for the just צְדִיקִים / יִשְׂרָאֵל praise is “fitting” (נְאֻנָּה), according to the anonymous speaker. The religious position of the just and the right, both interior and outward, that is what is fitting²⁴ for the praise of YHWH.
- Exulting in God and praising him are actions which belong to and connote being צְדִיקִים / יִשְׂרָאֵל. In fact, praise is presented as a particular disposition connected with them.

(5) Starting from these three observations, with the aim of tracing even better the identifying traits of the צְדִיקִים / יִשְׂרָאֵל in our psalm, it seems appropriate to seek to understand to whom the hymns normally address the summons to exult (verb רָנַן *pi.*, “rejoice, cry out with joy”) in YHWH. When addressed to people (and not to the elements of nature, as, for example, the trees and plants²⁵), this summons is addressed to two categories of recipients²⁶:

²³ Cf., also, N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 90.

²⁴ On this use, ethical in a certain sense, of the word נְאֻנָּה, see also F. DELITZSCH, *Die Psalmen*, 267, who links Ps 33:1 with Prov 19:10: “Non s’addice [נְאֻנָּה] allo stolto vita agiata”.

²⁵ Cf., for example, Ps 96:12: “all the trees of the forest”; Ps 98:8: “the mountains”.

²⁶ Cf., already, H. GUNKEL, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, 35–36.

– The first category is the people of Israel. For example, in the context of a royal psalm, Ps 20:6, the worshipper states: *נְרַנְנָה בִּישׁוּעָתֶךָ*, “we shall exult in your liberation [that is, performed by you]”; cf. also: Ps 132:9: *וְנַחֲסִידֶיךָ יִרְנְנוּ*, “and let your faithful cry out with joy”. The reasons Israel is called on to exult are bound up with the victory and salvation of YHWH’s anointed one against his enemies (cf. Ps 20:7), and, in this sense, Israel is being called on to celebrate its God for the liberation from the slavery of Egypt (cf. Ps 81:1, 6) and for his *הִסְדָּךָ* (Ps 90:14). Furthermore, the individual Israelite can also exult in God because, in the time of trouble, God manifests himself as his shield, bulwark (Ps 59:17) and help (Ps 63:8).

– The second category includes non-Israelites also. In fact, the summons is addressed “to the ways of the east and the west”, that is, all who live there (Ps 65:9: *תִּרְנִין וְעָרֵב וְעָרֵב בְּקֶרֶב וְעָרֵב*); to the “peoples” in general, called on to rejoice and exult (Ps 67:5: *יִשְׂמְחוּ וִירְנְנוּ לְאֻמִּים*); to “all the earth” (Ps 98:4: *כָּל-הָאָרֶץ*). These too are called on to praise and, generally, for two reasons: for the wonders worked by YHWH (cf., for example, Ps 65:9: *מֵאוֹתֹתֶיךָ*, “at your wonders”, that is, those bound up with the lordship which he exercises over nature which he causes to bloom; cf. verses 10–14; cf., also, Ps 67:6–8) and for the judgement of God, which is poured out on all and which is just (Ps 98:9: *בְּצִדְקָה*) and right (Ps 67:5: *מִישׁוֹר*, “with equity”, cf. also Ps 98:9: *בְּמִישְׁרֵים*, “with uprightness”).

Thus, from these texts it emerges that often, in the hymns, the reason for the call to praise God is attributed not only to those who belong to the people of Israel according to origin and tradition but, on the contrary, to all those – nations and peoples – who can in some way observe the power of YHWH which is expressed, on the one hand, as lordship over nature, on the other hand, through his judgement, which is just and right. In the psalms, therefore, the other peoples find legitimacy in their praise of YHWH: they too can be involved in the praise of his name as a consequence of the fact that they too, like Israel, can recognise his wonderful action and his just judgement. However, whereas Israel often addresses YHWH as its direct partner in conversation, the nations and peoples are those who are called on by Israel to rejoice in him.

(6) Even if it cannot be excluded that the psalms allow for the idea that even the non-Israelites can share in the praise of YHWH, the question about the identity of the “just and right” remains open nonetheless: do these terms necessarily and exclusively designate people who belong to the children of Israel? Once again, it is necessary to leave room for other possible interpretations because the immediate context does not refer to any element which allows a univocal reading of this category. The same goes for the two other cases in which the pair “just”/“right” is used elsewhere. Similarly, that is, with the call to praise YHWH, it occurs in Ps 32:11: *שְׂמְחוּ בַיהוָה וְגִילוּ צְדִיקִים וְתִרְנְנוּ כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל*, “be glad in YHWH, rejoice you just, exult all

the right of heart”. Neither the remote context of Psalm 32 nor the immediate context of verse 11 produces any element which permits a clearer identification of the addressees whom the psalm is calling on to praise God. In the psalter, the only other occurrence of the pair is found in Ps 97:11: *אור זרע לצדיק ולישרי לב שמחה*, “a light [is] sown for the just and joy for the right of heart”. Here too, since the context provides a wider horizon than the people of Israel alone, on account of the fact that it refers to the sovereignty of YHWH over all the earth and over all the other gods (cf. verse 9), there is no indication of the unequivocal implication that this category refers to Israel.

In the light of these observations, we can arrive at a conclusion which, even if not definitive, seems to be legitimate. Although for some scholars a category which is generally ascribed to Israel, the reference to the just/right in the first verse of Psalm 33 can be ascribed not only to the latter *tout court*, but to a broader group with features which will become more recognisable as the psalm continues.

(7) Within the framework of our exegesis of Psalm 33, verse 2 requires no special examination. On the one hand, it completes verse 1, in the sense that it repeats the call to the praise of YHWH, on the other hand, it adds an element, namely, the musical instruments which are used to accompany the song.²⁷ As for verse 3, it introduces for the first time a new element which specifies the quality and nature of the praise. In fact, the object of praise to which the just and right are being called is a “new song”: *שירו-לו שיר ה' הטיבו נגן בתרוּעה*, “sing to him a new song, play skilfully on your strings with a loud shout” (lit.: “in a cry”).

a) The expression “new song” occurs another five times in the Hebrew Bible and these all in the Psalter in which it takes on a stereotypical form. It emphasises not only the importance of singing but also the need that it is a joyous acclamation which carries within itself an element of novelty. It is not accidental that this expression appears in verse 3 which closes the call to praise and, at the same time, specifies the type of song to raise to YHWH. Although, for some, the origins of this expression are uncertain,²⁸ it is probably a formula which sees its beginning in Isa 42:10 where it refers to the return from the Exile and to the new message about God’s action among the nations of the world.²⁹ In this connection, it seems appropriate to point out that this expression is employed always in relation to a communal act of praise involving not only Israel but also the other nations of the earth. In particular, just as in our psalm, in the other

²⁷ For the instruments mentioned in verse 2, see e.g. J. BRAUN, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine*, 16–19; 22–24.

²⁸ See e.g. P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 272.

²⁹ For this hypothesis, see N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 113; S. GAHLER, *Gott der Schöpfung – Gott des Heils*, 60.

psalms where this expression occurs, the content of the praise has as its epicentre the justice, faithfulness and mercy of God.

- In Psalm 40, the “new song” is placed on the lips of the psalmist who blesses God for the wonders done on behalf of his people (verse 6: וּמִן־הַשְּׁבִיבוֹתֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ). This song is the reason for calling on the multitudes to fear YHWH and trust in him (verse 3). In particular, the object of this praise is the justice, faithfulness and mercy of God (verse 11).
- The theme of praise, bound up with the justice/uprightness of God occurs also in Psalm 96. In verse 1, the speaker calls on “the whole earth” to sing a “new song” for the coming of God’s judgement which will be universal: “He will judge the people uprightly” (verse 10: יָדִין עַמִּים יְדִין בְּמִישְׁפָּרִים).
- In Psalm 98 also, the “new song” which the psalmist urges is bound up with justice and the salvation of God which he himself has revealed to the nations (verse 2: הוֹדִיעַ יְהוָה יְשׁוּעָתוֹ לְעֵינֵינוּ). (הַגּוֹיִם גָּלְיָה צְדָקָתוֹ).
- Finally, Psalms 144 and 149 also record the appeal to “sing a new song” (Ps 144:9; 149:1). Here, once again, the subject is the relation between Israel and the nations. In particular, the blessing concerning “the people whose God is the Lord” is an element common to Psalm 144 and Psalm 33 in which it occurs almost identically in verse 15 and verse 12 respectively. In Psalm 144, the new song seems to be motivated by the power of YHWH who protects his king – David according to verse 1 – from his foreign enemies (verses 10–11). In Psalm 149, on the other hand, YHWH allows his people to vanquish the nations (verses 7–9).

b) These observations on the texts lead us to suppose that the formula “new song” does not occur in Psalm 33 by chance but, as elsewhere, it concerns a new way of conceiving and regulating the relations between Israel and the nations.³⁰ However, this new vision of these relations should not be understood in the sense of a domination of Israel over the nations or of a divine judgement on them, *a priori* negative, but rather concern a new way of looking at the action of God, whose justice and faithfulness – as affirmed in verse 5 – are poured out not only on Israel but on all the earth. If, on the one hand, this assumption, which, actually, opens up the path to a new way of thinking about the relations between God, Israel and the nations,

³⁰ For a similar view, cf. N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 114. Less well founded is the theory of M. WITTE, “Das Neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33”, 29, who recognises in Psalm 33 an “eschatological hymn”, proclaimed by the eschatological community which is meditating on the nature of YHWH and on his action in time. In fact, the question is raised about what community is reciting Psalm 33. Would it be Israel or a community that includes Israel together with other peoples? And why would Psalm 33 be recited in an eschatological period?

potentially includes everyone, on the other, it excludes in practice all those who do not belong to the category of the צְדִיקִים / יְשָׁרִים to whom the call to praise refers.

Verses 4–5

Between verse 3 and verse 4, one can observe a transition between the introduction of the psalm and its main section.³¹ As has been said, verses 1–3 are characterised by the imperatives in the plural: the “just and right” are called to raise a “new song” to YHWH. Verse 4 does not develop this idea or add another imperative but explains why the praise of YHWH is necessary. It is so for two reasons which are introduced, from the grammatical point of view, by an explicative כִּי :

- כִּי־יָשָׁר דְּבַר־יְהוָה “for the word of YHWH is upright” (as we shall see later, verses 5–7 develop this *motif*);
- וְכָל־מַעֲשָׂהוּ בְּאֵמוּנָה “and in faithfulness [is] all his work”.

In order to understand the function of verses 4–5 for the entire psalm better, four aspects should be stressed:

(1) Verse 4 begins a new section. On the one hand, it creates a link with the previous verses but, on the other, it introduces two important elements which are woven together within the psalm, forming the texture with which the psalmist constructs the chief lines of his theology: the word of God which is upright and his work which is done in faithfulness. In fact, when one looks with care, word and work run together throughout the thematic grid and structure the principal section of the psalm which, in fact, opens in verse 4 and closes in verse 19.³² Actually, these two themes are taken up several times to speak of the action of God who by his upright word and his faithful work operates in the cosmos by creating it (cf. verses 6 and 9), observing the works of each person (cf. verses 13–15) and guaranteeing protection and salvation to the one who fears him (cf. verses 18–19). In any case, as we were saying, the central section of the psalm opens with one of the truths most rooted in the creed of Israel which refers, on the one hand, to the upright nature of the word of God and, on the other, to his faithfulness in all his works.³³

³¹ In this connection, cf. already H. GUNKEL, *Die Psalmen*, 139. The most recent commentators also observe the transition between the introduction and the main part between verses 3 and 4, cf. P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 272; L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 580; N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 96–97.

³² For such a structure for Psalm 33, cf. also P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 271; L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 580; N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 96–98; M. WITTE, “Das neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33”, 14–15.

³³ According to L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, *Manuale di poetica ebraica*, 70, “words and deeds are presented as correlative, or, more precisely, as a merismus”.

(2) The theme of the uprightness of God and of his word which is upright is a truth proclaimed on several occasions in other psalms too, as, for example, in Ps 25:8 “good and right [is] YHWH (טוֹב וְיָשָׁר יְהוָה); Ps 92:16 “right [is] YHWH (כִּי־יָשָׁר יְהוָה); Ps 19:9: “the statutes of the Lord are right” (פְּקוּדֵי יְהוָה יִשְׁרִים) and Ps 119:137: “You [are] just, O Lord, and right your judgements” (וְיָשָׁר מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ צְדִיק אֱתָהּ יְהוָה). As for the faithfulness of God, we note that when the term אֱמוּנָה refers to God, it expresses a particular aspect of his “nature” and of his acting. The term אֱמוּנָה, in fact, just like its verbal root, describes not so much a principle that we could call “philosophical” to which to appeal in speaking of the behaviour of God in an abstract way, but rather a concrete way of acting. This latter aspect of acting “in faithfulness” becomes still clearer if one considers that his work is “in faithfulness”. In this connection, it is interesting to note – and the commentaries on the Psalter usually do not take account of this detail³⁴ – that the word אֱמוּנָה, preceded by the preposition ב, is rare in the Hebrew Bible and never refers to God, except only in Ps 33:4. In some passages, the verb on which בְּאֱמוּנָה depends is precisely the verb עָשָׂה, “to do”, e.g. in 2 Kgs 22:7; 2 Chr 19:10; 34:12 where the expression בְּאֱמוּנָה refers to a human action that is sincere and worthy of trust. In other words, the use of בְּאֱמוּנָה presupposes that the work of God which is carried out “in faithfulness” indicates that men can experience the fidelity and sincerity of God in his works. The nominal clause in verse 4b should probably be interpreted in this sense, expressing, as it does, a general truth. However, it is not to be excluded, rather, it is probable that this affirmation presupposes the history of Israel: each time that Israel tells of the “faithfulness” of YHWH, it is actually referring to what it has concretely experienced of him in the history of its relation with its God. In this sense, the meaning of בְּאֱמוּנָה has to do with having adhered to a God who has gained the trust of his people by manifesting his trustworthiness to them, his honesty, his steadfastness and sincerity.³⁵ In this way, Ps 33:4 is alluding to the more concrete experiences of uprightness and faithfulness which God has shown: his word (דְּבָר) and his work (מַעֲשֵׂה) in history, and this latter as an extension of the former. These acts of YHWH are perceived by men as “sincere” and “trustworthy”. However, it should be emphasised that, to this point, there has been no explicit mention of Israel or of other peoples. Therefore, one of the central questions which has to be answered for an adequate interpretation of the psalm is that which concerns the question of YHWH’s human

³⁴ Cf., for example, the brief observations of C. WESTERMANN, *Ausgewählte Psalmen übersetzt und erklärt*, 151: “Was am Wort und am Wirken Gottes gelobt wird (wahrhaftig – verlässlich), ist bei beiden dasselbe: daß man sich darauf verlassen, sich daran halten kann.“ K. SEYBOLD, *Die Psalmen*, 138, is content to observe, “alles Handeln JHWHs geschehe auf der Basis von Treue und Verlässlichkeit (באמונה).”

³⁵ See also T.S. VEŠKO, *Divine and Human Faithfulness*, 40.

“interlocutors”: are we dealing with Israel, with the non-Israelites or, more generally, with all humanity?

(3) Verse 5 introduces new vocabulary. By contrast with verse 4, YHWH is the grammatical subject of verse 5a: אֱהֵב צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט. If, on the one hand, verse 4 aims to act as a preliminary to what will follow in the principal section of the psalm (verses 4–19), verse 5 aims at making explicit and reinforcing the assumption already expressed in verse 4 in order to amplify its sense. In this way, the use of the terms in verse 5 is to be understood. In a certain sense, that of their meaning, they complete each other. In this connection, actually, a certain parallelism between verse 4 and verse 5 is noticeable, something which we could describe as “explicative”. That is, in placing the two stichs of verse 5 in parallel with those of verse 4, the psalmist is describing and deepening the sense of what he has just affirmed. In this way, the uprightness of the divine word is defined further according to other characteristics proper to God: the “righteousness” and the “justice” (צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט) of which it is composed, that is, attitudes attributed elsewhere in the psalter to God and his throne (cf. Ps 89:15; 97:2) which aim at bringing about a just and right way of life which can benefit all the inhabitants of the earth (cf. Ps 36:7; 99:4).³⁶ Thus, this is about the “heavenly” qualities of God, and, even if the terms צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט are not taken up in Psalm 33, the idea of a God who acts from heaven and intervenes in earthly matters is not one foreign to our text. In fact, on the one hand, the earthly world appears in verse 5b, on the other, the theme of God who resides in heaven appears in verses 13–14, as we shall see in what follows. Before going into these ideas in depth, we can highlight the *crescendo* which characterises the two verses, 4 and 5. As we have seen, in verse 5a, God is the subject of the participle אֱהֵב which, in its turn, expresses a general truth: God is a “lover” of צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט. Moreover, the participle אֱהֵב throws into relief the “personal” commitment of God, an involvement that consists in carrying out “righteousness and judgement”³⁷, whereas, in verse 4, the formulation is more impersonal. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same thing happens for the work of God which is carried out, as it says in verse 4b, “in faithfulness”, and which, in verse 5b, overflows in his חֶסֶד. Basically, what seems to be gathered from the terminological plane is a kind of *crescendo* which culminates in the affirmation that “the earth is full of the חֶסֶד of YHWH”.

³⁶ In connection with the meaning of צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט, cf., for example, E. ZENGER, “Psalm 33. Lobgesang auf JHWHs Macht und Güte”, 208; N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 105–106.

³⁷ Cf. also L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 581, according to whom this loving does not consist in a sentiment but designates a concrete action. P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 273, speaks of justice, uprightness and faithfulness as “divine characteristics”.

Finally, we should note a relationship on the terminological level between the introduction and verses 4–5. According to verse 1, the addressees of the call to praise YHWH are the “just” (צַדִּיקִים) and the “right” (יְשָׁרִים). Precisely these terms appear in verses 4–5 but not to describe human beings, but to describe YHWH. On the one hand, this different use of the two words underlines the caesura between verses 3 and 4³⁸; on the other, it creates an implicit link between YHWH and those who are called on to praise him.³⁹ In fact, YHWH is presented to the addressees as a God who holds the values of uprightness and justice in their fullness. However, the profound difference between YHWH and the addressees of the call mentioned in verse 1 is underlined by the fact that verses 4–5 attribute to God two other qualities: faithfulness (אֱמוּנָה) and his דִּקְדּוּהוּ.

(4) Once again, what seems decisive for examining Psalm 33 according to our perspective is seeking to grasp at whom the work of God, which is performed through his דִּקְדּוּהוּ, is directed. Faithfulness, justice, equity and דִּקְדּוּהוּ, express a relational state. In fact, if they are employed to describe the way God acts, we ask: at whom are his word and his work directed? For whom are his faithfulness, his justice, his equity and his דִּקְדּוּהוּ? In verse 5b, the text gives a first, if not an exhaustive answer: “the earth is full of the דִּקְדּוּהוּ of YHWH”. This is the primary “recipient” at whom the דִּקְדּוּהוּ is directed. But what does this statement mean exactly? This is another question which deserves careful study because it is usually neglected by scholars.⁴⁰ For a first step, it will be necessary to enquire into the meaning of the expression “the earth is full of something”, while, for a second, it will be useful to go into the meaning of דִּקְדּוּהוּ.

a) The expression מְלֵאָה הָאֲרֶץ, “the earth is full of” is not very frequent in the Hebrew Bible. In general, it has the function of indicating a state of completeness, fullness, in which the whole of reality is involved. In this sense, in Gen 6:13, where it is found with the substantive חַטָּה, it is used to indicate the total state of sin which fills the fabric of relations and of the whole of reality to the point of bringing God to decide to destroy humanity. In a negative sense, therefore, this state of fullness is like a situation of rarefaction and saturation which leaves no room for some other dimension.⁴¹ This also seems to be expressed in Jer 23:10 in connection with the fact that the land is full of adulterers (מְלֵאָה הָאֲרֶץ) as a result of which the whole of reality is compromised in the eyes of God who decides on its punishment. In Isa 11:9, on the other

³⁸ Thus, N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 98.

³⁹ Cf. also H.-J. KRAUS, *Psalmen. 1. Teilband Psalmen 1-59*, 410

⁴⁰ See e.g. C. WESTERMANN, *Ausgewählte Psalmen übersetzt und erklärt*, 151; D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 110; S. GAHLER, *Gott der Schöpfung – Gott des Heils*, 83 – 84.

⁴¹ For the following considerations, cf. L.A. SNIJDERS, art. מְלֵאָה *māle*’, 300.

hand, the expression is employed in a positive sense: “the earth is full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea” (מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ דַּעַה אֶת־יְהוָה כַּמַּיִם לַיָּם מְכַסִּים). Here, the idea of fullness is supported and reinforced by the metaphor in which the imagery of the water and the sea explain further the condition and the relation of diffusion, of the totality of the one in the other.

b) In the psalter, the expression מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ, “the earth is full of” occurs three times and always with reference to the action of God. In particular, Ps 104, a hymn which exults in the divine work, the origin of all creation, verse 24 states: “the earth is full of your creatures” (הָאָרֶץ מְלֵאָה (קַנְיָנֶיךָ); in Ps 119:64, we have almost the same expression as that in Ps 33:5: הַקֶּדֶד יְהוָה מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ: “the earth is full of your הַקֶּדֶד, O God”. With reference to God, the expression also occurs in Habakkuk 3 where the theophany of God and his presence is announced, something which envelops and dominates the cosmos. In this context, Hab 3:3 mentions both the heaven and the earth, utilising the expression with reference to the glory of God: כֶּסֶף שָׁמַיִם הוֹדוּ וְתִהְיֶה הָאָרֶץ מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ: “your majesty covers the heavens, the earth is full of your praise”.

c) In the light of these texts where the expression in question appears, it is interesting to note some elements:

- The substantive אָרֶץ can assume a double value: on the one hand, it has to do with the earth in the sense of “all the created earthly realities” (for example, in Gen 6:13), on the other hand, it can also be understood as the land inhabited by Israel (for example, in Jer 23:10).
- When the expression refers directly to the action of God on the earth, on the one hand, the earth is seen predominantly as a cosmic element in which the work of God and the creation are interdependent aspects and regard the concrete reality in which God relates to man and, therefore, to the whole creation (cf. Ps 104); on the other hand, the expression occurs in a context in which the divine judgement is being referred to (cf. Habakkuk 3). In verse 5 of our psalm, we can catch a glimpse of both aspects. If on the one hand, in fact, it is certain that the context here has to do with אֲדַקֶּה and מְשַׁפֵּט and, so, with the precise attitude of God in actuating these “qualities” on behalf of men, on the other hand, we have to ask ourselves whether this expression, as elsewhere, means that the presence of God and his הַקֶּדֶד concerns the whole earth⁴² or the land of Israel. From this point of view, verse 5 seems to be alluding to an idea which implies a broader concept but which in itself is not clearly explicit. It seems to be hidden within the lines of the statements which follow verse 5 and which we intend to investigate also from this point of view. Moreover, there remains a further point on which to shed light. If, on the one

⁴² Thus, for example, L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 581: “... la misericordia sembra zampillare e distribuirsi per tutta la terra”; K. SEYBOLD, *Die Psalmen*, 138: “JHWH liebt die Gerechtigkeit; die Welt ist voll davon.”

hand, this expression indicates, as elsewhere, the presence of something which adds up to the whole of reality, causing effects which are such as to give rise to its very appearance, what is the meaning of the term חֶסֶד ?

– Till now, it has been mentioned that, in verse 5, the substantive חֶסֶד seems to have a key role because it constitutes the *apex* of the *crescendo* which describes the divine attributes in verses 4–5. However, the term חֶסֶד performs a fundamental role in the whole of the economy of the psalm. In fact, it returns twice in Psalm 33, in verses 18 and 22: in verse 18, it constitutes the element which is the hope of all those who fear YHWH; in verse 22, the verse containing the final invocation which closes the whole psalm, the object of the worshipper’s request is precisely the חֶסֶד of the Lord in which he hopes.

– If the term is an essential element for understanding the theological thought underlying Psalm 33⁴³, it seems appropriate to have to investigate more closely its meaning in itself and the use that our psalm makes of it. It is a term which has raised a certain amount of interest because of the difficulties of interpretation that it presents. In fact, the term חֶסֶד has been the object of various studies because there does not exist a precise parallel in modern languages.⁴⁴ That is why the modern translations of the Bible employ various ways of rendering its significance such as “love”, “mercy”, “kindness”, “faithfulness”, but also “grace” and “power”.⁴⁵ In the face of this plurality of possible translations, not a few scholars have registered a certain embarrassment and the need to fix the sense of חֶסֶד . This is not only in order to interpret correctly those texts where it occurs but also to grasp its theological significance which in itself plays a role by no means marginal in the dynamics of the relations between individuals, and, if referring to God, between him and humans. In this sense, we can already say that, in general, חֶסֶד presupposes an act of faithfulness to, of responsibility for someone. It is always to do with a concrete action which is motivated by a positive relationship between the two parties, and is never a promise or an attitude in the abstract.⁴⁶ Finally, whoever is able to perform any kind of act of חֶסֶד is always someone who, in the situation in question, is always certainly “superior” to

⁴³ J.L. MAYS, *Psalms*, 149: “This statement [i.e. “the earth is full of the חֶסֶד of YHWH”] is the pivot on which the psalm turns”.

⁴⁴ Studies on this topic are abundant, see e.g. C.F. WHITLEY, “The Semantic Range of *Hesed*”, 519–520; K. DOOB SAKENFELD, “Loyalty and Love”, 191.

⁴⁵ As is noted by C.F. WHITLEY, “The Semantic Range of *Hesed*”, 523, the term has an uncertain meaning because the derivation of the term is uncertain and it has been translated in various ways: “Loving kindness”, “Mercy”, “unfailing love”, but he also detects in the meaning of חֶסֶד the sense of “power”, without which many texts could not be translated in a plausible way (e.g. Ps 109:26).

⁴⁶ See K. DOOB SAKENFELD, “Loyalty and Love”, 197.

the other party involved.⁴⁷ Except in Ps 109:12, 16, in which the term refers to a human action, this term always refers to God in the psalter. In this way, the use of *דָּקָה* in the Hebrew Bible is more of a description of a characteristic of God which sinks its roots into his very nature than a way of indicating an aspect of a human action.⁴⁸ However, it is not to be taken for granted that the presence of the divine *דָּקָה* presupposes a covenant relationship, that is, between YHWH and Israel.⁴⁹ That would mean that Israel would be the sole addressee of the psalm.

d) We return to Psalm 33. Assuming that the term is connected with the very nature of God, it seems appropriate and necessary to understand the context in which *דָּקָה* is found and what words accompany it. This will orientate our understanding of the psalm within Psalm 33. As for the immediate context of our psalm, we have already seen that verse 5, in which the term appears, is composed of two stichs. In the first, it is said that God is someone who “loves righteousness and justice” (*אֱהָבָה דָּקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט*), in the second, that “the earth is full of the *דָּקָה* of YHWH” (*הָאֲרֶץ מְלֵאָה מִדָּקָה יְהוָה*). As appears from the composition of the verse, in the first stich, the substantives are the direct object of the action of God who “loves” them; in the second, there is a clarification of the place towards which God directs his action, that is, the recipient of it: the earth. This action includes, on the one hand, the justice and the uprightness which God loves, but, on the other hand, his action seems to go further: its definitive foundation is the *דָּקָה* of YHWH of which the earth is full. If we observe the two remaining stichs which precede verse 5, that is, those of verse 4, the protagonists are the word of YHWH, which is “upright”, and all his work, which is “in faithfulness”. Basically, what we note in these two verses is a succession of adjectives and substantives which describe qualities and attributes relating to the action of YHWH. That allows us to take a further step. To speak of the word of YHWH which is “upright”, and of his “faithfulness with reference to his works,” allows talk of the very “identity” of God, on the one hand, on the other, it forms the preliminary to what is affirmed afterwards, that is, in verse 5. This permits the better understanding of what his *דָּקָה* consists of. In verse 4, in fact, we find the general statement and the reason for which it is necessary to give glory to God. This statement is then explained further in verse 5a which speaks of God’s “affection” for righteousness and justice. In its turn, this statement is inserted in verse 5b within

⁴⁷ K. DOOB SAKENFELD, “Loyalty and Love”, 198: “...The person who is asked to perform the act of loyalty is completely in control of the situation; that person is ‘situationally superior’ to the other, regardless of who is superior/inferior within the everyday relationship of the parties involved”.

⁴⁸ See G.R. CLARK, *The Word Hessed in the Hebrew Bible*, 267.

⁴⁹ This hypothesis, put forward by N. GLUECK, *Hessed in the Bible*, 73–74, had a strong impact on biblical exegesis (see the following footnote). However, it is questionable if the idea of covenant is underlying the various uses of the word *דָּקָה*. See also H.J. ZOBEL, art. *דָּקָה*, 52–53.

For example, P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 274, maintains: “In Ps 33, there are integrated some of the most basic themes of Hebrew theology: creation, history, covenant, and the human response of worship.”

the larger and more complete horizon of his דְּבָרָא . The psalmist seems, therefore, to be making use of terms and concepts which end up by being incorporated into the wider concept of דְּבָרָא . In fact, as arranged, the text suggests that the uprightness and faithfulness, righteousness and justice which belong to YHWH find their definitive realisation in his דְּבָרָא which pervades the whole of the earth. Thus, the earth turns out to be the primary and immediate recipient of a divine action which is articulated in several aspects – uprightness, faithfulness, righteousness and justice – which, ultimately, find their fulfilment in his דְּבָרָא . Therefore, the דְּבָרָא of YHWH seems to be that action which, including all the aspects listed till now, on the one hand, combines them in an harmonious whole, but, on the other hand, transcends them. However, what is the nature of this transcending?

e) As we have already said, when we speak of דְּבָרָא , the reference is always to a concrete act. How then is the realisation of the divine דְּבָרָא brought about on earth? If we look at the verses immediately following verse 5, that is, verses 6–7, it is interesting to note that they take up and develop the themes announced in verse 4.⁵⁰ In verse 4, these themes constitute the reason for which one has to praise God; in verses 6–7, the word of YHWH and his work in faithfulness are also the principle of the divine action in the cosmos. In fact, the word of YHWH as the principle also of his creative action is the theme which, together with that of his acting, predominates over the central section of the psalm, that is, from verse 4 to verse 19. In particular, verses 6–9 develop at length the theme of the word as principle of cosmic creation, while verses 10–19 focus on the action of God in the created reality. It is significant that the term דְּבָרָא reappears precisely at the end of the central section, that is, at verse 18. In this connection, therefore, we ask if it is precisely his creative word and his works on the created things which constitute the action that God performs through his דְּבָרָא and which rules over all the earth. To answer this question, we propose to continue our analysis and to take up the treatment of the theme in the following paragraphs. However, as regards the statement that “the earth is full of the דְּבָרָא of YHWH”, it seems that it is possible to put forward a twofold conclusion, albeit cautiously: on the one hand, there is the expression of the idea of a “pervading” of the earth with the divine דְּבָרָא , that is, with a presence that is total and unlimited, on the other hand, till now, we have no clear indication that permits us to conclude that the earth mentioned is to be identified with a particular country, Israel, for example. It is still an open question what kind of human beings could be the recipients of the divine דְּבָרָא . As we shall see, only the final verses of the psalm provide an answer to this question.

⁵⁰ According to N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 102, verses 4–5 are to be understood as a “preliminary sketch of the whole”, that is, of the following verses.

Verses 6–9

Before beginning the exegesis of verses 6–9, some observations on the structure of the section are necessary. As we have said, verses 6–9 take up again what was stated in verse 4 which speaks of the word of God and his work and extend their concept by presenting the creative action of God for and in the cosmos. He makes the heavens through his word (בְּדָבַר יְהוָה) and the firmament through the breath of his mouth (בְּרוּחַ פִּי) together with the waters of the sea and the storehouses of the deeps. This cosmic action of God is matched by a double call from the psalmist. In verse 8, in fact, he addresses, first of all, “the whole earth” to fear YHWH (verse 8a: יִירָאוּ מִיְהוָה כָּל־הָאָרֶץ) and, immediately afterwards, “all who dwell in the world” to revere him (verse 8b: מִמְּנוֹ יִגֹּדְרוּ כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי תְהוֹמֹת). Verse 9 closes the subsection devoted to the creative word, providing the reason which, in its turn, is introduced with the explicative כִּי (cf. already verse 4) for which all are called on to fear him and revere him. As one can see from the text, if, on the one hand, verses 6–7 are taking up the themes of the word and the work of God which were announced in verse 4, on the other, they constitute the presupposition for the call which the speaker of the psalm addresses in verse 8 to all the earth to fear YHWH and all the inhabitants of the world to revere him.

Once again, therefore, we put at the centre of our analysis the principal question which we wish to answer. Who are the recipients of the word and work of YHWH in Psalm 33? Are the just and right who are mentioned in verse 1 to be identified only with those who know and fear YHWH, that is, only with Israel, or can such categories also embrace all the others, that is, all those who, although not part of the people of Israel by origin or tradition, can recognise him and fear him, in the light of his magnificent works in the cosmos? To pursue this question, it seems appropriate to make some lexical and grammatical observations on the verses in question.

(1) The first question on verses 6–7 concerns the realities to which they refer. Taken as a whole, verses 6–7 are repeating a truth well known to the creed of Israel: God creates through his word. In particular, verse 6 takes up the first account of creation and, specifically, the text of Gen 2:1 by mentioning God’s creation of “the heavens” (שָׁמַיִם) and “all their hosts” (כָּל־צְבָאוֹת). However, by contrast with the Genesis creation accounts, where the accomplishing of the works created by the word of God is rendered by the verbs אָמַר “say” and הָיָה “be” (thus, for the first time, in Gen 1:3), in verse 6 of our psalm, the creating through the word of God is expressed by the verb עָשָׂה, accompanied by the complement of instrument rendered by the expression בְּדָבַר “by [the] word of”. This kind of complement is found also in verse 7 where it is stated that the hosts of heaven were made by God “by the breath of his mouth” (בְּרוּחַ פִּי).

(2) Furthermore, verse 7 poses some problems of interpretation. In fact, according to some scholars, it would be alluding to the separation of the waters from the dry land in Gen 1:9–10;⁵¹ for others, it would be alluding to the wonderful deeds performed by God at the Red Sea on behalf of his people, as recounted in Exod 15:18 and Ps 78:13.⁵² The *crux interpretum* of verse 7 chiefly concerns the presence of the expression כַּנֶּגֶד מֵי הַיָּם and, more precisely, the way of reading the form כַּנֶּגֶד.⁵³ In the light of the first translations, which render the expression as if it were to do with the substantive נֶאֱד “wineskin” (LXX: ὡς ἄσκόν, “like a wineskin”; Jerome, *Psalterium iuxta LXX: sicut in utre*), scholars are divided among those who maintain that the *Vorlage* of the LXX registered precisely this variant and those who instead hold that the variant כַּנֶּגֶד, which is found in the MT as it has reached us, was also in the older Hebrew text. The reading in one or the other sense gives rise to two different possible backgrounds underlying verse 7a, and, so also, to two different types of interpretation.

– In fact, for some scholars who read the MT as passed down to us, that is, כַּנֶּגֶד, verse 7a would be recalling the texts of Exod 15:8 and Ps 78:13 on account of the presence of similar expressions.⁵⁴ In Exod 15:8, in fact, we find the expression מַיִם נִצְבּוּ כְּמוֹ-גֵד, “the waters stood up like a dam/wall”; in Ps 78:13 וַיַּצְבֵּב-מַיִם כְּמוֹ-גֵד, “and [God] made the waters to stand like a dam/wall”. In both texts, the expression occurs with reference to the particular history of Israel, and, especially, its crossing of the Red Sea following YHWH’s wonderful intervention.

– Other scholars reckon, instead, that the original reading of the Hebrew text was נֶאֱד “wineskin”. Although not attested in the Hebrew manuscripts, this form is reconstructed on the basis of the translation of the Greek Bible of the LXX and the Latin version of Jerome, the *Psalterium iuxta LXX*. For these authors, such a variant would be a clear and unequivocal reference to the primordial creation by God which, as in Genesis 1, was performed by his word.⁵⁵

– Between these two positions, there are those who would see in verse 7 an explicit reference both to the creation in Genesis 1 and to the salvific events bound up with the history of Israel

⁵¹ For the authors of the last two centuries, cf, for example, F. DELITZSCH, *Die Psalmen*, 268; E. BEAUCAMP, *Le Psautier*, I, 150; E. ZENGER, “Psalm 33. Lobgesang auf JHWHs Macht und Güte”, 209; J.L. MAYS, *Psalms*, 150; T. LORENZIN, *I Salmi*, 152.

⁵² Cf., for example, P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 270 e 273.

⁵³ For further details on the problem of the textual criticism and history of the text of Psalm 33,7, we refer to the article of E. BONS, “Psalm 33,7: *nd* oder *n'd*, ‘Deich’ oder ‘Schlauch’?”, *passim*.

⁵⁴ Cf. L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 582.

⁵⁵ See e.g. G. CASTELLINO, *Il libro dei Salmi*, 462; J. CALÈS, *Le Livre des Paumes*, I, 359; C.A. BRIGGS, E. G. BRIGGS, *The Book of Psalms*, I, 287–288; E. PODECHARD, *Le Psautier*, 153.

which are mentioned in Exod 15:8 and Ps 78:13 as the reproduction of a kind of *creatio* by God which is carried out in and is at the origin of both the cosmos and the history of Israel.⁵⁶

It is certainly difficult to disentangle oneself and align oneself with certainty with one side or the other. However, in our opinion, it would be mistaken to choose between the two interpretations as if they were exclusive, that is, one which reads נֹאֵד “wineskin” and sees in the text an allusion to the creation, and the other which reads גָּד “dam/wall” and which sees instead an allusion to the Exodus. A *via media* would consist in saying that the MT, as we have it, still allows us to think of the primordial waters collected as within a dam/wall (כַּגֵּד מֵי הַיָּם לְבָסִים) without the need to see there perforce an allusion to the events of the Exodus. In fact, heaven and the waters which dominate the earth could have been sent by God to the edges of the dry land and thus be gathered up as by a dam or wall (גָּד) so as to separate the dry land from the waters at the moment of the creation of the earth.⁵⁷ This is perhaps a different way of describing the initial separation of the waters and the dry land, one which contrasts with the well-known language of the text of Genesis, particularly that used in Gen 1:9–10. This observation would be further confirmation of that made earlier, that is, that Psalm 33 does not use the verbs אָמַר and הָיָה to speak of the divine command and its fulfilment.

If one observes verse 7 and sets it in its whole context, this reading fits well with all the elements that refer to the creation recounted in the first two chapters of Genesis and to the universalistic air found particularly in the subsection in which it is located. In this connection, we can mention two elements in particular:

- The theme of the creation by God through his word. It occurs both in verse 6 (בְּדַבָּר) and in verse 9b (כִּי הוּא אָמַר וַיְהִי הוּא-צְוָה וַיַּעֲמֵד).
- The presence of some primordial cosmic elements, such as the deeps (verse 7b: תְּהוֹמוֹת; cf. Gen 1:2) and the creation of some of these elements, like, for example, the heavens and their hosts (verse 6: הַשָּׁמַיִם ... וְכָל-צְבָאָם; cf. Gen 2:1: הַשָּׁמַיִם ... וְכָל-צְבָאָם).

The hypothesis that verse 7 does not refer to the Exodus but to the creation can be corroborated by three further considerations:

- The Hebrew text of Psalm 33 seems to distance itself from Exod 15:8 and Ps 78:13. In fact, in verse 7, we find the verb כָּנַס which is seldom used in texts of the Hebrew Bible. To be precise, it occurs approximately 11 times, and, whether it is employed with reference to people (cf., for

⁵⁶ See P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 273: “The Language of the ‘Song of the Sea’ explicitly adapts the Canaanite mythology of creation to demonstrate God’s work in history in the creation of his people”; M. WITTE, “Das neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33”, 17.

⁵⁷ As far as we know, this interpretation is rare in the commentaries of recent decades. However, for a similar interpretation, cf. also N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 92.

example, 1 Chr 22:2; Ezek 39:28) and things (cf., for example, Neh 12:44; Eccl 2:8), or whether it is used with reference to elements of nature (cf. Ps 33:7 and Eccl 3:5), it expresses the idea of collecting, heaping up, gathering together. This same idea is found in the following stich where it is expressed by the verb *נתן*, which, in this context, means “put, lay”, and the complement of place *בְּאֶצְרוֹת*, which means “in storehouses”. It is clear, therefore, that the MT of Ps 33:7 highlights the action of amassing, gathering together of the waters. Quite the opposite, the texts of Exod 15:8 and Ps 78:13 convey another idea. Both employ the verb *נצב*, “stand up” which expresses a different type of action: the waters stand up like a wall or, rather, they are put, gathered, within a dam or a wall. That leads us to think that the texts of Exod 15:8 and Ps 78:13, which are an explicit account of the events at the Red Sea, are actually different from what is expressed in Ps 33:7 which seems rather to refer to the primordial events set in being by God at the beginning of the world and which are recounted in Genesis.⁵⁸

– If, moreover, one considers the verses immediately following, verses 8 and 9, it is not the Israelites who are being called on to fear God or any particular category of persons belonging to the people of Israel, but rather “the whole earth” (*כָּל-הָאָרֶץ*) and, again, “all who dwell in the world” (*כָּל-יֹשְׁבֵי תְהוֹמֹת*). In the light of what was stated in verse 6, it is the latter who are being exhorted to fear YHWH on account of his creative work which is performed by his word and which is visible to all (verse 9).

– Finally, in support of a reading of Ps 33:7^{MT} linked more to the creationist background of the book of Genesis, one would also bring in the translations of the LXX (just as, subsequently, of the Vulgate). Even if the following sections will deal with the exegesis of verse 7 of the LXX in relation to the MT, it seems appropriate to point out here already that, by translating *נצב* instead of *נָתַן*, the translators have chosen in this text to place the emphasis on the work of God at the beginning of the world, using images closer to the Genesis accounts of creation so as to confer on Ps 33:7 an atmosphere that is more explicitly universal and which falls outside any reference to the particular history of Israel.⁵⁹

(3) The two stichs of verse 8, constructed in parallel, each express with jussive forms the call to fear YHWH. A more detailed analysis allows us to make two observations:

⁵⁸ For this interpretation, cf. E. BONS, “Psalm 33,7: *nd* oder *n'd*, ‘Deich’ oder ‘Schlauch’?”, 108–110.

⁵⁹ Probably, the LXX deliberately wished to underline the creationist and universal aspect implicit in the text. In fact, on the one hand, the LXX in itself seems to know the term *נָתַן* which it renders now with *τεῖχος*, “wall” (Exod 15:8), now with *πῆγμα*, “mass, heap” (Josh 3:16); on the other hand, even if there were no certainty that the Greek translator(s) of the psalter knew the term, the LXX deliberately avoids all reference to the particular history of Israel. For a detailed study of this aspect, cf. the analysis of the text of the LXX in the last part of this chapter.

a) Prescinding from the first verses of the psalm where the “just” and “right” are being called on to praise the Lord, verse 8 is the one which introduces human beings into the central part of the psalm, first with the metonymy “the whole earth” (כָּל־הָאָרֶץ), then with the expression “all who dwell in the world” (כָּל־יְשֻׁבֵי תֵבֶל). Obviously, the call to fear YHWH is not addressed explicitly to the people of Israel or to those who believe YHWH, but to an audience of addressees that is much larger, almost without limits. With his hymn in which he praises YHWH for his work in creation, the anonymous speaker of the psalm is making YHWH known to a fictitious public and invites them to a reverential fear towards him. In fact, verse 8 is framed by the two verses 7 and 9 which express, each in its turn, the idea that YHWH creates by means of his word.⁶⁰ However, this fictitious public whom the speaker addresses does not know YHWH in the first place as the God of history but as a creator God. In other words, verse 8 seems to suggest that the recipients of the creative work of YHWH are “all who dwell in the earth”.⁶¹

b) In the light of these verses, is it possible to give an answer to a question that is still open: what reality is the substantive אֶרֶץ referring to in verse 5b (תִּמְסַךְ יְהוָה מִלְאֵה הָאָרֶץ)? Is it the territory of Israel or the earth as a whole? The connection with verse 8 allows us to form a conclusion. In verse 5b, it is not yet explained with whom YHWH enters into a relationship characterised by the דָּוָה of which the earth is full. In verse 8, instead, it is clear that all the dwellers in the world are being called on to fear the creator God. This means that verse 5b already introduces a theme which is not focused in the first place on Israel and its particular relationship with YHWH. However, to this point, the dwellers in the world can know YHWH only as creator. If it is true that the earth is full of the divine דָּוָה, how can these dwellers in the world know this aspect of YHWH, and how can they experience it on them? This question remains still open.

Verses 10–12

This section introduces another category of human beings. They are represented by the categories of “people” (עַם) and “nation” (גּוֹי), which appear in both the singular and the plural, and which constitute the theme common to the three verses. Verses 10–11 are constructed according to an antithetical parallelism which sets in opposition the plan (substantive תַּצְוָה) and the counsels

⁶⁰ See also D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 112.

⁶¹ It goes without saying that this interpretation of the first part of Psalm 33 diverges considerably from approaches underlining the role of Israel in the Psalm, see e.g. P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 273: “Thus, in summary, the overtones of the language in vv 4–9 indicate not only the divine creation of the natural order, but also the creation of God’s holy nation in the redemption from Egypt accomplished at the Red Sea.”

(מְהִשְׁבוֹת) of God with the plans and counsels of the nations. Verse 12, on the other hand, is a macarism which runs over two parallel stichs. This has as its subjects “the people” and “the nation”, both in the singular. The following analysis will examine, first, verses 10–11 and their relationship with the immediately preceding verses. Immediately afterwards, we shall look at verse 12.

(1) Verses 10–12 do not develop the theme of creation further but introduce that of history.⁶² In fact, verse 10 suggests that God’s activity does not cease in completing his work in the creation but is prolonged in the process of events within the created reality. It has a clear effect on the creation and on what goes on in it so as to discover the intentions and plans of men. This is what emerges from verse 10 which mentions the plans of the nations and the counsels of the peoples. In these two stichs, constructed, in their turn, in parallel, it seems that there is a sort of zoom lens which better focuses on the work of God over the whole of reality, something which was mentioned already in verse 9. Although verses 10–11 introduce another theme into the psalm, it is unquestionable that they offer some links with the preceding text.

- If, on the one hand, verses 8–9 call on the whole earth and all who dwell in it to fear YHWH, since through his word and his command everything takes life and is fulfilled, verse 10 seems to explain, on the other hand, how this word and this work take shape in concrete form. As in a kind of process from the universal to the particular, God arranges the cosmos and then governs it by manifesting his lordship over it. In fact, this concrete realisation in history manifests itself in the voiding of the plans and counsels of the nations and peoples. These turn out to be fleeting before those of YHWH which, instead, last for ever and are valid for all generations.
- As we have seen, according to verse 10, the work of God is realised in time and in history, thus penetrating the whole reality created by him right from its beginnings and to all eternity. This concrete and particular dimension which, at the same time, is able to be extended for an infinite period, seems to be taking up and defining what was stated in a perhaps more general way in verse 5b: “the earth is full of the הָקֶדֶד of the Lord”. We note, in fact, that the expressions which indicate the total extension of the work of God provide a rhythm for the section of verses 6–9 and, particularly, act as a hook between both sections: thus the general expression of verse 5 seems to be defined in the following verses by means of the use of the substantive כָּל which specifies the earth (כָּל־הָאָרֶץ) and its inhabitants (כָּל־יְשֻׁבֵי תְּבֵלָה) in verse 8 and which always

⁶² See also L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 583; H.P. MATHYS, *Dichter und Beter*, 253; D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 113.

indicates, to be precise, the whole of created reality over which the powerful action of God extends (verse 4: כָּל־מַעֲשָׂהוּ).⁶³

– The verb עָמַד is the same as that one which occurs in verse 9 and which the speaker uses to tell of the creative activity of YHWH through the word: “and it stood firm”. The text thus seems to suggest the following observations: the plans and counsels of God exist from the creation and have a link with his creative word. This signifies that what has its origin in God does not know perishability; that is, God creates with his word, and his rule over created things continues for ever, overcoming the plans and counsels of the nations which, though powerful, are destroyed and foiled by him.

(2) The previous observations lead us to think that the counsels of God and the plans of his heart are not directed at Israel alone but extend over the whole of created reality. Consequently, the nations (גוֹיִם) and peoples (עַמִּים) mentioned in verse 10 form part of this created reality and, through their plans and counsels – even if frustrated by God – play a role in history. In conclusion, the plans and counsels of YHWH pervade all reality, in its spatial and human element, and for a time which is infinite: “for ever” (לְעוֹלָם) and for all indiscriminately “from generation to generation” (לְדוֹר וָדוֹר).

(3) However, if verse 10 has to be understood of all human beings in a universal and global way, we ask: who are the “nation” and the “people” mentioned in verse 12? This verse requires a detailed analysis. In particular, the following two aspects merit further examination:

a) The question as to whom the terms “nation” and “people” refer in verse 12, appears to be crucial if one considers that it occurs within a macarism: “Blessed is the nation whose God is YHWH, [blessed] the people he has chosen as his heritage”. Since, by contrast with verse 11, the substantives are here employed in the singular, the question which this raises is: is the psalmist referring only to Israel or, more generally, to “that” nation which has God as Lord and to “that” people which God has chosen as his heritage, that is to a people and a nation still to be defined? Again: perhaps it is necessary to make a distinction in identifying to which nation the first stich refers, if to Israel or to another, and to what people the second stich refers. Before attempting to answer these questions, we can already say that the commentaries do not always pause to reflect on the identity of the people or peoples referred to in verse 12. Often, it is taken for granted that verse 12 refers to Israel *tout court*⁶⁴ or else there are a few statements which,

⁶³ For this aspect, see also N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 112; J.-L. VESCO, *Le Psautier de David traduit et commenté*, I, 312.

⁶⁴ Cf. in this sense C.A. BRIGGS, E. G. BRIGGS, *The Book of Psalms*, I, 289: “The people of YHWH [...] may sing: *happy the nation // the people*, antith. to all the other nations and peoples, because they have the inestimable privilege of one *whose God is Yahweh*; and this is not simply because they have

on the one hand, allow a glimpse of a possible other horizon, on the other hand, remain ambiguous because they do not go into the question in detail.⁶⁵ From our point of view, however, this question becomes of crucial importance, not only because the main interest of our own analysis consists precisely in understanding better the relations between Israel and the other nations, but also because it seems to us that a correct understanding of Psalm 33 cannot avoid an examination of this question, and that for three main reasons:

- If one considers the structure of the psalm as it appears in the process of reading, the macarism is at exactly the centre of the body of the psalm.
- In particular, if one considers the section in which this statement appears, that is, verses 10–12, we note that it is set between two sections, the one immediately preceding (verses 4–9) and the one following (verses 13–19). These have as their particular object the description of the powerful action of God over the creation and in them, in this particular case, the relation between God and individual people is mentioned.
- Verses 10–12, which have as their theme the sovereignty of God over the nations and their counsels, conclude with a statement which has the tone of an exclamation: this macarism is

chosen Him to be their God, but because *He has chosen them for His heritage*, His own special property in accordance with the original covenant...” Also for E. PODECHARD, *Le Psautier*, 153, “the blessed” are the Israelites, even if the author shows signs of openness by speaking of “ceux qui le craignent” (151). P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 273, maintains clearly that the protagonist of verse 12 is Israel. It is the nation which has YHWH as Lord on account of its national existence which takes its inspiration from a plan that belongs to God and which has little to do with human aspirations. Thus, for example, among the recent commentaries L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 509; K. SEYBOLD, *Die Psalmen*, 139, affirms that verse 12 is “ein Glückwunsch an das Volk JHWHs”; T. LORENZIN, *I Salmi*, 153: “La felicità fondamentale per Israele sta nel fatto di vivere in una relazione di alleanza con Dio e di essere il popolo che egli si è scelto (v. 12)”. Even if J.-L. VESCO, *Le Psautier de David traduit et commenté*, I, 312, recognises a more universal tone to the teaching contained in the psalm, later, when speaking of verse 12, he confines himself to stating: “Au v. 12, est clairement affirmé le bonheur du peuple que Dieu a choisi pour héritage” (311). E. ZENGER, “Psalm 33. Lobgesang auf JHWHs Macht und Güte”, 209, maintains that Israel is the people alluded to in verse 12b but he does not speak of verse 12a.

⁶⁵ Among the authors who mention this question but without delineating its basic contours, cf., for example, J. CALÈS, *Le Livre des Psaumes*, I, 361 who, in his analysis of the macarism of verse 12, does not go to the roots of the question of the identity of its protagonists. He speaks of them in only general terms, citing particularly verses 10–12 which speak of the concern of God which is manifested “dans l’histoire des peuples” and “dans la vie personnelle des individus”. A basic ambiguity on this question is recognised also in G. CASTELLINO, *Il libro dei Salmi*, 463, who states that the macarism in verse 12 concerns Israel and the poet who is thinking of his own people, an expression of exultation because the people who obtain YHWH’s protection are to be envied”. However, Castellino then continues to say of God: “Invero, dall’alto dei suoi cieli, dalla sua dimora eccelsa scruta esamina, pesa, spia tutti gli abitanti della terra e ne penetra nell’intimo le opere. Felici quelli che lo temono.” K. SCHAEFER, *Psalms*, 82, states: “In a progressively narrowing scope the poet focused first on the nations, then the people whose God is sovereign (10-12).” H.-J. KRAUS, *Psalmen. I. Teilband Psalmen 1-59*, 413, does not enquire who are the people or peoples mentioned in the macarism.

addressed to the “nation whose Lord is YHWH” and to the “people he has chosen as his heritage”.

b) As a counterweight to those authors who, as we have said, neglect to examine the question and to those who seem to take their cue from presuppositions already defined from the outset, there are those who have tackled the understanding of verse 12:

– Firstly, emphasis is given, for example, to the central position of God, that is: the blessedness of the nation which has YHWH for its God should be understood as a consequence of the plan of God rather than as result of the behaviour of the nation in itself.⁶⁶ Starting from this presupposition, the status of the “chosen” people would be the expression of one part of YHWH’s general plan for humanity. Starting from these observations, verses 10–12 would be introducing two types of nations: those who are opposed to God’s will and whose plans will, therefore, be frustrated by him; and those who, accepting God, are chosen by him as his heritage.⁶⁷ In this connection, however, it seems appropriate to object that, by contrast with Psalm 2, for example, in itself Psalm 33 does not speak of a rebellion of certain nations against YHWH. In fact, the choice of the people in question by God is not made in these terms or according to certain specific conditions.

– Along the same lines but more generally, “the people whom he has chosen as his heritage” and whom the text describes as “blessed” are identified with the “just” of verse 1 and the “we” of verse 20, and so associated with those who hope in YHWH (verse 21). Working from this assumption, it is stated that this group is to be identified with the celebrating community, linked to the Temple and the Law. Over and against this community, therefore, would be the rest of humanity – pagans or Israelites – who, if they forget the Law, will see the frustration of their counsels and their plans.⁶⁸ Once more, it seems appropriate to point out that such exegesis risks bestowing on the psalm categories which are foreign to it such as the Law and the Temple where the community would have sung this psalm.

– Another attempt at focusing on the identity of the “blessed” of verse 12 claims that, on account of the assonance between the רִשְׁוֹן of verse 4 with the רִשְׁוֹן and רִשְׁוֹן of verse 12, it can be claimed, on the one hand, that Israel shares in the uprightness of YHWH as a result of its election; on the other hand, that these verses lead the hearer to a right judgement.⁶⁹ Who, then,

⁶⁶ For this hypothesis, see D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 114–115.

⁶⁷ See D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 115.

⁶⁸ For this hypothesis, see J. VERMEYLEN, “Quand la structure révèle un sens: Les Psaumes ‘quasi-alphabétiques’ 33 et 103”, 304.

⁶⁹ See J.M. VINCENT, “Recherches exégétiques sur le Psaume XXXIII”, 449.

would be these hearers? According to this approach, they would be Israelites considered as the cultic community which is reciting this psalm.⁷⁰ However, this reading of the text takes for granted that the people chosen by God are to be identified with the Israelites *tout court* and that therefore it is they who are also called the “right” in verse 1.

As can be seen, although these attempts at reading verse 12 also in the light of the context of the psalm display a wish to study the categories of people present in the text, it seems necessary once more to start off from an analysis of the psalm and the categories used in it so as not to run the risk of reaching conclusions which could be shown to be superficial and hasty. To this end, we are resolved to make an analysis of verse 12 which takes account of the terminology employed and of the significance of the two main expressions of which the verse is composed. In particular, it seems necessary to investigate: the use of the macarisms in the psalter (sections c–d); the biblical background of the two stichs of verse 12, that is, the ideas of the covenant and election; and the literary and theological innovations to be seen in this verse (sections e–g). In a second stage, we shall draw conclusions from the previous observations (sections h–i), and will read verse 12 in its context. Finally, we shall develop a new reading of the macarism (section k).

c) We shall take some general observations as our starting point. The term אֲשֶׁרֵי appears a little more than forty times in the Hebrew Bible, and the majority of these are to be found in the psalter where it occurs 26 times. It is a construct form in the plural which, in all probability, derives either from the root *ʕsr*, which signifies “go” in the *qal* and “lead” in the *pi*. or, more commonly, “render a person happy”, or else from the root *ʕsr*, “call, say blessed, happy”.⁷¹ The word אֲשֶׁרֵי is often followed by a relative clause or a participle which describe the subject of which it is predicated. The term אֲשֶׁרֵי, therefore, designates a state of happiness, of blessedness with an origin that perhaps lies in liturgical formulae such as that, for example, which has to do with the cry of joy.⁷² However, in the context of our study, it is not necessary to focus on the possible original “*Sitz im Leben*” of this expression. Being “blessed” in the sense of happy is to

⁷⁰ J.M. VINCENT, “Recherches exégétiques sur le Psaume XXXIII”, 451–452.

⁷¹ On the etymology, various hypotheses have been advanced. In this connection, cf. W. JANZEN, “‘Ašrê in the Old Testament”, 215–216; H. CAZELLES, אֲשֶׁרֵי *ʕshrê*, especially 445; in particular, according to A. D. RUBIN, “The Form and Meaning of Hebrew *ʕsrê*”, 368, the term should be traced back to a root which is also found in Arabic: “I would suggest that the root of *ʕsrê* is in fact *šry*, cognate with the Arabic root *sry/srw*, attested in a variety of forms, including the adjective *sarīy* ‘noble, bountiful’, the noun *sarw* ‘magnificence, bountifulness’, and the impersonal verb idiom *surriya* ‘*anhu* ‘he was cheered up’. For the form *ʕshrê*, I would suggest that it is an adjective of the relative pattern *ʕqatal*, i.e. **ʕšray*. This pattern is well known in Arabic, where it indicates a comparative, superlative, or can give the sense of ‘very’ to an adjectival root.”

⁷² In this section, we are referring to the article of H. CAZELLES, אֲשֶׁרֵי *ʕshrê*, 446.

be distinguished from being “blessed” in a more explicitly religious sense (בָּרַךְ) because, with the term אֲשֶׁרִי, the intention is to indicate the fact that the state of blessedness is always the fruit of an individual choice that is oriented towards the good and towards God. Thus, in a perspective which links an attitude that conforms to the commandments to a reward, happiness, for example, depends on fearing God (Ps 112:1) or consists in not following the advice of the crooked (Ps 1:1) or in considering the poor (Ps 42:2).

d) We return to the macarism in Ps 33:12a where the term אֲשֶׁרִי occurs in relation to the substantive גֹּי. Once again, returning to our basic question, we ask: of whom is the text speaking? Which is this people that has YHWH as Lord? Who are we to understand by the term גֹּי in Ps 33:12a? In the light of the other texts in which the lemma occurs, we notice that the formula אֲשֶׁרִי never otherwise occurs with the substantive גֹּי. Rather, in the other texts, the subject of whom blessedness is predicated is, for example, “the man” (Ps 84:13: אָדָם; Ps 94:12: הַגִּבּוֹר; Ps 112:1: אִישׁ); “the dwellers in your house” (Ps 84:5: יוֹשְׁבֵי בֵיתְךָ) or those who, as has been said, are distinguished for living according to the will of God, such as those who walk in his law (Ps 119:1), those who observe justice and act according to it (Ps 106:3). The only times being “blessed” refers to the category “people/nation” are in Ps 89:16 and in Ps 144:15b. In both cases, however, אֲשֶׁרִי is accompanied by the substantive עַם “people” which is used here to indicate Israel.⁷³ The fact that the formula occurs almost identically in Ps 144:15b actually highlights that, where Ps 33:12a is concerned, the choice to make use of the term גֹּי is not accidental, all the more so if one considers that this is the only time in all the biblical texts in which אֲשֶׁרִי is associated with this term. Furthermore, interestingly, if we start off from the text, Israel is never explicitly mentioned both in Ps 33:12a and in the rest of the psalm, just as there is no reference to the law or commandments of God. In the light of these observations, we ask ourselves whether the term גֹּי should really be identified with Israel.⁷⁴ This theory seems possible for still further reasons:

⁷³ Where Ps 89:16 is concerned, its context confirms it clearly: the proper name of Israel appears some verses after, in verse 19; Israel is the blessed people that knows to praise YHWH. As for Ps 144:15, it is inferred from verse 10, where David is mentioned, that the psalm refers to Israel; see e.g. F.-L. HOSSFELD, E. ZENGER, *Psalmen 101–150*. 786. It is interesting to note that, in Ps 144, the macarism, which recurs at the close of the psalm, is an exact reproduction of the formula which we find in the first stich of our verse, but with the use of the term עַם.

⁷⁴ A study carried out by J. CLINTON MCCANN JR., “The Shape of Book I of the Psalter and the Shape of Human Happiness”, which proceeds according to a canonical approach, seeks to create links between the various macarisms present in the Psalter, including Ps 32:1 and Ps 33:12 in order to identify those who in the two psalms are described as “blessed”. In this connection, however, the author speaks only of “humanity” (345), without specifying who is really being mentioned.

- Even if verse 12 is made up of two parallel stichs, that does not prevent the content of the one leaving room for an understanding which does not perforce have to coincide *in toto* with the content of the other. On the contrary, the text seems to highlight this element of novelty through the fact that the parallel statement in the following stich actually uses another term to speak of “people” (עַם). Thus, it is not necessary to take for granted that verse 12 is an example of synonymous parallelism⁷⁵ in which the elements of the two stichs refer to the same reality.
- The formula אֲשֶׁר־י + participle or relative clause is a stereotyped form which carries within itself the value of an assumption the intention of which is to proclaim a general truth which could refer not to a single particular people but to an exemplary people.
- It is necessary to cite again a macarism which is not linked to an explicit subject, Ps 2:12: אֲשֶׁר־י כָּל־חֹסֵי בּוֹ “happy are all who take refuge in him”. Obviously, the addressees of this fictitious psalm are the earthly rulers,⁷⁶ probably the non-Israelite kings and princes alluded to in verse 2 of the psalm.

e) However, before identifying the people mentioned in verse 12a of Psalm 33 with a people other than Israel, it seems appropriate to consider another argument which goes in the opposite direction. In fact, as composed, verse 12a seems to recall the idea of the covenant between YHWH and Israel⁷⁷ which has its extended form in Deut 26:17–19:

17	אֶת־יְהוָה הָאֲמַרְתָּ הַיּוֹם לְהִיֹּת לְךָ לֵאלֹהִים וּלְלַכֵּת בְּדַרְכָּיו וּלְשָׁמֵר חֻקָּיו וּמִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וּלְשָׁמֵעַ בְּקוֹלוֹ	Today you have obtained this declaration from YHWH: to be your God; and [for you] to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordi- nances, and to listen to his voice.
18	וַיְהוָה הָאֲמַרְךָ הַיּוֹם לְהִיֹּת לּוֹ לְעַם סִגְלָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ לְךָ וּלְשָׁמֵר כָּל־מִצְוֹתָיו	And today YHWH has obtained this declaration from you: to be his own people as he has promised you, and to keep all his commandments,
19	וּלְתַתֵּךָ עָלֶיךָ עַל כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְתִהְיֶה וּלְשֵׁם וּלְתִפְאֳרָתָהּ וּלְהִיֹּתְךָ עַם־קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּר	[for him] to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour; and [for you] to be a people holy to YHWH your God, as he has promised.

⁷⁵ For the problem of definition of the different categories of parallelism, see e.g. L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, *Manuale di poetica ebraica*, chapter 5.

⁷⁶ See e.g. P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 67–68.

⁷⁷ See already F. DELITZSCH, *Die Psalmen*, 269: “Dieser Teil des Liedes [i.e. the macarism] ist wie eine Paraphrase des אֲשֶׁר־י Dt 33,29”; C. A. BRIGGS, E.G. BRIGGS, *The Book of Psalms*, I, 289. For a detailed analysis of this problem, see N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 107–111, furthermore S. GAHLER, *Gott der Schöpfung – Gott des Heils*, 117–120; F.-L. HOSSFELD, E. ZENGER, *Psalmen 101–150 übersetzt und ausgelegt*, 786.

Here is a list of all the principles which make up the covenant between God and his people. Israel declares that YHWH is its God, just as YHWH declares that Israel is his people, his own peculiar possession. This formula, however, is based on some very definite assumptions: the reciprocity of the pact between YHWH and his people can be maintained only on condition and thanks to the fact that Israel commits itself to observing the Torah and all its commandments. From this starting point, we ask, in fact, even if Ps 33:12 seems to be taking up this covenant formula, is it presupposing the same commitment on the part of the “people who have YHWH as Lord”? Moreover, is it necessary, therefore, to understand that Israel is the people designated by the term גוי? Before answering, we prefer to devote some further words to verse 12b so as then to indicate the points necessary for a more unitary and coherent interpretation of the verse as a whole.

f) In verse 12b, the blessedness refers this time to the “the people [God] has chosen as his heritage” (הַעַם בָּחַר לְנַחֲלָה לּוֹ). We note immediately that verse 12b is associating two *motifs* which are normally never mentioned together in the OT⁷⁸: on the one hand, the verb בחר, “choose” which, through its use elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and especially in the book of Isaiah (e.g. Isa 41:8–9; 43:10; 44:1), would be recalling the idea of Israel’s election by God from among all the other peoples⁷⁹ and that of the Exodus (e.g. Deut 4:37; Ezek 20:5–6)⁸⁰; on the other hand, we find the term נַחֲלָה, “possession, heritage”, which refers to the idea of an inheritance that is lasting and inalienable.⁸¹ As can be easily understood, we have the incidence together of two decidedly important aspects which are bound up with the particular history and with the very life of Israel: election and heritage.

g) If we take into account the elements considered to this point with reference to the whole of verse 12, it seems appropriate to highlight the following four observations in order to mark out some paths of reading which have been opened up.

– The first observation concerns the position of the macarism: although it acts as a kind of stylistic caesura, it does not prevent verse 12 from acting as a “hinge” between the previous and following verses.⁸² In this sense, the macarism can be read as a climax⁸³ in which there is a convergence of all the statements relating to the call to the whole earth and all its inhabitants to

⁷⁸ For this observation, see N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 108.

⁷⁹ See also M. WITTE, *Das neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33*, 20–21.

⁸⁰ For this idea, see N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 109.

⁸¹ See e.g. E. LIPÍŃSKI, art. נַחֲלָה *nāḥal*, 320.

⁸² For the caesura, cf. H.P. MATHYS, *Dichter und Beter*, 254.

⁸³ N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 108: “The beatitude signals a climax in the course of the text”; see also C. PETERSEN, *Mythos im Alten Testament*, 105.

fear YHWH as creator and Lord of history (verses 8–11), and the theme, connected with it, which concerns the lordship which YHWH exercises over all the earth and over all the nations through his gaze which penetrates all their works (verses 13–19). This position of the macarism suggests that the reality to which it refers transcends the borders of Israel.

– The covenant formula referred to in verse 12a is never inserted into a macarism with the exception of Ps 144:15b. There, however, at the close of the whole psalm, it performs a different role from that which it has in Ps 33:12.⁸⁴

– The covenant formula in Deut 26:17–19 has Israel as its definite and sole recipient. The latter, in fact, is mentioned explicitly and unequivocally as the single partner of the covenant with YHWH. In this sense, the emphasis here is placed precisely on Israel and on its active participation in the covenant through observing the commandments. In Ps 33:12, on the other hand, the attention is focused on a nation and a people whose precise names are not mentioned and is concentrated on the blessedness which comes from a close relationship with YHWH.⁸⁵ That means that, rather than in terms of reciprocity and commitment to the law, the bond between the nation/people and YHWH in Ps 33:12 is expressed in terms of belonging and preference as a result of a relationship between free and personal agents, one which avoids particular duties and/or obligations.⁸⁶

– Furthermore, verse 12 would seem to be suggesting that this people and nation belong exclusively to YHWH. That appears to emerge from the fact that there is no mention here of other gods. In fact, the nation/people which is called “blessed” here seems to exclude any other possible bond beyond that with YHWH. In this connection, however, it seems suitable to emphasise that the aspect of preference and exclusiveness appears, nonetheless, to be markedly more stressed in verse 12b. This is because the vocabulary employed echoes, as we have said, the *motif* of God’s election of Israel. The idea of preference and exclusiveness is strengthened by the fact that God chooses the people as his “heritage”. This presupposes that God binds this people to himself in a way that is markedly profound and irrevocable.

h) From these observations on verse 12, we can deduce some lines for reading:

⁸⁴ For further details, cf. F.-L. HOSSFELD, E. ZENGER, *Psalmen 101–150 übersetzt und ausgelegt*, 786; N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 107.

⁸⁵ See also N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 108.

⁸⁶ D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 114, places especial emphasis on God as protagonist: “However, though v. 12a can be read as a commendation of this nation’s activity, the verse as whole is not without ambiguity. That Yahweh is the God of this one nation can be a consequence of God’s will rather than a result of their own behaviour. [...] The chosen status of the one nation constitutes part of the overall plan of Yahweh but the proper behaviour of the people also plays a part. Yahweh remains in control; the people respond by aligning themselves with Yahweh in an act of ‘voluntary heteronomy’.”

– If we admit that Ps 33:12a is alluding to the covenant formula, we must also acknowledge, however, that, as formulated, it does not provide any detail to remind us unequivocally of the exclusive relation between God and Israel. Along these lines, in fact, within the context of the psalm, there is no mention of the name of Israel nor are there any accounts of the events relating to its particular history, such as the Exodus.⁸⁷

– Certainly, the author of Ps 33 is bringing together themes and *motifs* already well known to the theological tradition of Israel, blending them in such a way as to reformulate them in a manner that is entirely new. On the one hand, these *motifs* are rooted in the past and in the belief of Israel; on the other hand, brought together and in this context, they allow the formulation of something new. For this reason, the question arises as to the specific message of the macarism in verse 12a which does not mention Israel, its history and its laws explicitly.

i) With the aim of answering this question, we can add a further three elements which we consider important:

– In addition to verse 12a, the term יִגָּל already occurs in the plural in verse 10 where it actually designates the other nations. For this reason, it does not seem risky to have to admit that, in verse 12 also, this term could refer to a foreign people rather than to Israel.⁸⁸

– In the same way, the fact that, as we have said, the name “Israel” is not explicitly mentioned in verse 12, would allow us to hypothesise a “non-Israelite” interpretation of the verse and, in the final analysis, of the psalm as a whole. In this way, then, the question which we are posing is whether the category of “nation” has to be understood as tacitly addressed to Israel or whether it can reflect all the other nations too.⁸⁹

– Moreover, if the term יִגָּל is being used in verse 12 with the same sense as in verse 10, we ask whether, in verse 12b, where there appears a terminology clearly more bound up with the idea of election, the psalmist is not in fact working with a further distinction between “the nation whose God is YHWH” and “the people whom YHWH has chosen as his heritage”, referring, on the one hand, to the non-Israelites (verse 12a) and, on the other, to Israel (verse 12b), without

⁸⁷ The absence of any mention of the Exodus has been observed by various authors, see e.g. N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 109; J.-L. VESCO, *Le Psautier de David*, I, 313; M. WITTE, *Das neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33*, 21.

⁸⁸ For N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 108, it is surprising that the term יִגָּל, comes first in Ps 33:12 compared with אֲנִי. However, this permits the avoiding of the almost automatic identification of this nation with the people of Israel and a conflation of this nation with all the other nations which are mentioned in verse 10.

⁸⁹ In interpreting this verse, some authors consider the possibility that verse 12 is alluding to the whole of humanity, e.g. M. WITTE, *Das neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33*, 21; S. GAHLER, *Gott der Schöpfung – Gott des Heils*, 119. See also C. PETERSEN, *Mythos im Alten Testament*, 109, who speaks of non-Israelite fearers of YHWH.

mentioning it explicitly.⁹⁰ In fact, as we have already pointed out, verse 12 lends itself to an interpretation that is not inevitably univocal.

j) At this point in our analysis, it seems appropriate to be able to read verse 12 in its context. This will enable us to have a better understanding of this verse in the light of the theological background of the psalm as a whole. As partly demonstrated already, the text offers tones and concepts which confer on the whole body of the psalm an air that is certainly broader. Among these, the more important elements favouring a non-Israelite reading of Psalm 33 are:

- As also stated previously, the substantive *לֵל* occurs six times (verses 4, 6, 8, 13, 14, 15).⁹¹ In verses 4 and 6, it refers to the creative word of God to whom “all his works” are due. In the remaining verses, the substantive occurs to indicate the lordship of God over the whole earth (verse 8) and, on it, over all its inhabitants and even over all the generations. Thus, the use of the substantive *לֵל* does not seem accidental. In fact, it appears to have the role of giving a clear illustration of YHWH’s field of action. This action knows neither limits nor bounds, whether from the spatial or the temporal points of view. Thus, the origin of the earth and of all that exists on it can be attributed to his creative action, and everything which goes on it cannot escape his gaze.
- The reference to the beginnings, just as to the present and to “all generations” (verse 11b), makes it clear that God’s action on the cosmos is pervasive and incessant. It is set on a spatio-temporal axis which knows neither limits nor interruptions. In this way, Psalm 33 describes the whole of reality as the place of relation *ab origine* between God, the creation and all the men on earth, from every race and throughout all generations.
- As already stated, the earth, place of the relation between God and all that exists, is to be understood in a sense that is essentially cosmic. That is to say, it does not coincide with the land promised by God to Israel but is the place of the manifestation of all his creative work over the cosmos and everything that exists in it. This relation is described according to quite specific modalities which are listed: in verse 4, which speaks of the uprightness of his creative word and of all his work which is carried out “in faithfulness”; and in verse 5a, which speaks of his righteousness and justice; and, above all, in verse 5b, where the *apex* of these statements is reached: “the earth is full of the *דָּוָר* of YHWH”. Once again, that is, the text seems to be suggesting that the cosmic action of God is not limited solely to the creation but that his

⁹⁰ This idea is alluded to by N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 112, but his exegesis goes in another direction. See also E. BONS, “YHWH und die Völker”, 25.

⁹¹ This feature of Ps 33 is highlighted by N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 112.

presence in it is permanent. It is made concrete, finally, in his יְהוָה through which he manifests his very being in a way that is absolute and pervasive.

– Another element which indicates the universal tone of the psalm is the clear and pressing call to fear YHWH which is addressed to “all the earth” (verse 8a) and to all the dwellers in the world, who are exhorted to tremble before him (verse 8b). It is interesting to note the reprise of the same substantives immediately after the macarism, in verse 14, where it says that YHWH scrutinises from his throne “all the inhabitants of the earth”. That is, the macarism of verse 12, turns out to be set in the centre of a discourse addressed not only to Israel but to all the nations and peoples that inhabit the world.

– As it is expressed, the reference to the king and the warrior who are not saved either by the army or by their own strength (verse 16) cannot be ascribed to any particular king of Israel. Similarly, there are no names or episodes that belong to the history of Israel. Rather, the statements are constructed to be general truths which turn out to be valid, therefore, for any king or hero.⁹²

k) In conclusion, we return to verse 12 in order to establish its content against the background of the previous observations:

– With regard to the covenant formula alluded to in verse 12a, it seems important to emphasise the absence of any reference to a commitment on the part of the human partner to observe the Torah and its commandments. Actually, this detail is not unimportant if one thinks that the reciprocity of the pact between God and Israel within the framework of the stipulation of the covenant constitutes an inherent, if not the only, *conditio sine qua non* for the existence of the pact, as emerges from texts like Deut 26:16–19. So much so that, when Israel fails to observe the law and the commandments ordained by God, the covenant too is put at risk. We ask, therefore, if verse 12a contains to a certain degree a formula which recalls that of the covenant between YHWH and Israel, what role does the Torah play in the context of Psalm 33? In fact, a careful analysis reveals that, in the whole of the psalm, there is no explicit reference to the Law.⁹³ When the *motifs* of justice and uprightness occur (verses 1 and 5), they refer to general concepts and do not perform an admonitory role: on the one hand, in verse 1, with reference to

⁹² P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 274, speaks of a “fundamental principle of human history; though there are formidable forms of human strength, they can never balance the divine power.” M. WITTE, *Das neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33*, 24, claims that verses 16–17 refer to eschatological events. However, it is questionable if this hypothesis can be maintained. It is more probable that verses 16–17 speak of a general truth as can be deduced from the introductory יְהוָה .

⁹³ References to the Torah and to the need to follow its commands are present elsewhere in the psalter. One thinks, for example, of Ps 1:1–2; 119:1 where being blessed is closely bound up with observance of the Lord’s Torah.

men, they indicate the moral qualities that fit the just and right man to praise YHWH; in verse 5, they appear with reference to God and seem to delineate his mode of being and of acting in history. Therefore, if we start from the assumption that verse 12a contains an allusion to the covenant formula, we have to point out that here it has a shape that is certainly new. It would seem that if, on the one hand, the blessedness of the nation mentioned here is the result of its special relationship with YHWH, on the other hand, it does not show any specific link with the observance of the law⁹⁴ or any reference to a promise by God such as, for example, that connected with the land of Canaan (Deut 4:1, 5). As formulated, the stich certainly puts forward a relationship of belonging to YHWH, but this is founded on another presupposition, that concerning the fear of YHWH, as emerges from verse 8.⁹⁵ That, in fact, is not only the foundation of the relation between YHWH and all the earth with its inhabitants, who become the new partner with whom God wishes to establish a relationship, but it is also the guarantee – as elsewhere for Israel – of a happy and secure existence.⁹⁶ In fact, while the counsels and plans of all the other nations are frustrated, those of the nation which fears YHWH and which chooses him as Lord will fall within the plan of the Lord which will stand for ever.⁹⁷ Thus, if verse 12a somehow takes on the category of the covenant as the close and lasting link between YHWH and the nation mentioned, this category is remodelled totally, both with reference to the partners involved and, consequently, to the ways according to which it is set down. In fact, the absence of reference to the law, the absence of the name of Israel, and the presence of the substantive יִגְלוּ, which is used in verse 10 to indicate the non-Israelites, are all elements leading us to think that, in verse 12a, the blessedness does not concern Israel alone but is also addressed to any other nation which fears YHWH and so decides to have him as Lord.⁹⁸

– If the vocabulary of verse 12b is actually alluding to election and, therefore, to the special relation of YHWH with Israel, it seems important, nonetheless, to underline that in Psalm 33

⁹⁴ See N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 114.

⁹⁵ See also M. OEMING, *Das Buch der Psalmen. Psalm 1–41*, 193: “V. 8 thematisiert die universelle Anerkennung des einen Gottes Jahwe”; N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 116.

⁹⁶ In this connection, J. CLINTON MCCANN JR., “The Shape of Book I of the Psalter and the Shape of Human Happiness”, 344, writes: “The shape of human happiness in the psalms is essentially this – trust. The beatitudes in Psalms 32 and 33 add an important dimension to the character of the relationship of trust that constitute happiness. [...] Happiness is essentially a matter of trust, of fundamental dependence upon God for life and direction and future.” G. CASTELLINO, *Libro dei Salmi*, 463, comments upon verse 12 as follows: “Felici quelli che lo temono e lo venerano”.

⁹⁷ In this connection, cf. E. PODECHARD, *Le Psautier*, 153: “Le bonheur du peuple que Iahvé a choisi ressort de ce que Iahvé réalise toujours ses desseins, lesquels ne peuvent qu’être favorables à son peuple.”

⁹⁸ For this conclusion, see e.g. N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 116; S. GAHLER, *Gott der Schöpfung – Gott des Heils*, 119.

this election does not display any links with the foundational events of the Exodus. Thus the election alluded to by the text would go back to distant times that are not specified.⁹⁹ That being said, although one can make a connection between verse 12b and the idea of the election of Israel, the outlines of the particular history of YHWH and Israel fade away to nothing in the second stich of verse 12. In the light of these elements, it does not seem right to exclude the fact that, even if verse 12 employs well-known formulae rooted in the world and theology of Israel, it could have as its addressees, even if fictitious, all those other people and nations who decide, in the wake of Israel, to fear and hope in YHWH. In fact, as formulated, by transposing certain categories proper to the people of Israel to all the inhabitants of the earth, the text seems to be sketching the outline of a covenant relationship which transcends the borders of Israel. One asks, therefore, whether it is still opportune to speak of “covenant” in this context.

Verses 13–15

From the point of view of content, verses 13–15 take up again the theme of the lordship of God over all the earth and all who live there which was already expressed in verses 8–11.¹⁰⁰

(1) Our analysis takes its cue from some stylistic observations:

- In verse 14, there is a recurrence of almost the same expression already found in verse 8: “all the inhabitants of the earth” (v. 14: כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ; v. 8: כָּל־יִשְׁבֵי תִבְל).)
- Verses 13–14 are constructed according to alternating parallelism: A (v. 13a) – B (v. 14a) / A^I (v. 13b) – B^I (v. 14b). Here, what leaps to the eye is the repeated use of verbs from the semantic field of “seeing”: נבט *hi.*, “look” and ראה, “see”, verbs very widespread in the Hebrew Bible which often, as in verse 13, occur together (cf., for example, Isa 42:18; 63:15; Ps 80:15; 142:5);¹⁰¹ together with the less common verb שגה *hi.*, “gaze, observe, scrutinise”.¹⁰²
- The use of the prepositions מן (verses 13 and 14) and אֶל (verses 14 and 15) emphasises the “high/heavens” dynamic (where God lives, and from where he watches and scrutinises) and the “low/earth” one of the inhabitants of the world.

(2) Taking account of these stylistic observations, as well as in the light of their context, we shall seek to understand better the sense of verses 13–15. Even if from the stylistic point of

⁹⁹ For this observation, see also N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Ps 33”, 114.

¹⁰⁰ See e.g. P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 274; L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 584. For another structure, see M. WITTE, *Das neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33, 14–15*, who holds that verses 12–14 constitute a separate unit. However, for stylistic reasons, this hypothesis is to be rejected.

¹⁰¹ For further details, cf. H. RINGGREN, art. נבט *nbt*, *TDOT IX*, 126–128.

¹⁰² In the whole of the Hebrew Bible, the verb שגה *hi.* Occurs only 3 times: Ps 33:15; Cant 2:9; Isa 14:16.

view there is no element making this connection explicit, the presence of the almost identical expression in verses 8 and 14 reveals that the text is in fact linking God's watching all the inhabitants of the earth (verse 14) with the call addressed to them to tremble before him (verse 8). God's gaze, that is, remains fixed on everything that happens on earth. Not only does he not limit himself to gazing from his dwelling on high, having fashioned their hearts individually (verse 15a), but he understands in depth the works performed by each one of them.¹⁰³ This understanding does not cease with a mere external observation of these acts, because he is able to penetrate their meaning and, therefore, the intention with which they were carried out. Thus, God's gaze differs from that of man through his capacity to go beyond appearances. In fact, this penetrating gaze must demand that all the inhabitants of the world fear him and tremble before him since he is the one in whom everything has its origin (verses 9 and 15a), and he alone the one in whom everything is able to exist (verses 10–11).

(3) The prepositions employed build up the images in such a way as to give an architecture to the dynamic of YHWH's cosmic action. He looks down and sees "from heaven" (מִשָּׁמַיִם) all the sons of men (verse 13). "From the place of his dwelling" (מִמְכוֹן־שְׁבִיתוֹ), he sees, and his gaze is "on all the inhabitants of the earth" (אֶל כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל הָאָרֶץ). Finally, he discerns/understands "[lit.: over] all their works" (אֶל־כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם). With delicacy, the text communicates the cosmology of the ancient world, but here the scene seems to be sketching the image of a great dwelling in the heavens where God lives¹⁰⁴ and from where he sees, scrutinises and understands the value of men's works. The fact that God acts "from heaven", the place of his dwelling, outlines a universal dimension of his being and of his acting; once more in Psalm 33, YHWH is being described as the one who is at the origin of and above all things. All those who dwell on the earth, without any distinction of people or of nation, can only be subject to his gaze which is constant and lasting.¹⁰⁵

(4) Although the verbs concerned with seeing could appear to be synonyms, and, indeed, in part they are, verses 13–15b present a sort of *crescendo* in which the action of simple looking on the part of God (verse 13: נִבַּט *hi.*, and רָאָה), evolves into a more careful form of attention (verse 14: שָׁגַח) which, finally, becomes understanding (verse 15: בִּין), precisely by virtue of

¹⁰³ See also D. JACOBSON, "Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm", 115–116: "Verse 15 solidifies the connection between creation and understanding. The one who models the human heart is the one who discerns all human activity."

¹⁰⁴ For a similar idea, see Ps 11:4; for a brief survey of Psalter quotations dealing with God's dwelling, see H. GUNKEL, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, 73.

¹⁰⁵ In relation to verse 13, C. A. BRIGGS, E.G. BRIGGS, *The Book of Psalms*, I, 289, write of God that: "His inspection is universal, a resumption of the thought of the universal warning of v. 8".

what has been seen and observed.¹⁰⁶ In this connection, even if verses 10–11 are referring to the counsels and plans of the nations which are frustrated by God, it seems that, as a whole, the text, also in relation to verses 13–15, does not understand God's gaze *tout court* as the announcement of a threatening judgement.¹⁰⁷ If it were so, there would actually be a warning in view of a possible destruction.¹⁰⁸ Instead, these verses tend to describe the cosmic acting of YHWH in his relation to the earth and its inhabitants. In this way, verses 13–15 are a kind of clarification where the stress is placed not so much on the judgement in itself as on the presence and lordship of God over all created reality.¹⁰⁹ God's gaze, which permeates the whole earth, tells of his constant presence in all the areas of human life by virtue of the fact that each thing has its origin in him. Everything is subjected to his lordship because it is the manifestation of a power which belongs solely to him and which, as such, exceeds every human capacity or work. In God's work of creation and government, judgement plays a necessary role,¹¹⁰ but the text of the psalm, rather than putting weight on this, highlights the unsurpassable power of God who acts where human understanding and capacity cannot reach. Seeing, accompanied by a deep understanding, is an exclusive prerogative of God.¹¹¹ That human action with its limitations is being confronted is confirmed by verses 16–19 which follow.

Verses 16–19

We begin with some general observations. Verses 16–17 focus on the vanity of human power. Here, we encounter models of strength such as the king, the warrior and the horse. Although these dispose of resources considered powerful in human terms, such as the army and physical strength, they cannot actually obtain salvation. If, on the one hand, these verses enable the speaker to emphasise the emptiness of human power, on the other hand, they pave the way for what is stated immediately afterwards in verses 18–19: the sole salvation from death and, in

¹⁰⁶ According to H. RINGGREN, בִּין *bîn*, 102, the verb in Ps 33:15 should be translated with “to give heed”: “The idea ‘to give heed’ occurs, e.g., in Ps 33:15: God ‘gives heed’ (RSV: “observes”) the deeds of men.” W. RANDALL GARR, “The Semantics of בִּין in the *qal* and *hiphil*”, 544, maintains that “the *qal* expresses perception and lower degrees of mental activity. The *hiphil* expresses higher, more complex, and more demanding mental activity.”

¹⁰⁷ In this connection, the specific semantic field of judging and destroying is missing. However, H.P. MATHYS, *Dichter und Beter*, 254, holds that the idea of divine retribution gleams through the text.

¹⁰⁸ In this connection, cf., for example, Ps 28:5; 50:22.

¹⁰⁹ In connection with God's understanding in verse 15, P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 274, speaks of his omniscience which relates even to the personal life of individuals.

¹¹⁰ D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”», 116: “[...] Judgment is not so much a separate stage after creation as necessary aspect of the creative process.”

¹¹¹ With some slight differences, this idea is also attested in 1 Chr 28:9: כִּי כָל-לִבָּבוֹת דּוֹרֵשׁ יְהוָה וְכָל-יִצְּרָר מִהֶם, “for YHWH searches every heart, and understands every intent of the thoughts.”

general, from misfortune, can only be the work of YHWH.¹¹² He extends it to the one who fears him.

(1) We should note in these verses the repeated use of two lexical fields: that connected with force and that with salvation.

a) The lexical field of force is associated with human figures – *חַיִל* “power, army” with reference to the king (verse 16) and *כֹּחַ* “strength” with reference to the warrior – and with the horse (verse 17).¹¹³ Moreover, all these terms are raised to the highest level through the construct state accompanying them: in verse 16, we find the expression *בְּרַב־חַיִל* “by his great army” and *בְּרַב־כֹּחַ* “by his great strength”; in verse 17, *בְּרַב־חַיִלוֹ* “by his great power”. The psalmist seems, therefore, to be underlining that, even in the case of notable power or strength, such as those of a king in battle or a warrior in combat or, again, a horse in a military action, this would not be enough to obtain salvation either for oneself or for another. It is significant that the model for such force is taken particularly from military power, that is, an idea of power considered at its highest level because magnified by the collective aspect of its use, by the institutional power bound up with authority, and by the courage and the means employed.

b) However, this idea of force relating to the figures mentioned in verses 16–17 is diminished by the use of the negative of the terms linked to the action of saving: “no king is saved” (verse 16: *אִי־יִשְׁעַתְּ הַמֶּלֶךְ נוֹשָׁע*), “a warrior is not delivered” (v. 16: *גִּבּוֹר לֹא־יִנְצֵל*), “a lie is the horse for safety” (verse 17a: *לֹא־יִשְׁעֶה לְתִשׁוּעָה*), “it will not save” (verse 17b: *לֹא־יִמְלֹט*). The verbs *ישע*, *נצל*, *מלט*, are used here as synonyms to express a unique idea which is present elsewhere in biblical texts: neither man nor horse can obtain salvation but only the Lord.¹¹⁴ The semantic field of salvation occurs immediately afterwards, in verse 19, but this time in relation to YHWH. Here, the verb *נצל* *hi.* is not accompanied by any negation but by the infinitive construct with the preposition *ל* which gives the verb a final aspect. In the second stich, we find the same construction in relation to the verb *חיה* *pi.* “keep alive”, it too accompanied by the preposition *ל*

¹¹² For a similar idea, see P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 274: “The preceding verses in praise of God’s greatness are heightened in this section of the hymn by a striking contrast; the traditional human sources of strength are as nothing in contrast to God’s might.”

¹¹³ For the semantic field concerning force, cf. L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 585: “Ci sembra significativa la scelta militare come oggetto concreto di progetto umano fallito, tradizionalmente associato all’aggressione di imperi stranieri e alla mancanza di fiducia di Israele.”

¹¹⁴ In this connection, for example, Exod 15:3 in relation to God as unique and true warrior who crushes horse and rider (Exod 15:1, 4); In this sense, P. C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 274, writes that in Ps 33:16–17: “These ancient traditions are here established by the psalmist as a fundamental principle of human history.” In relation to the futility of the strength of a horse, cf. also Prov 21:31: “The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory belongs to YHWH” (*וְלִיהוָה הַתְּשׁוּעָה סוֹס מוּכָן לְיוֹם מִלְחָמָה*). Moreover, Ps 147:10–11 contrasts the inadequacy of the strength of the horse with the idea of God’s protection of those who fear him and hope in his goodness.

with final value. The presence of these infinitive constructs introduced by the preposition ל creates the syntactical connection with verse 18.

(2) Verse 18 requires a more detailed analysis which embraces not only the study of its vocabulary but also its function within the psalm as a whole.

a) In its turn, this verse displays a conspicuous caesura with the previous verses owing to the presence of the particle הַנְּהַ which opens the verse and serves to bring attention to what it is saying.¹¹⁵ However, if, on the one hand, this particle creates a caesura in the text, the statement introduced by הַנְּהַ has clear textual links both with what was stated in the verses immediately preceding, that is, verses 13–15, and with what was stated even earlier, in verse 8. These links with verses 13–15 can be traced in the image of God who watches and observes from on high. In verse 18, this is rendered by the expression עֵינֵי יְהוָה אֶל-יִרְאַיִי, “the eye of YHWH is on those who fear him”. The second part of this expression displays a textual link with verse 8 by means of the verb יִרָא.

b) If we analyse verse 18, and, in particular, the idea that the eye of YHWH rests on “those who hope in his goodness” (לְמַנְחָלִים לְחֶסֶדֹו), we observe that, here too, there are points of contact with other verses of the psalm. In fact, the substantive חֶסֶד occurs also in verses 5 and 22, and, in particular, in the latter, it is found along with the verb יִהַל *pi*. “to have trust, wait for”, as already in verse 18.

c) In the light of this lexical picture, it seems appropriate to highlight the particular use of the terms employed by the psalmist and their links with the other verses in order to have a better understanding of the hermeneutical framework within which the psalmist is delineating his theological thought and, in particular, verses 18–19. Excluding the particle הַנְּהַ, which introduces the whole statement, verse 18 is constructed in a parallel way so as to form a chiasm in which the expression עֵינֵי יְהוָה corresponds to לְחֶסֶדֹו, and the expression אֶל-יִרְאַיִי to לְמַנְחָלִים. Such a construction allows us to ask: what is the relationship of these terms which coincide in the text? Why does the psalmist associate them? What is the message he wishes to communicate? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to highlight the specific message of verse 18, in particular its differences from 13–14 (section d). In a second stage, it will be necessary to enquire into the terminology used (sections e-h).

d) While God’s gaze seems to rest on all the inhabitants of the earth – and this is what is expressed in verse 13 with the triple repetition of the verbs which render the action of his observing –, here, in verse 18, it would seem that this action is focused particularly on two

¹¹⁵ For the functions of הַנְּהַ, see e.g. P. JOÜON, T. MURAOKA, *A Grammar of the Biblical Hebrew*, § 164a; B.T. ARNOLD, J.H. CHOI, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 157–158.

categories of people: “those who fear him” (יִרְאֵיו) and “those who hope in his goodness” (מִיִּתְקַלִּים (לְחֶסֶד)). In fact, by placing the attention on the action of God who observes from heaven, verses 13–15 are trying once again to underline the lordship and the presence of God who, although on high in his dwelling, observes and understands the works of the men whose hearts he himself has fashioned. In verse 18, in describing this action, the psalmist seems to take a step forward again. The action of seeing is transformed by the pregnant presence which governs the whole of reality in a kind of attitude that is particularly favourable towards those who fear him and put their trust in his חֶסֶד. This is what is confirmed in verse 19 which expresses the purpose of the presence of the eye of YHWH: לְהַצִּיל מִמָּוֶת נַפְשָׁם וּלְחַיּוֹתָם בְּרָעָב “to deliver their soul from death and to keep them alive in time of famine”. That is: once God “understands their works” (verse 15), he directs this gaze of his upon those whose fear of him he has seen and their trust in his mercy. Thus, observing and understanding all their works, YHWH makes another distinction, that is, he distinguishes between those on whom he rests his eye and all the others. In this sense, “the eye of God” is revealed as an image which speaks of the disposition of YHWH who saves,¹¹⁶ who guarantees a particular protection in time of misfortune for those who fear him and hope in his חֶסֶד.¹¹⁷

e) God’s eye is an image employed elsewhere in the psalter. When used in a positive way, it always manifests this sense of YHWH’s particular closeness to those on whom his eye rests.

– This is the sense, for example, of Ps 32:8, 10 in which God guarantees that he will be the guide and counsellor of his faithful one to show him the paths he must follow (verse 8: אֵינִי עֹשֶׂה לְעֵינַי, “I will counsel you, my eye [is] on you”. In verse 10, the same psalm says: וְהִבֹּטְתָם בִּיהִנֵּהוּ חֶסֶד, “the one who trusts in him he will surround with his חֶסֶד”.

– Ps 34:16, proclaims that the eye of God is on the just, he will hear their cry (עֵינַי יְהִנֵּהוּ אֱלֹהִים), by contrast with what will happen to the wicked whose memory he will even blot out.

In the light of these occurrences, one can claim that, when used in a positive sense, the eye of YHWH rests on categories of people who obey God’s requests. In our text, that would mean fearing him and trusting in his חֶסֶד which, as we said in connection with the chiasmic structure of the verse, would seem to coincide as if they were the two facets of the same reality. In other

¹¹⁶ For a similar reading, cf. D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 117: “To be under the eye of God is to be saved.”

¹¹⁷ In this sense, cf. also Ps 101:6. Concerning the gaze of God which rests on those who fear him, P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 274 writes that God “sees those that ‘fear him’ (or ‘stand in awe of him’) and that depends on his covenant characteristic of lovingkindness (חֶסֶד: v 18b); and seeing, he naturally responds to their submission and commitment to him in providing the might and defence that they require.”

words, if, previously, God understands through observation the value of what happens on the earth and so the intention which is behind all the works of men, here, his gaze is closely bound up with the concept of salvation. That is why it rests on those who fear him, that is, on those who acknowledge him as the truly powerful God who is able to obtain salvation.¹¹⁸

f) As previously argued, the verb יָרָא expresses an attitude of reverence and, in some ways, of recognition of and submission to God, particularly where he manifests himself by intervening in a powerful and extraordinary way.¹¹⁹ In the Hebrew Bible, this attitude is connected both with Israel and, more generally, with the foreign nations in texts such as Jonah. As we read in verses 8–9 of our psalm, the call to fear God and to tremble before him is addressed to all the inhabitants of the earth. This call is motivated precisely by the powerful aspect which he displays in all the work of creation of which he is the maker. This work of creation is presented as sign of the power of YHWH who creates by his word and to whom everything is subject. In fact, just as he is at the origin of all life, it is he too who guarantees its existence. To be exact, he is the only one who is able to “deliver from death and keep alive in time of famine”. In other words, since the creation is that reality in which God manifests himself in a particular way, at least according to verses 6–9, the addressees of verse 8 are all those who can recognise God through his creation. Called on to fear God, they will be guaranteed his יְשׁוּעָה which they will not wait for in vain.

g) In verse 18, the idea of “fearing” is completed by that expressed by the verb יָחַל *pi.* In fact, God’s protection, which is made explicit in verse 19, is guaranteed to those who fear him and hope in his יְשׁוּעָה. The verb יָחַל *pi.* can be found in both theological and secular contexts in which it expresses some kind of expectation (e.g. Job 13:5).¹²⁰ Its semantic spectrum also includes a kind of hope which, in the theological context, is reposed especially in a liberating and salvific intervention by God. In this sense, hoping in YHWH is a typical characteristic of the pious Israelite who addresses himself with faith to God, for example, in time of trouble or misfortune (e.g. Ps 38:16; 69:4). Furthermore, the verb is also used in expressions which are exhortations to hope in YHWH (e.g. Ps 31:25; 42:6), and, sometimes, it is employed also in expressions which are basically a promise. In our case, with the verb יָחַל *pi.*, this sense of expectation and hope clearly refers to YHWH and, specifically, to his יְשׁוּעָה. The only time in which the verb יָחַל occurs with יְשׁוּעָה is in Ps 147:11. Here, it says that God is pleased with those who fear him and

¹¹⁸ In this connection, A. DEISSLER, “Der anthologische Charakter des Psalmes 33 (32)”, 254, writes that the main idea expressed in verses 16–19 consists in the conviction that whoever wants to save himself is deceiving himself because help comes only from the Lord.

¹¹⁹ See the first chapter of this monograph, especially the exegesis of Jonah 1:16.

¹²⁰ For more details, see C. WESTERMANN, art. “יָחַל *yhl pi./hi.* to wait”, in particular, 706–707.

hope in his קָדֹשׁ ($\text{רוּצֵה יְהוָה אֶת־יִרְאֵי אֶת־הַמַּיְחֵלִים לְקָדֹשׁ}$). Although the vocabulary is almost identical to that of Ps 33:18, the context of this expression, in particular verses 12–13, reveals that YHWH's pleasure rests on those in Jerusalem who hope in his kindness. In this connection, we observe that, by contrast with Ps 147:11, in Ps 33:18–19, God's action consists, on the one hand, precisely in an act of liberation and salvation, something which is not said explicitly in Psalm 147, on the other hand, it is addressed to all those who hope in his קָדֹשׁ , regardless of their belonging or not to the people of Israel.

h) In taking up this term, Psalm 33 seems to be insisting precisely on the concept of קָדֹשׁ . If that is true, since it occurs in relation not only to Israel but to all the other nations and inhabitants of the earth, it is a concept which can be grasped also by the inhabitants of the earth who fear YHWH and who repose their hope in his kindness and it can be poured out on them. Thus, the concept of fear and hope in YHWH's קָדֹשׁ are two concepts that seem to go beyond the boundaries of Israel alone and embrace a much larger horizon. If all the inhabitants of the earth are called on and so can fear YHWH, this is because, as our psalm suggests, his power and his divine presence are visibly engraved in everything that has been created on earth through his word and his faithfulness. If that is true in relation to the possibility of recognising the powerful presence of YHWH in the creation, we ask what hoping in his קָדֹשׁ consists of. As has been said, the concept of קָדֹשׁ , comes up three times in our psalm, in verses 5, 18 and 22. The first occurrence is in the section which introduces the creative work of God, the material features of which are described particularly in verses 6–7. In this connection, it would seem that קָדֹשׁ is being included among those characteristic aspects which are basic to the “nature” of God. In fact, קָדֹשׁ is mentioned in the verses in which he is described, as if to intend to lay the foundations for a knowledge of this God, how and by virtue of what he acts. Thus, among the characteristic traits of YHWH are mentioned the uprightness of his word, the faithfulness of his work, his love for justice and right, and, almost as the culmination of all, his קָדֹשׁ is that reality which belongs to God and of which the whole earth is full (verses 4–5). In verse 5, therefore, קָדֹשׁ seems to be being presented as that aspect of God to which the whole earth created by him is inseparably bound. In this sense, YHWH, from whom everything has its origin, and his קָדֹשׁ which fills all the earth, are the two poles of the whole of earthly life. In this sense, there is no distance between YHWH and his קָדֹשׁ : everything that has its origin in him is filled with this unifying principle which makes the earth the very place of his presence through his קָדֹשׁ .

However, if the earth is full of this קָדֹשׁ , what does it mean to hope in it? As has been said, for the pious Israelite, hoping in God means waiting for his decisive intervention of liberation and salvation. Even if our psalm is not dealing with Israel alone, the concept of קָדֹשׁ is placed in

relation to YHWH and, in particular, to his salvific intervention with regard to death and famine, that is, the two experiences which put at risk the very safety of life.¹²¹ Thus, the דָּוָה of God manifests his presence and also his ability, proper to him alone, to tear away from death. That דָּוָה which manifests the very presence of YHWH over all the earth is also that quality of God in which all life can hope in order to be freed from death.¹²² The verb יָהַל *pi.*, therefore, includes that aspect of active participation on the part of the one who wishes to find salvation and protection. Actually, the fact that the whole earth is full of the דָּוָה of God, as affirmed in verse 5, is not sufficient *tout court* for the salvation of life. In order that the latter can be made real in the life of each individual, it is necessary for there to be an expectation, an active hope on the part of the one who wishes to receive it. In conclusion, this aspect of hope and trust in the דָּוָה of YHWH is combined with and, in fact, cannot exclude fearing him. Indeed, fearing him is not something to be considered separate from the process of salvation. Fearing YHWH means recognising in him the only source from which everything takes its life and, therefore, the only one to whom to commit one's own existence, which is always subject to the danger of death and famine.

(3) As has been said, the divine דָּוָה manifests itself in two types of action mentioned in verse 19. In order to understand the specific message of this verse better, we have to take its vocabulary into consideration.

a) The verb נָצַל in the *niph'al* means “to be saved” and, sometimes, has a reflexive sense “save oneself” (as, for example, in verse 16 and in Deut 23:16; Hab 2:9); in the *hiph'il*, it means to “free, save, deliver” from any kind of constraint.¹²³ With reference to God, the verb נָצַל *hi.* is attested, in the Exodus traditions (e.g. Exod 3:8; 6:6); on the other hand, it carries, more generally, the meaning of “salvation, liberation”. It is not a precise technical term but expresses one of the deepest convictions in the theology of the Hebrew Bible: YHWH frees, saves from oppression, disaster and death. That is also what is implied in our psalm. In fact, the verb נָצַל appears also in verse 16 in relation to the warrior. The use of the verb נָצַל in connection with both the warrior and God can only give rise to a comparison of the action of the one with that of the other.¹²⁴ In verse 16, the verb is in the *niph'al* and accompanied by the negation. In this

¹²¹ According to P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 275, “the deliverance is not from the terminal disaster which face a living person, but into a fullness of life in relationship with God”.

¹²² Hence, in the light of verse 18, the idea that the earth is full of YHWH's דָּוָה , i.e. his care and commitments towards humans (see H. SPIECKERMANN, *Heilsgegenwart*, 290), takes a concrete shape.

¹²³ For further details, see e.g. U. BERGMANN, art. “ נָצַל *hi. nsl* to rescue”, 967–968.

¹²⁴ For a similar idea, cf. D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 117: “The negative passive Niph'al, נָצַל (v. 16) is now transformed into an active Hiphil, נָצַל (v. 19). [...] Deliverance is now more than a matter of victory in battle obtained by brute strength; Yahweh delivers from death itself and, beyond this, positively provides life.”

sense, it is being used to express the inadequacy of physical strength which is not sufficient for the warrior to save himself. In verse 19, as has been said, the verb is used in the *hiph 'il* infinitive construct with a final value “in order to free, in order to save”. Here, it is used without negation, the subject is YHWH and the action is carried out on behalf of third parties. It follows, therefore, that the result of this action is different. For the warrior, it is disastrous but, when referred to YHWH, the salvific action is not in question; rather, its positive outcome is presented as a certainty. Moreover, we observe that, in verse 19, the verb is accompanied by the direct object נַפְשָׁם (“their lives”) and by the complement of separation or distance expressed by the syntagma מִמָּוֶת (“from death”).¹²⁵

b) When attributed to God, the verb נָצַל often expresses the expectation, of Israel to be freed from any type of oppression or disaster (e.g. Exod 3:8, 22; Judg 6:9; Ps 79:9; 106:43). In our text, however, what is astounding is that this verb is not recording the expectation of Israel nor is the salvific action directed, as one would imagine, at Israel *tout court*. Rather, God directs this action at “all those who fear him” and “all those who hope/trust in his mercy”. This provides further explanation for the call in verse 8 to all the inhabitants of the earth to fear him and tremble before him. That is, he who created all things by his word and his command is also the one who has the power to save life, the נַפְשָׁם , from death. It is interesting to note that here the term is indicating once more that his act of liberation and salvation is directed at “their lives” (נַפְשָׁם). In this sense, the term נַפְשָׁם bears a neutral connotation and is contrasted with the death mentioned in the same stich as if to include the whole of humanity without distinction between these two extremes. God frees every life from death, that same life which, as the psalm emphasises several times, finds its origin in YHWH. In this way, the psalm seems to be suggesting that this salvation is no longer or not only the prerogative of the people of the covenant, whose safety God promised to protect *ab origine*, but, this time, the deciding factor between people seems to be something else altogether: fearing him and hoping in his רַחֲמָיו .¹²⁶ In our psalm, this seems to be the crucial point of the experience through which man, any man, has to pass in order to obtain protection and salvation from YHWH.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ These formulations are also present in other texts of the OT such as Josh 2:13; Ps 56:14 (where the action of salvation is performed by God); Prov 10:2; 11:4 (in which the subject that saves is justice, צְדָקָה).

¹²⁶ For a different idea, cf., among others, L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 586, for whom the recipient of this salvation is clearly Israel.

¹²⁷ P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1-50*, 274, goes in the same direction. However, by interpreting Psalm 33 and the idea of רַחֲמָיו against the background of the covenant, he implicitly identifies the persons protected by God with the Israelites.

Verses 20–22

Thus, and also in the light of what is stated in verses 5–9, fearing YHWH and hoping in the divine דָּוָה includes recognising him, on the one hand, as creator of everything, on the other, as the one on whom all life really depends and, therefore, as the one to whom to entrust all hope for one's own existence. This would seem to be confirmed by the final verses of the psalm which close the hymn with a kind of invocation. From the stylistic point of view, it is possible to notice the change of tone immediately. In fact, these verses form a small, separate subsection. That emerges from the fact that there is a change of subject, that is, the speaker begins to talk with reference to a “we” of whom he makes himself the spokesman. To explain verses 20–22, we shall proceed in five steps.

(1) In verse 20, although the verb (הָכַח pi.) is no longer the same, and the term דָּוָה no longer appears, the idea already present in verse 18 is taken up again: waiting for, hoping in YHWH. Furthermore, the presence of the term שָׁמַח , which is the subject of this hope, creates a textual link with what was stated in verse 19, namely: “God frees souls from death”.¹²⁸ Thus, the speaker of verses 20–22 is creating a kind of relation between the group of which he is making himself the spokesman and those whom YHWH saves from death, precisely on account of the hope which they repose in him. But in what kind of relation are the “we” of the group in verses 20–22 and “those who fear and hope in the דָּוָה of YHWH”? Is the speaker making an identification or inclusion of this group with those who hope in YHWH? If the response to this is positive, are we dealing with Israel¹²⁹ or else does the “we” refer to a collective subject whose boundaries go beyond Israel? In order to be able to answer such questions, it seems appropriate to analyse these verses in the light of their context also. To do that, it is indispensable to consider the terminology employed and to highlight to what degree verses 20–22 are woven together thematically and stylistically with the previous text. Along these lines, we shall ask in particular about the thematic links of these verses with the rest of the psalm and if, working from these, we can arrive at some conclusions which will allow us to make a better identification of this group. Until now, this passage, which seems to us of fundamental importance, has not been given due attention in the commentaries and studies on Psalm 33.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ In this connection, we share the opinion of N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 104: “Without the disclosure in vv. 16–18 that people are saved solely by hope in YHWH’s steadfast love, the confession about hoping in YHWH’s steadfast love in vv. 20–22 would be unthinkable”.

¹²⁹ Thus P.C. CRAIGIE, *Psalms 1–50*, 275, “the concluding lines contain introspective reflection, in which the worshipers reflect upon the personal implication of their praise.” For a similar exegesis, see also E. ZENGER, “Psalm 33. Lobgesang auf JHWHs Macht und Güte”, 210.

¹³⁰ See e.g. L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL, C. CARNITI, *I Salmi*, I, 580.586.

(2) What seems clear is that verses 20–22 form a sort of inclusion with verses 1–3. Here, we find something of a response to the initial call to exult in and praise YHWH.¹³¹ In fact, the verbs in verses 1–3 emphasise the call to his praise and proclamation even through the sound of the harp and song, thus stressing the aspect of joy which these actions ought to bring with them. This *motif* of joy is reprised in the section of verses 20–22 with the verb שמח, “rejoice” which summarises in itself all the elements belonging to exultation present in the first three verses which refer to the praise of God through song and musical instruments.¹³²

(3) In particular, this aspect of joy, which is taken up again in verses 20–22, is found between two expressions through which the group which is present in these verses expresses its faith in YHWH and calls on his הַשֵּׁם: on the one hand, it is preceded by the idea of “hoping” in verse 20a, where the verb חכה *pi.* appears which, as has been said, confirms the attitude of a trustful waiting for him. On the other hand, the verb שמח is found in a connection of dependence on the verb בטח, “trust”, through the particle כי which expresses a relation of causality.¹³³ That is, the joy of this group – to which the expression “our heart” (לִבֵּנוּ) alludes – is precisely the result of its trusting in “his holy name”.¹³⁴ When the verb בטח, which is frequently attested in the psalter, refers to YHWH, it designates an attitude of sure faith which includes also the aspect of the hope which the believer reposes in him, even when the individual finds himself confronted with situations of danger and uncertainty (e.g. Ps 22:5–6; 56:4–5). Moreover, in theological contexts, the verb בטח is employed as a synonym of אמן *hi.* (Ps 78:22).¹³⁵ In our text, this verb refers to believing as an act of faith in YHWH¹³⁶ who, in the text, is mentioned through the syntagma “his holy name”. Reference to the name of God is typical of the post-Exilic literature and, in some texts, is the symbol of his ineffable presence with which the believer is placed in a relation of dialogue.¹³⁷ In this way, the syntagma “his holy name” replaces the person of God and all

¹³¹ For this opinion, see also N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 106.

¹³² In this connection, cf. Gen 31:27 where the root of שמח is linked with the song (שיר) and other musical instruments such as the tambourine (תוף) and the harp (כנור); cf. also Ps 9:3 where שמח is placed in parallel with another verb belonging to the semantic field of music, which concerns “singing, making music” (זמר).

¹³³ Thus, N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 96.

¹³⁴ In this connection, the heart in the Bible indicates the seat of the desires and feelings but also of the decisions and of the will. The use of the substantive in connection with the verb שמח and the verb בטח in Ps 33:21 designates believing as a conscious act of the will, in this case exercised by the group. It is from this decision that the joy of their heart springs. Concerning the use and the anthropological reality of לב in the OT, cf. e.g. H.W. WOLFF, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, especially 53.

¹³⁵ In non-theological contexts, the two verbs are used in parallel in Mic 7:5. For more details, see E. GERSTENBERGER, art. “בטח *bṭḥ* to trust”, *TLOT*, 325–330, spec. 327–329.

¹³⁶ In Ps 33:21, the verb בטח refers to the reliability and trustworthiness of God. Cf., in this connection, H.W. WOLFF, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 153. On the thematic level, this idea is taking up that of בְּאֵמֶנֶת (verse 4): “all his works [are performed] in faithfulness”.

¹³⁷ In this connection, cf. R.J. TOURNAY, *Seeing and Hearing God in the Psalms*, 108–109.

the qualities attributed to him.¹³⁸ We note that, in making a frame for the central statement represented by verse 21a, in addition to the verbs *חכה pi.* and *בטח*, there is another verb which expresses the relation of faith between the “we” of this subsection and YHWH: the verb *יחל pi.* in verse 22b, in relation to the divine *יְהוָה*, already found together in verse 18.

(4) From the verbs employed, therefore, it is clear that the “we” of the group in these verses is distinguished by a faith in YHWH which is expectation, hope, trust. This type of faith produces joy and leaves room for the proclamation which is founded on two aspects: the recognition that YHWH is their “help and shield” (verse 20b) and the believing “in his holy name” (verse 21b).¹³⁹ This proclamation gives rise to the invocation of God’s *יְהוָה* in which all trust is reposed.¹⁴⁰ In this connection, as has been said, one notes that verse 22 is taking up the terms already present in verse 18, though creating a kind of paraphrase which allows for the extension of the idea previously stated with the aim of emphasising its importance. To be precise, the terms taken up again are the verb *יחל pi.* and the substantive *יְהוָה* which, in verses 22, by contrast with verse 18, are distributed across two stichs. In this connection, one can identify a literary procedure which is called “break-up of a composite phrase”.¹⁴¹

– Actually, in verse 22a, the *יְהוָה* of God is related to another element already present in verse 18, *עַיִן יְהוָה*, “the eye of YHWH”. In particular, in verse 22, the speaker invokes the *יְהוָה* of God on the group in whose name he is speaking, taking up what was said in verse 18 where it is stated that the eye of God rests on those who fear him and hope in his *יְהוָה*. That is, in verse 22, the group is recognised as being among those who hope in his *יְהוָה* who, as affirmed in verses 18–19, procure salvation and protection.

– This is confirmed in verse 22b by the expression which concludes the psalm, *פֶּאֶשָׁר יִחְלְנוּ לָךְ*. This constitutes a further recapitulation of the adhering to faith in YHWH on the part of the group present in verses 20–22. In this sense, the syntagma *יִחְלְנוּ לָךְ* concentrates in itself all the concepts expressed with regard to adhering to God and to the contents of the faith professed by the group.

¹³⁸ In this connection, cf. B. RENAUD, « *Proche est ton Nom* », 16.

¹³⁹ In this connection, D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 118 writes: “The people not only praise, fear, and wait for Yahweh; they totally rely on Yahweh’s holy name, in contrast to the wicked who rely on their own plans and strengths.” However, the wicked are not mentioned in Psalm 33.

¹⁴⁰ In connection with the proclamation of God as “help and shield”, we observe that the terminology refers to military vocabulary. This occurs also in verses 16–17 which refer to the army and the horse. The use of such vocabulary in the respective verses serves to emphasise the contrast which emerges between the emptiness of human power and the real substance of the power of YHWH. Cf. also E. ZENGER, “Psalm 33. Lobgesang auf JHWHs Macht und Güte”, 210.

¹⁴¹ For this element of Hebrew Poetry, see W.G.E. WATSON, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, 328–332.

(5) The identification of the group in verses 20–22 with those who hope in the יְהוָה of YHWH allows us to state that it is not to be identified with Israel alone. In fact, all the previous statements taken up again by verses 20–22 refer to a universal context, that is, to all those people who, regardless of their ethnicity, decide to fear YHWH and to hope in his יְהוָה . In verses 20–22, these statements find their concrete form in the faith of this group: it is they who have responded to the call to hymn and praise YHWH and have welcomed the call to acknowledge in him and his יְהוָה the one on whom all hope reposes. Thus, they obtain joy and the certainty of complete salvation and protection. Working from that, the last three verses of the psalm, which constitute the response and the actualisation of what was called for in verses 1–3 because of the joyous proclamation with which the psalm concludes,¹⁴² lead inevitably to the identification of the “just” and “right” of the first verses with the “we” of the believing group of verses 20–22.¹⁴³ In this way, the concepts of “justice” and “uprightness” are now being realised in the attitude of praising God, joyfully proclaiming faith in him and hope in his יְהוָה . In particular, in the light of verses 8 and 12, it is easy to understand that Psalm 33 is making an important transition: these attitudes no longer belong to Israel alone but also concern the whole of that part of humanity which adheres to YHWH as the one in whom to believe and from whom to await, in trust, salvation and protection for one’s own life. It could be argued that this transition is the reason why Psalm 33 is presented as a “new song”.¹⁴⁴

b) The text of the psalm according to the LXX

α) Introductory remarks

In this section, we intend to analyse the principal variants of the LXX text with regard to Psalm 33. This seems appropriate if we are to understand better how the LXX received and sometimes modified the text. In this sense, we shall try to understand if and in what way the Greek variants add new elements or different nuances of meaning to the Hebrew text, and if these have their

¹⁴² For this idea cf., also, D. JACOBSON, “Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm”, 117: “Verses 20–22 respond to the opening call in a manner specifically appropriate to Ps 33” ; J.-L. VESCO, *Le Psautier de David traduit et commenté*, I, 314: “Le psaume se termine sur un aveu de besoin de secours (v. 20), sur une protestation de confiance (v. 21) et sur un désir de nouvelle expérience de l’amour divin (v. 22). Ces trois derniers versets répondent aux trois premiers. Seize versets ont justifié le passage de l’invitatoire à la réponse.”

¹⁴³ See also N. LOHFINK, “The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33”, 106: “We must identify the ‘we’ speaking in the conclusion in vv. 20–22 with the ‘righteous’ who at the beginning of the psalm are called to offer a hymn of praise – even though the word “righteous/righteousness” is not taken up again at the end.”

¹⁴⁴ For this idea, see R. TOMES, “Sing to the Lord a New Song”, 117.

raison d'être in the theological environment in which the LXX was produced.¹⁴⁵ In fact, in general, we can affirm that, in addition to being an important witness for a better knowledge of the biblical texts in Hebrew, Latin and the other ancient languages, the text of the LXX has been reassessed for its specific characteristics which make of it not a mere “isomorph” of the Hebrew text¹⁴⁶ but rather a translation which presents distinctive interpretative and hermeneutical categories on the lexical, stylistic and theological levels.¹⁴⁷ In this sense, what appears clear in the case of Psalm 33 is that, where it presents notable variants, the LXX is a sort of witness of a theological rereading of the Hebrew text.

In the following sections, we shall provide some general information about the LXX translation of the Book of the Psalter. We shall then consider the most significant variants of the Greek text of Psalm 33 (= Psalm 32^{LXX}), attempting to understand their terminological and theological significance.

β) The LXX Psalter

We are not going to present here a systematic *status quaestionis* on the dating of the LXX psalter, its place of origin and the characteristics of its translation. We can say, however, that the majority of students today maintain that the Greek psalter was translated around the first half of the second century B.C.¹⁴⁸ As for the place of composition, scholars are still divided between those who place the translation in Palestine, above all, for the presumed closeness between the Greek psalter and the *kaigé* version, and those who claim that its *milieu* could have been Egyptian because the Psalms employ a vocabulary typical of an Egyptian environment.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Although, in general, the LXX text of the Psalms presents a translation that is faithful to the Hebrew text with regard to the style and to use of Greek vocabulary corresponding to the Hebrew, it is not lacking in elements of originality owing to the creativity and theological convictions of the translator or the translators. For a detailed study of this question, see e.g. J.K. AITKEN, “Psalms”, 325–326; E. BONS, R. BRUCKER, “Psalmoi / Das Buch der Psalmen”, 343–349.

¹⁴⁶ A. PIETERSMA, “Exegesis in the Septuagint: Possibilities and Limits”,

For a recent criticism of this model, see J. JOOSTEN, “Reflections on the ‘Interlinear Paradigm’ in Septuagintal Studies”, *passim*.

¹⁴⁷ For the innovative aspects of the Greek psalter, cf. the examples cited by E. BONS, “Der Septuaginta-Psalter – Übersetzung, Interpretation, Korrektur”, 13–27.

¹⁴⁸ See e.g. G. DORIVAL, M. HARL, O. MUNNICH, *La Bible grecque des Septante*, 93; J.K. AITKEN, “Jewish Worship amid Greeks”, 51; ID., “Psalms”, 321–323.

¹⁴⁹ For further details, cf. J.K. AITKEN, “Jewish Worship amid Greeks”, 55–70. As for the vocabulary of the Greek psalter, an important study has been carried out by Orsolina Montevicchi who has observed, on several occasions, the closeness of the Greek translation of the psalter to the papyri of the Ptolemaic period. Cf. O. MONTEVECCHI, “*Quaedam de graecitate psalmorum cum papyris comparata*”, 97–120 (first published in 1951).

γ) Exegetical observations

In this paragraph, we record the most significant elements of the LXX text of Psalm 33(32) without going over again the elements dealt with in relation to the MT in the previous sections.

Verse 5

After calling on the just to praise God with songs and instruments because of his word which is “right” and his work which is “faithful” (verses 1–4), verse 5 continues:

5a	אֱהֵב דָּקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט	ἀγαπᾷ ἐλεημοσύνην καὶ κρίσιν	He loves righteousness (LXX: <i>compassion</i>) and justice, the earth is full of the goodness of YHWH (LXX: <i>of the mercy of the Lord</i>).
b	קָדַח יְהוָה מִלְּאֵה הָאָרֶץ	τοῦ ἐλέους κυρίου πλήρης ἡ γῆ	

If we compare the two texts, two interesting elements emerge in this verse:

(1) In the first stich, the MT states that God loves דָּקָה, that is, “justice”, a term which the LXX translates with ἐλεημοσύνη, “compassion”.¹⁵⁰

a) From a comparison between the MT and the LXX, it is clear that the translation of דָּקָה most attested in the LXX and, in particular, in the psalter would normally have as its equivalent the Greek term δικαιοσύνη, “justice” (e.g. Ps 5:9; 30:2; 35:7, 11^{LXX}). The term ἐλεημοσύνη, on the other hand, is employed as a translation of the Hebrew substantive דָּקָה only around seven times (Deut 6:25; 24:13; Ps 23:5; 103:6; Isa 1:27; 28:17; 59:16).¹⁵¹ We can explain this translation starting out from the fact that, in late biblical Hebrew, the term דָּקָה undergoes a semantic evolution through which the meaning of “justice” is replaced by that of “compassion”¹⁵².

b) In this connection, one notes that in each of these texts just mentioned, the Greek text carries a message that is slightly different from that of the Hebrew text:

– According to Deut 6:25, the דָּקָה of Israel which the LXX renders with ἐλεημοσύνη “compassion”, consists in “observing and practising all the commandments prescribed by God”, something that guarantees the good and survival of Israel (verse 24), in Greek, the ἐλεημοσύνη, that is, “the compassion” of God towards his people.

¹⁵⁰ For the LXX use of the noun, see e.g. T. MURAOKA, *A Greek-English Lexicon of Septuagint*, 223.

¹⁵¹ The substantive ἐλεημοσύνη is not very frequent in the LXX. The remaining times, it usually translates the Hebrew substantive דָּקָה, above all, in the book of Proverbs (e.g. Prov 3:3; 14:22; 19:22) and once in Gen 47:29. See also C. DOGNIÉZ, M. HARL, *Le Deutéronome*, 158.

¹⁵² See Ges¹⁸, 1104.

- In Deut 24:13, restoring to a poor man the pledge he has given obtains for a man $\eta\eta\tau\tau\zeta$ in the sight of God, in Greek, “compassion”: “that will be an act of justice deserving the mercy of God”¹⁵³.
- In Ps 23:5^{LXX}, the author goes still further: instead of citing a particular act connected with compassion, and not making any allusion to the Law and its precepts, he specifies that the blessing and compassion of the Lord will be extended to the one who is “innocent of hands and pure of heart, who does not boast and does not swear deceitfully” (verse 4).
- In Psalm 103 (102^{LXX}), a hymn of thanksgiving to God for his kindness, $\eta\eta\tau\tau\zeta$ is once again attributed to God. However, the text differs slightly. In fact, in verse 6, the speaker thanks God because, among other things, “he has done acts of $\eta\eta\tau\tau\zeta$ ” which are placed in parallel with “deeds of judgement” (מִיִּשְׁפָּטִים) towards all the oppressed (מִיִּשְׁפָּטִים). The LXX translates this verse as follows: *ποιῶν ἐλεημοσύνας ὁ κύριος καὶ κρίμα πᾶσι τοῖς ἀδικουμένοις*.
- *Mutatis mutandis*, Isa 1:27 goes in the same direction. Here it says that Zion will be redeemed by judgement (בְּשִׁפּוֹטַי ; LXX: *μετὰ γὰρ κρίματος*) and that the exiles will be saved by justice $\eta\eta\tau\tau\zeta$ (LXX: *μετὰ ἐλεημοσύνης*).
- The term ἐλεημοσύνη occurs in Isaiah on a further two occasions and always in a similar context: once, in Isa 28:17, where it speaks of God’s action in relation to Zion; here, “I will make judgement (בְּשִׁפּוֹטַי – LXX: *κρίσις*) the line, and justice ($\eta\eta\tau\tau\zeta$ – LXX: *ἡ δὲ ἐλεημοσύνη μου*¹⁵⁴) the plummet in order to eradicate falsehood and whatever shelters it”. Also, in Isa 59, where, in the face of a serious lack of justice and truth in the land and the absence of intervention by anyone, verse 16 says that, in carrying out his judgement, the arm of the Lord “brought them help”, establishing them “with $\eta\eta\tau\tau\zeta$ ” (LXX: *ἡμύνατο αὐτοὺς τῷ βραχίονι αὐτοῦ καὶ τῇ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐστηρίσατο*, “he defended them with his arm and established [the oppressed] with his mercy”).¹⁵⁵

c) From this analysis of those texts where the LXX translates the Hebrew term $\eta\eta\tau\tau\zeta$ with the Greek ἐλεημοσύνη, two factors emerge:

¹⁵³ C. DOGNIEZ, M. HARL, *Le Deutéronome*, 158 : “ce sera un acte de justice méritant la miséricorde de Dieu.”

¹⁵⁴ The LXX adds the pronoun in the genitive in order to explain that it is God who acts with ἐλεημοσύνη. For this feature of the LXX version of Isaiah, see M. VAN DER VORM-CROUGHS, *The Old Greek of Isaiah*, 34.

¹⁵⁵ Here again, there is a divergence between the MT and the LXX: in the MT, $\eta\eta\tau\tau\zeta$ supports the arm of God through which he brings help; in the LXX, in bringing help, God “supports with ἐλεημοσύνη”. For the explanation of the divergences between the MT and the LXX of Isa 59:16, see also I.L. SEELIGMANN, *The Septuagint Version of Isaiah and Cognate Studies*, 218.

– Firstly, one can observe that it is man who enjoys the divine ἐλεημοσύνη. In two texts, the compassion of God is promised to the man who lives in conformity with God’s expectations: in Deut 6:25, it is the one who observes the Law and all its implications in daily life; in Ps 23:5, it is the one who has “a pure heart, does not tell lies, gives to the poor and does not boast”. Thus, the Greek translator is interpreting the נִרְדַּף of the Hebrew text as ἐλεημοσύνη in order to carry the following idea: “knowing how to do good”, in the light of and in obedience to the law given by God, has as its result his kindness: this is explained as happiness and survival for the people and the individual.

– What is more striking is that, with reference to God, the term ἐλεημοσύνη (“compassion”) is translating the Hebrew term נִרְדַּף (“justice”) when the text is dealing with one of his acts of judgement proper, and, in particular, with an intervention aimed at helping those who are the victims of injustice (Ps 102:5^{LXX}). The LXX translation would thus seem to be suggesting that the justice of God is none other than an act of judgement which is nonetheless always directed at the good: in the final analysis, it is an act of “compassion” (ἐλεημοσύνη) towards men because the judgement of God in and of itself is none other than an act of salvation which he performs as a result of his “compassion” (cf. Isa 1:27). In fact, in Isa 59, the lack of justice (δικαιοσύνη) in the land and, so, also of a just man to intervene to re-establish it, leads God to clothe himself with justice (verse 17: δικαιοσύνη) and to carry out his judgement as an “intervention of help and compassion” (ἐλεημοσύνη) for his people. Therefore, as it says also in Isa 28:17, the compassion of God (ἐλεημοσύνη) is itself the instrument of judgement because it is directed to carrying out truth in the land where “whoever believes will not be ashamed (Isa 28:16^{LXX}).

d) In the light of these texts, we can draw the following conclusion about the translation ἀγαπᾷ ἐλεημοσύνην in Ps 32:5a^{LXX}: the translator is using the term ἐλεημοσύνη because he seems to have realised that, even if God’s justice requires a strong act of “judgement” (κρίσις), it is always an act of kindness and compassion. In this sense, God loves ἐλεημοσύνη and κρίσις because kindness cannot exist without judgement and there is no judgement which is not directed at ἐλεημοσύνη.

(2) The same root of the term ἐλεημοσύνη is employed in verse 5b. Here, the Greek translator returns to confirming the centrality of the mercy of God by using the substantive ἔλεος as his translation of רַחֲמֵי. As pointed out by other scholars,¹⁵⁶ the Hebrew term רַחֲמֵי has as its original meaning that of “kindness”, “goodness”, understood as the personal attitude of willing the good

¹⁵⁶ See e.g., J. JOOSTEN, “רַחֲמֵי ‘bienveillance’ et ἔλεος ‘pitié’”, 26; H. SPIECKERMANN, *Heilsgegenwart*, 290.

of the other. In this sense, the term is often used in the biblical texts in relation to God: he is the one who acts with kindness (רַחֵם). Now, if this is the principal meaning of רַחֵם, why did the Greek translator choose the term ἔλεος which, in itself, signifies “pity, compassion towards the misery of another”? The answer to this question can be reduced to three basic factors¹⁵⁷:

a) In the overwhelming majority of cases, the Greek Pentateuch, which was considered normative for the translation of the later texts, employs ἔλεος to translate רַחֵם, above all, to express the element of “condescension” which both terms contain (for example, in Num 14:19). However, this translation is not carried out in an indiscriminate way. In fact, when the proper sense of ἔλεος diverges from that of רַחֵם to the extent of becoming incompatible with it, the Greek translator uses other terms such as δικαιοσύνη, “justice” (e.g. Gen 20:13).

b) In the Twelve Prophets and in the Psalms, the Greek term in relation to רַחֵם – outside a covenant context – seems to designate “mercy” as a divine attitude that is certain, eternal and faithful (e.g. Ps 88:2^{LXX}).

c) In the Hebrew of the Hellenistic period, of the III/II century B.C., the term רַחֵם underwent a semantic evolution, becoming more of a divine attribute than a human quality, thus designating, on the one hand, God’s kindness in his dealings with his people and his creatures, on the other hand, acts of kindness towards the most poor (for example, Sir 7:33^A).

In the light of these observations, we can probably affirm that, more than just translating literally, the translator was performing an interpretation of the Hebrew text. In fact, if, on the one hand, the use of the term ἔλεος in relation to רַחֵם can be justified on the basis of the habitual use of the equation רַחֵם = ἔλεος in the LXX (above all, in translation texts later than those of the Pentateuch), on the other hand, it is necessary to observe that this translation confers on the Greek text a different nuance from that in the Hebrew text which uses רַחֵם, because it introduces a further element: that of mercy. Furthermore, as we have seen, the use of its derivative ἐλεημοσύνη for rendering the Hebrew substantive רַחֲמִים is not self-evident. In this context, using the terms ἔλεος and ἐλεημοσύνη, the Greek translator seems to be wishing to place the stress on the divine aspect of mercy which, above the others, permeates the whole of earthly existence in a lasting and stable way. However, the divine disposition of “mercy”, “compassion”, is accompanied by that of “judgement” (κρίσις), a pair found also elsewhere, for example, in Isa 1:27 and Ps 102:6^{LXX}.

¹⁵⁷ In the three following sections, some of the most important observations made by J. JOOSTEN, “רַחֵם ‘bienveillance’ et ἔλεος ‘pitié’”, 29–39, are adopted.

Verse 6a

In verse 6a, echoing the Genesis creation account, the psalmist states that “the heavens were made by the word of the Lord”.

6a	בְּדִבְרֵי יְהוָה שָׁמַיִם נִעֲשׂוּ	τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ κυρίου οἱ οὐρανοὶ ἐστερεώθησαν	By the word of YHWH the heavens were made (LXX: <i>were made firm</i>)
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Here, the Greek translator is rendering the Hebrew verb נִעֲשׂוּ not as usual, that is, with the equivalent Greek verb ποιέω, but with a verb which describes the divine action more specifically: the passive of στερεόω which means “to make firm”.¹⁵⁸ In the LXX, the verb στερεόω is used frequently in contexts where there is a description or praising of the creative action of God who, precisely, “makes firm, establishes”: “the world” (Ps 92:1^{LXX}); “the earth above the waters” (Ps 135:6^{LXX}); “the earth” (Isa 42:5; 44:24); “heaven” (Hos 13:4; Isa 45:12; 48:13). When it is used in this context, the verb στερεόω translates in particular the following Hebrew verbs: כּוּן, “fix” (Ps 93:1); נָטָה, “lay out” (Isa 45:12); פָּצַח *pi.*, “spread out” (Isa 48:13) and, more frequently, the verbal root רָקַע “spread out” (Ps 136:6; Isa 42:5; 44:24). In particular, this root appears in Gen 1:6 in relation to the creation of the firmament, in Hebrew עָרַב, which in the LXX is translated with the root of the same verb στερεόω, that is, with στερέωμα, “heavens” (Gen 1:6^{LXX}).¹⁵⁹ Thus, in his translation of Ps 32:6^{LXX}, the Greek translator employs the verb στερεόω very probably as a term which usually indicates and, at the same time, describes more specifically, God’s act in creating the universe.¹⁶⁰

Verse 7

In verse 7, the psalmist continues to describe the work of the creative power of God who:

7a	כָּנַס כַּנְדָּ מֵי הַיָּם	συνάγων ὡς ἀσκὸν ὕδατα θαλάσσης	[He, who] gathers the waters of the sea like a dam (LXX: <i>like a wineskin</i>),
b	נָתַן בְּאֲצָרוֹת תְּהוֹמוֹת	τιθεὶς ἐν θησαυροῖς ἀβύσσους	[who] puts the deeps in storehouses.

¹⁵⁸ For the use of this verb in the LXX, see e.g. T. MURAOKA, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 635.

¹⁵⁹ For this interpretation, see E. BONS, “Comment le Psaume 32^{LXX} parle-t-il de la création?”, 57; according to M. RÖSEL, *Übersetzung als Vollendung der Auslegung*, 36, this translation would be due to the fact that the Greek translator is taking up the term of Plato who employs the adjective στερεός “stable, firm” in contexts connected with the creation (e.g. *Theaet.* 31b; 43c).

¹⁶⁰ See also E. BONS, “Comment le Psaume 32^{LXX} parle-t-il de la création?”, 57.

In the first stich, we note that the Greek translator translates with ὡς ἄσκόν, “like a wineskin”, the expression דָּגַד, which, in itself, in Hebrew means “as in a dam/wall”. This variant takes on a particularly important value for our text because it actually constitutes a change of perspective concerning the conception underlying the text. In fact, the term דָּגַד, signifies “heap, dam, wall” and it occurs in Exod 15:8 where Moses, praising God for his powerful deeds, speaks of the crossing of the Red Sea, saying that: “the waves stood up like a dam” (cf. also Ps 78:13). The same term דָּגַד occurs to describe the crossing of the River Jordan by the Israelites in Josh 13:13, 16 where it is said that the waters stood up and stopped, forming “a single heap”. In the light of these details, it would seem that these texts are referring to the history of Israel and to the wonders performed by God at the Red Sea and the Jordan on behalf of his people.¹⁶¹ However, just as we have tried to demonstrate in the section devoted to the MT of Psalm 33, this idea is to be rejected because the link with the events of the Exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land are too weak, and that for two reasons:

- Read in its immediate context, rather than with the history of Israel, the verse has links with the account of the creation of the world through its references to the separation of the waters from the dry land. Actually, if we read the whole of verse 7^{MT}, the second part of the stich says: “[who] puts the deeps in storehouses” (נִתֵּן בְּאֵצְרוֹת תְּהוֹמוֹת). In this case, the text would be referring first to the Exodus and only afterwards to the creation. That would certainly be a strange way for the author to proceed.

- Instead of speaking of the waters standing up/rising (as in Exod 15:8: נִצַּב *ni.*; Josh 3:13, 16: עָמַד), through the use of the verb כָּנַס “gather”, Ps 33:7^{MT} would be alluding more clearly to the work of creation, referring more explicitly to the action of God who *gathers* (כָּנַס) the waters within their containers, that is, in a clearly defined space.

Returning to our text, Ps 32:7^{LXX} uses the term ἄσκός “wineskin”: “gathering *like a wineskin* the waters of the sea”. This difference in translation is probably due to the fact that the LXX translator had in front of him a non-vocalised text and read נֹאֵד, “wineskin”, instead of דָּגַד, “dam”. Without any reference to the history of Israel and complementing the *motif* of creation in the psalm, this translation would allow a glimpse of a more universal perspective in the text of the LXX.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ We note that in the corresponding passages, except in Ps 78:13 (where the translation ὡσεὶ ἄσκόν could be mistaken), the LXX never translates דָּגַד with ἄσκός. Rather, for Exod 15:8, it employs τεῖχος, “wall” and in Josh 3:16 πῆγμα, “solid heap”. In Josh 3:13, on the other hand, we have no Greek equivalent of דָּגַד.

¹⁶² See also E. BONS, “Comment le Psaume 32^{LXX} parle-t-il de la création?”, 62.

Verse 9

The “universalistic” tone of the Greek text of the psalm is confirmed also by verse 9:

9a	כִּי הוּא אָמַר	ὅτι αὐτὸς εἶπεν	For he spoke, and it came to be (LXX: <i>they came to be</i>),
b	וַיִּהְיֶה	καὶ ἐγενήθησαν	
c	הוּא צִוָּה	αὐτὸς ἐνετείλατο	he commanded, and it stood firm (LXX: <i>they were created</i>)
d	וַיַּעֲמֵד:	καὶ ἐκτίσθησαν	

In this verse, where there is a clear echo of the account of creation in Gen 1:3, 6, the Hebrew text, speaking of the creative work of God and of the power of his word, states: “For he spoke, and it came to be, he commanded, and it stood firm.” This statement, which seems to have a rather general character, takes on a more specific nature in the Greek text. In fact, instead of the third person singular of the verb הָיָה in the *wayyiqtol*, “it came to be”, the Greek text employs the third person plural of γίνομαι “they came to be”. The same thing happens in the following stich but with a further distinctive element: instead of the third person singular of the verb עָמַד, which means “rise, stand up”, the Greek employs the third person plural of the verb κτίζω, “they were created”¹⁶³, a verb which, in the LXX, has the particular meaning of “create”. Two elements emerge from this analysis:

(1) In the Greek text, the use of the third person plural creates a syntactico-grammatical link with the previous verse: object of God’s creation through his word are πάντες οἱ κατοικοῦντες τὴν οἰκουμένην, “all the inhabitants of the earth” (verse 8b).

(2) The verb κτίζω is not used elsewhere in the LXX to translate the Hebrew verb עָמַד, “rise, stand up”, but it is found in Ps 88:13^{LXX}; 103:30^{LXX} – creational contexts – where, however, κτίζω is translating the Hebrew verb בָּרָא.¹⁶⁴ As for the Greek text of our psalm, verse 9 seems to be issuing a clearer call to all the inhabitants of the earth to fear God because *all*, Israelites and non-Israelites, are the work of his creation. In this sense, all will also be able to enjoy his protection in time of trouble (see verse 19).

Verse 10

10a	הֲנֵה הִפְיֵר עֲצַת-גּוֹיִם	κύριος διασκεδάσει βουλὰς ἐθνῶν	YHWH thwarts the plan of nations, frustrates the counsels of peoples.
b	הֲנִיא מִחֻשְׁבוֹת עַמִּים:	ἀθετεῖ δὲ λογισμοὺς λαῶν	

¹⁶³ For this meaning of the verb in the LXX, cf. T. MURAOKA, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 417.

¹⁶⁴ For this exegesis, see also E. BONS, “Comment le Psaume 32^{LXX} parle-t-il de la création?”, 63.

		καὶ ἀθετεῖ βουλὰς ἀρχόντων	<i>And frustrates the plans of the rulers</i>
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The first two stichs of verse 10, both in Hebrew and in Greek, turn out to be parallel, and the psalmist uses synonyms to render the same concept: (a) “God destroys the plan [LXX: the plans¹⁶⁵] of the nations (b) and frustrates [LXX: brings to nought] the counsels of the peoples”. In its turn, this verse is constructed chiasmatically with the following verse so as to form an antithesis with it: in the face of the plans of the nations and of the peoples, which God brings to nought, verse 11 says that (a) “the plan of the Lord exists for ever, (b) the counsels [LXX: the intentions] of his heart from generation to generation. However, in verse 10, the LXX, adds an extra stich: “and he brings to nought the plans of the powerful”. This is found at the centre of the construction formed by verses 10–11 and has no equivalent in the MT.

Even if, at first sight, this stich could appear to be a transcriptional error,¹⁶⁶ it seems, rather, that the Greek translator inserted this addition deliberately, unless he found a Hebrew equivalent in one of his sources.¹⁶⁷ In fact, if what we have here is an error, why would he have added to the terms ἀθετεῖ (“bring to nought”) and βουλὰς (“the plans”), already mentioned in the previous stich, the genitive ἀρχόντων? Rather, this stich seems to have a concluding value: by repeating the verb and the object of God’s action which, to be exact, brings to nought the plans, the Greek translator is once again confirming that God’s action towers over that of the nations and peoples whom, in the final analysis, he includes in a single category: that of the “powerful” who are also mentioned elsewhere in the psalter together with the kings (e.g. Ps 2:2; 148:11). In other words, the translator seem to be specifying still further the sense of what was stated previously: God does not frustrate the counsels and plans of the nations and the other peoples *tout court*, but he brings to nought the plans of all those powerful people who exercise their power in a way other than that willed by him, be they Israelites or non-Israelites. In fact, in this psalm, humanity seems to be divided into two groups: on the one hand, the “just”, called to “cry out with joy” (verse 1), who are those who wait for the protection of YHWH (verse 20) and

¹⁶⁵ Speaking of the counsels of the nations in verse 11, the LXX reads the plural each time. The singular of the MT is confirmed by 4QPs^d. See also P.W. FLINT, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls and the Book of Psalms*, 63.88.

¹⁶⁶ For this hypothesis, see e.g. J. CALES, *Le Livre des Psaumes*, I, 359: “Les LXX ajoutent un troisième stique: [...] C’est une variante de 10^b, introduite par erreur dans le texte.”

¹⁶⁷ In the Qumran fragments, this plus is not attested; see P.W. FLINT, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls and the Book of Psalms*, 88.

who repose their trust in him (verse 21); on the other hand, the whole of the rest of humanity, made up of all those who pursue their personal plans and intentions.¹⁶⁸

Verses 16–17

In verses 16–17 of the Greek text, we find four times the same root which occurs three times through the verb σώζω and once in the substantive σωτηρία.

16a	אִי־הַמֶּלֶךְ נִשְׁעַ בְּרַב־חַיִל	οὐ σώζεται βασιλεὺς διὰ πολλήν δύναμιν	No king is saved by his great army, a warrior is not delivered by his great strength (LXX: <i>and a giant shall not be saved by the greatness of his strength</i>).
b	גְּבוֹר לֹא־יִצָּל בְּרַב־כֹּחַ:	καὶ γίγας οὐ σωθήσεται ἐν πλήθει ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ	
17a	נֶשֶׁה הַסּוֹס לְתַשׁוּעָה	ψευδῆς ἵππος εἰς σωτηρίαν	A vain hope [literally: a lie – LXX: <i>unreliable</i>] is the horse for deliverance (LXX: <i>for safety</i>), [even] by its great power it will not save (LXX: <i>it will not be saved</i>).
b	וּבְרַב חַיִלוֹ לֹא יִמְלֹט	ἐν δὲ πλήθει δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ οὐ σωθήσεται	

Both in the MT and in the LXX, each stich expresses in its own way the idea of an illusory salvation: the king will not be able to be saved by his army, the warrior by his great strength; the horse cannot bring salvation and, in its turn, will not be saved by its strength. Even if the third stich lacks an explicit negation, it is clear that, in all these cases, it is being asserted that human power – whether it be physical or military – cannot ensure any salvation. It is interesting that the LXX text harmonises the vocabulary by repeating the use of the same Greek root whereas the Hebrew uses a good three different roots to express the idea of liberation/salvation: the verb נִשְׁעַ *ni.* with reference to the king, and its corresponding substantive (תַּשׁוּעָה) with reference to the horse; the verb יִצָּל *ni.* for the warrior; and, finally, the verb מִלֵּט *pi.*, again for the horse.¹⁶⁹ In the Greek text, the repeated use of σώζω should not arouse any wonder, but the fact that the translator makes use of its synonym ῥύομαι to translate the verb יִצָּל *hi.* only some

¹⁶⁸ For a different idea, cf. J. VERMEYLEN, “Quand la structure révèle un sens: Les Psaumes ‘quasi-alphabétiques’ 33 et 103”, 304.

¹⁶⁹ The MT reads a transitive form: “by its great power it will not save”, i.e. the warrior, while the LXX translates the *niph'al* מִלֵּט. The consonantal text remains unchanged, but the vocalisation changes slightly.

verses later (verse 19) suggests that he was choosing his vocabulary precisely: employing the same reasoning *per exclusionem* that we find also in the MT, through the repeated use of the verb σώζω and its corresponding substantive, the Greek translator seems to be placing still more stress on the idea that salvation does not come from human power or physical strength but rather belongs only to God, the one who alone is able “to save (ρύσασθαι) from death” (verse 19) those who fear him.

Verses 18–19 and 21–22

18a	הִנֵּה עֵין הַיהוָה אֶל־יִרְאַיוֹ	ἰδοὺ οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ κυρίου ἐπὶ τοὺς φοβουμένους αὐτὸν	Behold, the eye of YHWH [is] on those who fear him, on those who wait for his goodness (LXX: <i>on those who hope in his mercy</i>)
b	לְמַיְתָלִים לְחַסְדּוֹ:	τοὺς ἐλπίζοντας ἐπὶ τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ	
19a	לְהַצִּיל מִמּוֹת נַפְשָׁם	ρύσασθαι ἐκ θανάτου τὰς ψυχὰς αὐτῶν	<i>to deliver</i> their soul from death and to keep them alive (LXX: <i>to nourish</i> them) in famine.
b	וּלְחַיּוֹתָם בְּרָעָב:	καὶ διαθρέψαι αὐτοὺς ἐν λιμῷ	
21a	כִּי־בּו יִשְׂמַח לִבֵּנוּ	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐφρανθήσεται ἡ καρδία ἡμῶν	For in him our heart will rejoice, because in his holy name we have trusted (LXX: <i>we have hoped</i>).
b	כִּי בְשֵׁם קְדֹשׁוֹ בָּטַחְנוּ:	καὶ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τῷ ἁγίῳ αὐτοῦ ἠλπίσαμεν	
22a	יְהִי־חַסְדְּךָ יְהוָה עָלֵינוּ	γένοιτο τὸ ἔλεός σου κύριε ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς	Let your goodness be on us, YHWH (LXX: <i>Lord</i>), as we wait for you (LXX: <i>we hope in you</i>).
b	כְּאֲשֶׁר יִחְלַנו לָךְ:	καθάπερ ἠλπίσαμεν ἐπὶ σέ	

In verses 18 and 21–22, the theme of salvation is woven together with that of hope, rendered into Greek by the verb ἐλπίζω which, in verses 18 and 22, translates יהל *pi*. “wait” and, in verse 21, בטח “trust”. Such translation technique is not unusual in the psalter since, in addition to יהל and בטח, the verb ἐλπίζω serves also to render the verb הסה, “seek refuge” (as, for example, in Ps 31:2^{MT}). The fact that the Greek text of Ps 32:18.20–21^{LXX} makes a point of using the verb ἐλπίζω causes this to become a key word in the final verses. In fact, on the one hand, this verb is used to reassure the addressees of God’s presence with “those who fear him and hope in his mercy”; on the other, it figures twice in the two final verses. Since these are formulated in the

first person plural, they actually complete the initial call of the psalmist: called to praise God at the beginning of the psalm (verse 1–3), the just are invited to formulate the concluding prayer, knowing that the eyes of the Lord are on those who hope in his mercy. This is why this hope is transferred into the final invocation: “Let your mercy be upon us, YHWH, because we have hoped in you”.

3. Conclusions

a) Traditional exegesis of Psalm 33 and its points of departure

In the course of the last 150 years, approximately, Psalm 33 has been interpreted in very different ways. Even if not all the approaches seem to be totally convincing, it is without doubt that some of them have allowed the highlighting of certain aspects which could otherwise have been neglected. These include, for example, the numbering of Psalm 33 among the hymns of enthronement. This has caused the emergence of an important element of the text, that is, the call to sing to YHWH as creator and Lord of everything. In the wake of Gunkel, other studies have sought to determine the *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm, proposing various situations and occasions in the life of the society of Israel in which this psalm could have been performed. Even if, at times, these approaches have led to results that are very hypothetical, they nevertheless permit the identification of some phenomena relating to the content and structure of the psalm which exegesis of the text has to take into consideration.

Moreover, for the majority of commentaries and studies on Psalm 33, the text would have had Israel alone as its principal addressee. Sometimes explicit, sometimes more veiled, this assumption, in fact, constitutes the lens through which this psalm has been read and interpreted. In this way, the Israelites would be “the just” and “the right” of verse 1, those who are also called on to praise YHWH and sing a new song, to celebrate God as creator and Lord of life and – in the case of an interpretation which sees an allusion to the Exodus in verse 7 – the one who led them wonderfully through the Sea of Reeds. Along the same line of interpretation, Israel would be the only “blessed” nation mentioned in verse 12. Furthermore, it would be the chosen people, again, being warned about the emptiness of human and military power in verses 16–17. Finally, according to this way of understanding the psalm, it would again be the Israelites hoping in the divine יְהוָה and so receiving protection and salvation from YHWH. This interpretation, worked out exclusively on assumptions like this, is the one defended by the majority, even if it sometimes presents slight variations. This is largely due to the prejudice of the exegesis of the last century according to which the יְהוָה which God pours out on the earth presupposes the category of the alliance *tout court*. That is why only Israel could be the people

referred to in Psalm 33. An unavoidable consequence of this prejudice has led to the absence of any question surrounding the relation between Israel, YHWH and the nations, and, above all, the implications concerning the salvation of those nations.

b) The universal dimension of YHWH's influence on creation and history

Actually, from our analysis in which we have tried to defend a new reading of Psalm 33, it has emerged that the universal aspect of this text does not concern primarily the possible cosmic enthronement of YHWH. Rather, this universal aspect is better understood and finds its sufficient depth if its starting point is taken into consideration: the salvific message which is addressed to all the inhabitants of the earth who, recognising YHWH as the true giver and guardian of life, hope and trust in him.

This is inferred from the fact that the psalm presents all the elements within a universal dimension in which nothing and no one is excluded. Everything is found within the compass of a powerful action of God who is at the origin of creation and who exercises his invincible lordship over it and over history. This cosmic work of YHWH not only emerges from the images employed, such as those bound up with the elements of nature which have their source in his word and in his breath, but also from the language which highlights the universal scenario in which it is carried out. In this connection, for example, we recall the expressions which refer to a pervasive dimension of the presence of YHWH, such as that which we find in verse 5 where it says that “all the earth is full of the רִצְוֹן of God”, or else in verse 8 which mentions “all the inhabitants of the earth” who are called on to acknowledge him and so to fear him.

Such expressions, which refer more to a spatial dimension, are interwoven with others which tell of the presence of God on a temporal plane which knows no limits. In fact, as in verse 11, his plan “endures for ever” and his counsels “from generation to generation”. Moreover, this presence of God reaches and overcomes every form of human power because it has the capacity to vanquish the plans of the nations. Furthermore, the power of YHWH is the sole guarantee of the salvation of life by contrast with what the king, the warrior and the horse, images which represent the summit of human and military power on earth, could ensure in the event of danger. In this way, YHWH is presented as the only one who, watching over all the men on earth whose hearts he has formed individually, can guarantee salvation and protection for those of them who fear him and hope in his רִצְוֹן . In fact, the salvific eye of God is focused precisely on this category. It would seem, therefore, that the psalmist is arranging his images according to a gradual and progressive zooming-in which, from the general to the particular, describes more clearly the outline of the action of God on the earth: on the one hand, he creates, observes and

directs everything which happens on it; on the other, he guarantees his protection and salvation from death to those who fear him and hope in his mercy.

c) The absence of the concept of covenant and the importance of the divine יְהוָה

This reference to God's salvation, therefore, has as its background the whole of humanity. Israel is certainly part of this but it is not the only people to benefit from it. In this sense, the macarism in verse 12 finds its natural setting in a universal scenario in which Israel and the nations together are protagonists of a new relationship of close belonging to YHWH. This would no longer be founded upon the covenant *tout court* in the way presented by the foundational texts of Exodus and Deuteronomy, founded, that is, on God's gift of the Promised Land and on the observance of the precepts of the Torah by Israel. Even more so, this relationship of belonging to YHWH presented by Psalm 33 would not be the fruit of an extension to all of this category proper to Deuteronomy. If anything, Psalm 33 is presenting a new way of thinking the foundational content of the covenant which is that of relation. In this process of relation, God creates, watches over the actions of the inhabitants of the earth and saves those who hope in his יְהוָה. This latter manifests the presence of God in the created reality, and, through it, all men can participate in the divine plan by recognising YHWH as the only Lord of creation and history, the only one in whom to hope for their very lives. In this sense, Psalm 33 is putting forward a salvation which goes beyond the borders of Israel. It is extended immeasurably and is performed by God in a cosmic context. Thus, the criterion dividing those who will benefit from the divine יְהוָה from those who will be cut off outside it is no longer modelled on the lines of the covenant but on a conscious adhering to the faith of YHWH, the one who is distinguished for his holy name. This plan of God is for ever and for all, and comes to each one in a dimension which is simultaneously communal and personal.

d) The central messages of Psalm 33

In the light of our exegesis of Psalm 33, we can say that even if it has an alphabetical arrangement, it is not without numerous references which allow us to identify within it a clearer hermeneutical framework than one might have imagined at first sight. Even if, for certain verses, it seems difficult to identify initially, this hermeneutical framework unifies and lends depth and richness to the different themes treated. The fundamental element of the theological picture presented by Psalm 33 is that of the divine יְהוָה which, at crucial points, envelops the psalm's thematic axes. These are, mainly, five:

- YHWH is the creator of every existing reality.

- YHWH, Lord of the earth, directs all the actions which are carried out on it.
- YHWH alone has the power to preserve life from death and to guarantee its existence.
- By virtue of his creative and salvific power, all the nations are called on to acknowledge YHWH as God and to fear him.
- If the creative work of God is directed at all things and all living beings, his work of salvation is directed only on those who fear him and hope in his רַחֲמָיו .

e) Psalm 33 as a “new song”

The author of this psalm, therefore, is making use of the literary genre of the hymn to carry ideas which, although starting out from certain convictions which existed at the root of the religious traditions of Israel, arrive at conclusions that are completely new: all are called to the praise of YHWH because everything originates from him and, for this reason, his salvation is offered to all. In this sense, if the divine רַחֲמָיו is presented, at the beginning, as centre of the creative action of God, in what follows, it is established as the principle of salvation also. In other words, רַחֲמָיו pervades the relationship which binds YHWH to all that he has created and becomes the instrument through which all the inhabitants of the earth can obtain the salvation of their נַפְשָׁם . The reciprocity between the two partners which governs this new kind of relationship consists in this: on the one hand, God gives his רַחֲמָיו to all by virtue of the fact that he is the creator of all living beings; on the other hand, the ones who benefit from the divine רַחֲמָיו are all those who put their trust in it.

Trusting in YHWH in this way becomes the motive of praise for those who, in the last section of the psalm, manifest their faith in him. That is, by responding to the call to fear YHWH which is addressed to all the inhabitants of the earth, they are also those who wait for his רַחֲמָיו . In this sense, it is they who answer to the category of the “just” and the “right” who are addressed in the first verses of the psalm. It is fitting for them to praise YHWH because they share in the joy of salvation so that their heart rejoices in believing in him (cf. verse 21).

As presented in Psalm 33, therefore, the universal work of God does not play out solely on the level of creation and in relation to the lordship which God exercises over the earth and over history. Rather, it also concerns the salvation to which not only Israel but all are called. In Psalm 33, this truth of faith constitutes the object of the “new song” with which the just are called on to praise God. In this connection, our psalm manifests a new awareness which Israel developed later about the relationship between YHWH and the other nations. In other words, the Israelite community, the original *milieu* in which this new song took shape, is also that which, together with all the other peoples, is called on to proclaim its faith in the divine רַחֲמָיו with a new

awareness: it is the channel of that salvation which YHWH pours out on all, Israelites and non-Israelites, who hope in his רַחֲמֵי of which the earth is full. This universal dimension of relation and salvation will also become the interpretative key which the translator of the LXX will bring to the Greek text. In fact, as has been seen, the Greek version underlines repeatedly those elements which link the universalism of YHWH's salvation to the idea that he is also the creator of all, something particularly emphasised in verses 8–9.

f) The LXX strengthens the motifs of creation and mercy

Psalm 32^{LXX} is a very literal translation of an unvocalised Hebrew text which cannot have differed much from the form later transmitted to us in the Masoretic Text. However, as we have been able to observe, the translator carries out a series of changes which confer a physiognomy different from that of the Hebrew text. In particular, while, in the Hebrew text, one could possibly glimpse an allusion to the Exodus, the Greek text no longer contains any such allusion to this foundational event in the history of Israel, and, at the same time, the LXX brings forward a key idea: God, the creator of all human beings, continues to operate in history and in the life of those who fear him and hope in his mercy. In this way, the link between creation and salvation becomes clearer. This comes about from the use of a terminology which turns out to be more evocative in relation to certain passages of the creation accounts. In this connection, in particular, we cannot pass over the detail provided in verse 9 where it is said that all the inhabitants of the earth, the same ones called on to fear God and hope in his kindness, were created by him. In other words, the Greek text notably reinforces the idea that God's salvation is performed for *all* those who hope in him since all the inhabitants of the earth, Israelites and non-Israelites, are the work of his creation. That circumvents any prior condition which places distinctions between humanity as a whole and Israel. That is, the dividing line between those who obtain God's salvation is no longer the observance of the covenant, something which belongs to the special relationship of Israel with YHWH. Rather, the *conditio sine qua non* for obtaining his salvation is fearing him and trusting in him. In fact, YHWH is the only one from whom to expect salvation by virtue of the fact that he is at the origin of every life on the earth and the only one who, in the final analysis, has also the real power to guarantee it. Thus, with his *relecture* of the text, the translator is probably reformulating its underlying theology by adapting its contents: “the earth is full of the mercy of the Lord” (verse 5). In this way, the mercy of God not only plays a role in relation to the people of Israel but includes all those who hope in him.

Chapter 3: Joseph and Aseneth

1. Introduction: Observations on the *status quaestionis* and conclusions on the starting point for the exegesis of *Joseph and Aseneth*

a) Preliminary observations

In this chapter, we shall be examining the novel of *Joseph and Aseneth*, an intertestamental text. It is not found among the books traditionally attributed to the LXX but forms part of the so-called Hellenistic-Jewish literature. The study and the analysis of this text will permit us a better understanding of how the relation between creation and salvation was perceived and, consequently, the fact that God is the creator of the whole of humanity, and how this aspect is developed in narrative form by a Jewish text which can be dated to somewhere approximately between the first century B.C. and the second century A.D.

Although we are dealing with a novel, and many of its narrative elements are probably fictitious rather than historical, this text seems to us significantly important because it tackles the subject of the adhering in faith to the God of Israel of a figure who not only comes from the Egyptian world but who will actually become, along with the patriarch Joseph, one of the ancestors who will guarantee descendants to what will become the people of Israel (cf. Gen 41:50-52). Another aspect, no less important, seems to be that which concerns the description of the process of change in Aseneth by means of which it is possible to glimpse a way of opening to and so inclusion in the salvation of the God of Israel for one who, like Aseneth, coming from an Egyptian family, does not belong originally to Israel. Moreover, being the daughter of an Egyptian priest, like him and her people of origin, she worships the gods of Egypt.

b) The content of the work: a brief summary

Joseph and Aseneth is an intertestamental text with a plot which unfolds in Egypt. It elaborates on the story of Joseph, son of Jacob, which is told in chapters 37–50 of the book of Genesis, and, in particular, in Gen 41:45, which mentions his wedding to Aseneth, a pagan of Egyptian origin. We record the verse below both in the MT and in the LXX. The versions do not present visible divergences but only register differences with regard to the proper names:

MT	LXX
<p>וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה שְׁמוֹ יוֹסֵף פְּנֵחָה וַיִּתֶּן-לוֹ אֶת-אֲסֵנֶת בַּת-פּוֹטִיפֵר פֶּרֶעַ כֶּהֵן אֵן לְאִשָּׁה</p>	<p>καὶ ἐκάλεσεν Φαραῶ τὸ ὄνομα Ἰωσηφ Ψονθομφανηχ καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ τὴν Ἀσεννεθ θυγατέρα Πετεφρη ἱερέως Ἡλίου πόλεως αὐτῷ γυναῖκα</p>
Translation of the MT	Translation of the LXX
<p>And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Tsofnath-Paneah, and he gave him in marriage Aseneth, the daughter of Potiphra, priest of On.</p>	<p>And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Psontofanech-Paneah, and he gave him in marriage Aseneth, daughter of Pentefres, priest of Heliopolis.</p>

Our analysis will focus chiefly on the first part of the novel. However, in order to set our reflection better within the framework of the events narrated, we are giving here a brief summary of the whole book. In this way, we shall seek to highlight the importance of the first part for the overall message of the text.

The principal events recounted in *Joseph and Aseneth* can be summarised as follows. The novel is divided into two main parts: the first, from chapter 1 to chapter 21, tells of the meeting between Joseph and Aseneth, of the process of change which leads to her recognition of the God of Joseph, and of their wedding; the second, from chapter 22 to chapter 29, tells of the attempted rape of Aseneth by Pharaoh's son and his plan to usurp his father's throne.¹ On the narrative and thematic levels, the two parts do not present significant points of contact with each other, except for the leading part played by Aseneth in the continuation of the story.

The novel opens with the news that Joseph is being sent by Pharaoh to gather up the grain throughout the land of Egypt. Having arrived at Heliopolis, he is entertained by Pentefres, chief of the satraps and nobles of Pharaoh. He has a daughter, Aseneth, young and very beautiful, so much so that many desire her hand in marriage (chapter 1). She is described as a proud young woman who scorns every man – she also categorically refuses Joseph whom Pentefres would like her to marry – and is particularly devoted to the cult of the Egyptian gods whose images adorn the whole of her house and her precious clothes (chapters 2–3). However, her meeting with Joseph causes a profound change in her: at the sight of the young man, Aseneth is profoundly unsettled and utters words of repentance over the scorn she had shown towards her father (chapters 5–6).

¹ For the structure of the book as a whole, cf., for example, C. BURCHARD, "Joseph and Aseneth", 182; M. VOGEL, "Einführung in die Schrift", 4–5.

The author presents Joseph as a man who is particularly upright and pious: he does not eat with pagans – and that creates an important distance between him and the Egyptians² – and he does not accept the blandishments of foreign women (chapter 7). After an initial refusal, he agrees to meet Aseneth only because she is portrayed by her father as a «virgin who hates all men» (*Jos. Asen.* 7:7), but he abstains from kissing her because it is not fitting for a man “who blesses the living God with his mouth (...) to kiss a woman who uses her mouth to bless idols that are dead and dumb” (*Jos. Asen.* 8:5). However, moved to compassion by the sadness shown by Aseneth, Joseph pronounces over the maiden a prayer of blessing in which he seeks for her rebirth to a new life (chapter 8). Aseneth is happy with this blessing and escapes to the floor above, still trembling. When evening comes, Joseph continues on his journey, promising to return on the eighth day (chapter 9).

Remaining alone in her father’s house, Aseneth sees the beginning of a period of great contrition and penitence during which she lays aside her precious clothes, shuts herself up in her room, sprinkles the floor with ashes, throws her idols out of the window and, with supplications and lamentations, implores the mercy of the God of Israel on herself (chapter 10). After seven days, Aseneth, once again, addresses God with a fervent prayer in which she seeks pardon for the sins with which she is gravely stained – such as those of pride and idolatry – and seeks freedom (chapters 11–13). At the conclusion of this long supplication, as a sign of God’s acceptance and pardon, an angel appears to her who tells her to put aside her penitential garments since her name has now been written in the book of the living (chapter 14). Aseneth’s prayer has been heard: she will become Joseph’s wife and will be called *City of Refuge* for all those who, like her, will convert to the only God. At this point, the angel presents to Aseneth the figure of *μετάνοια* (chapter 15). The latter is like the purest of virgins, daughter of the Most High, who prepares for all those who convert “a place of rest in the heavens” (*Jos. Asen.* 15:7).

After having fed the maiden with a honeycomb, food of new life, the heavenly figure disappears on a blazing chariot (chapters 16–17). Now Aseneth shines out with unheard of beauty (chapter 18). Joseph returns to her house and blesses God for what he has done in Aseneth whom he now embraces and kisses for a good three times, communicating to her the spirit of life, wisdom and truth (chapter 19). The couple soon marry and produce two children, Manasseh and Ephraim (chapters 20–21; cf. Gen 41:50–52). The first part closes with a long prayer in which Aseneth returns to confessing her old sins (*Jos. Asen.* 21:11–21).

² Cf. Gen 43:32 where, however, it is said, to the contrary, that the Egyptians do not eat with the Hebrews. For this problem, see E. BONS, “Manger ou ne pas manger avec les étrangers?” *passim*.

The second part of the story is set in a subsequent period, in the years of famine. On meeting Aseneth, Pharaoh's son is overcome by a renewed passion and seeks to involve Joseph's brothers, now in Egypt, in the rape of the woman. Simeon and Levi refuse (chapters 22–23), but the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, with the help of Dan and Gad, prepare a plan to murder Joseph and rape Aseneth (chapters 24–25). Both plans are betrayed thanks to the prophetic ability of Levi, who foresees the ambush, and to the extraordinary courage of Benjamin, who attacks Pharaoh's son and seriously wounds him (chapters 26–27). Aseneth's intervention blocks Benjamin's homicidal instinct, but Pharaoh's son dies all the same because he is now at the end of his life. For the next forty years, Joseph will take the place of Pharaoh who has died of a broken heart (chapters 28–29).

As is clear from this summary, the novel is concerned to give a narrative development to what is mentioned in Gen 41:45, 50–52, recording in its account a huge quantity of material that is extraneous to the biblical text. In fact, it dwells on the particular events which lead up to the marriage of the two protagonists and which concern also, for example, the involvement of Joseph's brothers in the story and the failed attempt by Pharaoh's son to rape Aseneth.

c) Starting point and aims of our investigation

In the following sections, as a first step, we shall provide the literary and historical data concerning the novel, in particular, a brief summary of the *status quaestionis* surrounding the text, the original language, the place of origin and the approximate dating, the literary genre, and the cultural *milieu* in which it was composed. In order to begin our study on more solid foundations, it seems necessary to put forward those basic elements on which the majority of scholars concur and to take our distance from those positions which now seem out of date or too hypothetical.

In a second stage, our enquiry will focus, in particular, on the process of change and on the conditions by means of which, from being an Egyptian and an idolater, Aseneth becomes a believer in Joseph's God and wife of the patriarch, an eminent figure for the beginnings of the history of the people of Israel as it is told in the book of Genesis. For this reason, we shall present an analysis of some texts chosen from the novel which describe the passage of Aseneth from being an idolater to a believer in the God of Israel. We shall make a special examination of the process of Aseneth's transformation in order to observe those stages which lead the young woman to take a new turn in her life. In this connection, we shall look at the new religious and social status which Aseneth will acquire after her adhering in faith to the God of Israel. Finally, we shall mark out some conclusions on the basis of the exemplary character of the transformation of Aseneth, on the fictitious nature of the work, and on its setting in the

patriarchal period. In the light of this analysis, we shall elaborate some reflections on the theological ideas which emerge from this text regarding the relation between YHWH, Israel and the pagans.

This arrangement means passing over some other aspects of the novel which have been studied, particularly in recent decades.³ Thus, we shall not be going in any detail into any themes which concern, for example: all those questions bound up with the textual versions available; the literary genre of the Hellenistic-Jewish novel; the possible thematic and structural influences of non-Jewish Greek literature and its literary *topoi*; the Greek and Egyptian religious background⁴; the hypothesis of the presence of rites of initiation⁵; the view of women underlying the novel⁶; and the role of love and the erotic *motifs* in the text.⁷ From time to time, we shall refer to the particular studies on one or other aspect of these questions.

d) The novel Joseph and Aseneth in recent research

α) The text of Joseph and Aseneth and its textual versions

The text of *Joseph and Aseneth*⁸ is found in sixteen Greek manuscripts subdivided into four different groups (*a, b, c, d*) and in more than fifty codices which reproduce a translation of it into eight different ancient languages, including Greek, Latin and Syriac. Still today, scholars find it difficult to arrange these texts in chronological order and to establish whether to approve the short redaction, recorded in *d*, or the long one, reproduced in the remaining redactions⁹.

Among the studies of *Joseph and Aseneth*, the works of Marc Philonenko and Christoph Burchard constitute points of reference. In recent decades, they have both produced a critical edition of the text.¹⁰ According to Burchard, the most ancient text and the one closest to the

³ A good part of these approaches are presented in C. WETZ, *Eros und Bekehrung*, 21–42.

⁴ In this connection, cf., for example, D. SÄNGER, *Antikes Judentum und die Mysterien*, 88–190; R.S. KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 155–190.

⁵ For a detailed examination of the rites of initiation in the various Jewish religious groups in the Hellenistic-Roman period and of the possible agreements with the process of Aseneth's conversion, cf. R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 185–216.

⁶ This aspect is studied in detail and specifically by A. STANDHARTINGER, *Das Frauenbild im Judentum der Hellenistischen Zeit*. In this connection, cf. also R.S. KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 195.

⁷ In this connection, cf. R.S. KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 30.51.

⁸ For a detailed presentation of the various manuscripts available in the different ancient languages, cf. A.-M. DENIS, *Introduction à la littérature religieuse judéo-hellénistique*, 297–312.

⁹ Cf. D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 427, n. 6.

¹⁰ M. PHILONENKO, *Joseph et Aséneth: Introduction, texte critique, traduction, et Notes; Joseph und Aseneth. Kritisch herausgegeben von Christoph Burchard. Mit Unterstützung von Carsten Burfeind und Uta Barbara Fink. In addition to the critical editions of the Greek text, U.B. FINK, Joseph und Aseneth. Revision des griechischen Textes und Edition der zweiten lateinischen Übersetzung*, also examines the Latin text. In 2009, the same author, Uta Barbara Fink, published a revised version of the critical text of

original would be that preserved by group *b*¹¹; group *a* would contain the longest but also the most recent text; *d* would be a shorter form of *a* because it contains similar redactional interventions; *c* would be a late revision of a text transmitted by family *b*. Philonenko, on the other hand, prefers the short version transmitted by group *d* since, according to him, it would bear the most ancient text. The other redactions, *b*, *c* and *a* (in that order) would constitute a subsequent expansion.¹²

The reasons for which only the shortest version would bear the original text are challenged by Burchard on the following grounds.¹³ He rules out that *a* is an expansion of *d*; in fact, from a careful analysis, it emerges that *a* does not record interpolations to the text of *d*, but that there are omissions in *d*, and that the linguistic style of this group presents readings that are secondary in relation to the others. Moreover, according to Burchard, groups *b* and *c* probably constitute the intermediate stages of the textual tradition because, while *a* and *d* have some similarities in common, *b* and *c* deviate from the other families. He concludes, therefore, that “*d* is more likely to be an epitome, no later than the eleventh century, of a fuller text, which was close to the unrevised archetype of *a*.”¹⁴ Group *b* would, therefore, constitute the principal point of reference.

The present study, which prescind from questions of textual criticism, will examine the long version in Burchard’s edition because it takes account of a greater amount of textual data (particularly manuscripts and variants), and because his reasons in favour of the long text are more convincing than those maintained on behalf of the contrary hypothesis.¹⁵ However, in relation to the texts examined in the present study, the most important variants, if any, will be signalled.

Joseph and Aseneth; cf. U.B. FINK, “Joseph und Aseneth”. Any of readings which differ from Burchard’s critical edition are not significant for the present study.

¹¹ Cf. C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 180; “Einleitung”, 39–46.

¹² For this idea, cf., also, A. STANDHARTINGER, *Das Frauenbild im Judentum der hellenistischen Zeit*, chaps. 2 and 3; R.S. KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 22. For the author, only the shortest version would carry the original material for the composition of the novel. For this reason, Kraemer proposes to demonstrate in her study that the longer version of the novel aims to explain and develop the shorter text further, particularly where it presents anomalies, and to amplify or render more explicit the biblical pictures. Kraemer’s approach is explicitly challenged by U.B. FINK, “Textkritische Situation”, 35, according to whom, although the analyses of A. Standhartinger and R.S. Kraemer contain stimulating aspects on the level of content, they do not in fact contribute to providing elements valid for reconstructing the original text.

¹³ Among the other scholars who go in the same direction as Burchard, cf. D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 428–432. Cf., also, R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 67–68.

¹⁴ C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 180.

¹⁵ On the other hand, Philonenko’s text-critical choices have been criticised by various authors. Cf., for example, U.B. FINK, “Textkritische Situation”, 34–35.

β) The original language

According to the majority of scholars, *Joseph and Aseneth* was written in Greek.¹⁶ Only Paul Rießler,¹⁷ at the beginning of the twentieth century, maintained that the book was translated from a Hebrew original because of the strongly Semitic character of the work.

The studies of Burchard and Chesnutt in this regard have shown that the Greek language of *Joseph and Aseneth* actually presents two characteristics that are easily recognisable: on the one hand, many biblicalisms, such as expressions of the type *καὶ ἐγένετο* (*Jos. Asen.* 3:1), *καὶ ἰδοὺ* (*Jos. Asen.* 10:16), *εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον* (*Jos. Asen.* 4:8), *ἐχάρη χαρὰν μεγάλην* (*Jos. Asen.* 3:3), *τίς οἶδεν* (*Jos. Asen.* 11:12)¹⁸ which reflect the language of the LXX;¹⁹ on the other hand, the text presents expressions typical of Greek such as *ἀθανασία* and *ἀφθαρσία* (*Jos. Asen.* 8:5) for which there are no Hebrew equivalents.²⁰ Finally, if one considers that there is no proof that the text was known to the ancient Hebrew or Aramaic literature, the hypothesis of an original text in a Semitic language is to be rejected. This is why scholars agree in classing this text among the writings which belong to what is commonly called “Hellenistic-Jewish literature”.²¹

γ) Place of origin

The provenance of *Joseph and Aseneth* has never been studied in depth, but there is sufficient information to make us think that its origins are Egyptian. In favour of this thesis, advocated by the majority of scholars²², various elements combine, including: the setting in Heliopolis; the predominant antithesis between Jews and Egyptians and between the God of Israel and the

¹⁶ See A.-M. DENIS, *Introduction à la littérature religieuse judéo-hellénistique*, 328–329.

¹⁷ P. RIESSLER, “Joseph und Asenath”, 1–3.

¹⁸ For the various biblicalisms in *Joseph and Aseneth*, see R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 70; E. BONS, “Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*”, 434–436.

¹⁹ In this connection, R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 70, concludes: “...the influence of the Septuagint and of the Judaic heritage in general suffices to explain the Semitic character of the Greek in *Joseph and Aseneth*”.

²⁰ A list of other examples of Greek expressions which do not have Hebrew equivalents is found in C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 181.

²¹ Cf. A.-M. DENIS, *Introduction à la littérature religieuse judéo-hellénistique*, 315.

²² For an assessment of the various arguments in favour of the Egyptian origin, cf., for example, M. VOGEL, “Einführung in die Schrift”, 11–12. For the theories elaborated at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries which oppose an Egyptian *milieu* for the origin of the text, cf. R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 76–78; for all the bibliographical references, we refer to these pages. Chesnutt cites the theory of Pierre Batiffol, who places the writing of *Joseph and Aseneth* in Asia Minor since it presupposes a likeness between the role of the angel of God mentioned in chapters 14–17 and that of the angel Michael which is recorded in the Christian writings of this geographical area. However, as Chesnutt states, this element cannot be considered the only criterion for establishing the origin of the text. Chesnutt records, furthermore, the positions of Paul Rießler and Victor Aptowitz who place the origins of *Joseph and Aseneth* in Palestine. However, according to Chesnutt, that can be refuted because the similarities between *Joseph and Aseneth* and the Palestinian Jewish sources would confirm a Jewish origin for the novel but not its direct belonging to Palestinian territory. On the contrary, nothing would seem to contradict the thesis that *Joseph and Aseneth* was written in Egypt.

Egyptian gods; the repudiation of the latter by Aseneth; her adhering to the God of Joseph; and the recognition of him by Pharaoh and his nobles. These elements suggest that the text comes from an Egyptian *milieu*, and that, accordingly, it reflects the social and cultural environment in which it was composed. Philonenko even hypothesises that the text was compiled in the Egyptian countryside rather than in Alexandria because of the fact that its style is different from the philosophical and anti-idolatrous style of Philo.²³ As Chesnutt affirms, this idea turns out to be possible but not demonstrable with certainty because too little is known of Judaism in the other areas of Lower Egypt to conclude that this text was not composed at Alexandria but elsewhere.²⁴ In any case, as Chesnutt states, the Egyptian provenance of the text is the most likely hypothesis, not only because *Joseph and Aseneth* is a narrative expansion of the biblical verse Gen 41:45, but also because of the social and cultural context in which the author and his community probably lived.²⁵

δ) Date of composition

The date of composition of *Joseph and Aseneth* cannot be established with precision.²⁶ Nevertheless, scholars have set a *terminus post quem* and a *terminus ante quem* between which to locate the composition of the work chronologically. The linguistic dependence on the LXX, now widely recognised and demonstrated, has allowed the identification of the *terminus post quem* for the writing of *Joseph and Aseneth* as not before 100 B.C. As for the identification of the *terminus ante quem*, the historico-social elements in the novel are considered: the openness of Judaism to converted pagans and reciprocal tolerance between the two groups can be ascribed only to a period before the Second Jewish Revolt (132–135 A.D.) and the anti-Jewish measures taken by Hadrian. Additionally, if one accepts the thesis that the text originates in Egypt, one has to establish the *terminus ante quem* at a still earlier period: before the Jewish Revolt of the Diaspora which took place under Trajan (115–117 A.D.) and which saw the complete destruction of the Jewish communities in Egypt.

According to Donatella Maggiorotti, the dating of *Joseph and Aseneth* can be identified with less approximation. In fact, basing herself on the study of Joseph Méléze-Modrzejewski²⁷, she holds that *Joseph and Aseneth* was written not later than 31 B.C., the year of Octavian's victory

²³ See M. PHILONENKO, *Joseph et Aséneth*, 107.

²⁴ See R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 80.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 78; J.K. ZANGENBERG, "Joseph und Aseneths Ägypten", 180, thinks that the Egyptian origin of the novel is still the most probable hypothesis.

²⁶ In this paragraph, particular reference is being made to A.-M. DENIS, *Introduction à la littérature religieuse judéo-hellénistique*, 325–327; M. VOGEL, "Einführung in die Schrift", 12–15.

²⁷ Cf. D. MAGGIOROTTI, "Giuseppe e Aseneth", 447, note 102, which refers to J. MÉLÈZE-MODRZEJEWSKI, *Les Juifs d'Égypte de Ramsès II à Hadrien*, 131ss.

at Actium, since, for the Jews of Egypt, “the Roman conquest showed itself to be a ‘true disaster’ on the political level” because the transition from the Ptolemaic period to Roman rule changed the situation of the Jewish community in Egypt profoundly.²⁸

According to Randall D. Chesnutt, who prefers a *terminus ante quem* in the first century A.D. rather than the first century B.C., the toleration towards the Gentiles which emerges from the context of the work is more suited to a period preceding A.D. 70, in what concerns Egypt, than to the years prior to A.D. 38, the year of the massacre of the Alexandrian Jews.²⁹

Other scholars put the writing of the novel in the Ptolemaic period on the basis of what it says about the toleration of Egypt towards the Jews and because of the absence of any reference to Roman domination.³⁰ However, in Chesnutt’s view, though this thesis can appear appealing, it cannot be proved because the attitude of toleration towards the Jews on the part of the Egyptian government is not characteristic only of the Ptolemaic period but also of part of the early Roman period. What is more, we could be dealing with an idealised description of the relations between the Egyptian government and the Jews which no longer corresponded to the historical and political reality in which the author lived.

In conclusion, one could hypothesise that *Joseph and Aseneth* was written before 31 B.C. However, it is easy to defend – though not to state with certainty – the thesis that the book was written before A.D. 38.³¹

ε) *Joseph and Aseneth*: a Jewish writing?

In 1889–1890, while editing the *editio princeps* of *Joseph and Aseneth*, Pierre Batiffol believed that he had traced there some elements of Christian origin. That greatly influenced subsequent criticism which excluded it from the Hellenistic-Jewish writings for some time. According to Batiffol, *Joseph and Aseneth* is the mystical-symbolical, Christian elaboration of the rabbinic legend of Dina and Aseneth in which the two protagonists – Joseph and Aseneth – would be allegorical figures symbolising, respectively, Christ and virginity (or the Church). Moreover, in the passages concerning the blessed food, the chalice and the anointing, he detected allusions

²⁸ D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 447.

²⁹ R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 82.

³⁰ For further details, cf. R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 82–83.

³¹ For this approximate dating, cf., for example, D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 448; R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 85; A.-M. DENIS, *Introduction à la littérature religieuse judéo-hellénistique*, 326. For a much later dating, between the third and fourth centuries, cf. R.S. KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 225–244, especially 227 and 238, on the basis of certain similarities which she finds between *Joseph and Aseneth* and texts of the Christian period. This proposal has been widely challenged because the similarities between *Joseph and Aseneth* and the Jewish-Hellenistic literature seem much sharper. In this sense, cf. M. VOGEL, “Einführung in die Schrift”, 16–17.

to the Christian sacraments.³² Despite Batiffol's modifying his position over time, stating that *Joseph and Aseneth* must have been a Jewish work going back to the time of Jesus with some notable Christian interpolations, it was his early opinion which continued to influence subsequent studies.³³

In the reviews of Batiffol's edition, this hypothesis was already challenged by L. Duchesne and L. Massebieau. They thought the origins of the text were wholly Jewish and bound up with the propagandist literature of Hellenistic Judaism contemporary with, or even subsequent to, the time of Jesus. In particular, Duchesne criticised Batiffol's thesis, threatening its very foundations; in fact, he questioned that *Joseph and Aseneth* is a re-elaboration of the rabbinic legend of Dina and Aseneth, and even judges exaggerated Batiffol's tendency in claiming that many of the elements in the story are symbolic.³⁴

Also for K. Kohler, *Joseph and Aseneth* is to be considered a text of Jewish provenance: it would be a typical story of the conversion to Judaism of a pagan, and its origins would be bound up with the Essene environment.³⁵ This hypothesis was taken up and tackled systematically by Rießler in his article of 1922.³⁶ Here he maintained that *Joseph and Aseneth* is a Jewish writing with strong links to the Essene environment: the white robes, the prayer to the son, the exaltation of virginity and the sacred meal are the elements which led Rießler to this conclusion.

Surpassing all the possible theories which have been formulated on the original *milieu* of the novel, the most compelling is that according to which *Joseph and Aseneth* is Jewish in origin, despite some elements that are particularly close between it and the New Testament. An argument which seems decisive is that made by John J. Collins in one of his articles³⁷ which takes its place in the debate concerning the Jewish or Christian provenance of *Joseph and Aseneth*. Collins concludes that the story comes from a Hellenistic-Jewish environment: even if it could have a certain interest for Christians too, the question about marriage between a Jew and a pagan was certainly one of fundamental importance in a Jewish context. Furthermore, the references to the exaltation of the Jewish woman of chapter I and the fact that the process of Aseneth's transformation does not come close to baptism makes Christian roots for the story unlikely. At most, Collins states, the story of Aseneth's transformation could have been "highly

³² P. BATIFFOL, *Le Livre de la Prière d'Aseneth*, 7–37.

³³ R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 24–25

³⁴ L. DUCHESNE, Review of *Le Livre de la Prière d'Aseneth*, by Batiffol, *Bulletin critique* 10, 1889, 461–466 e L. MASSEBIEAU, Review of *Le Livre de la Prière d'Aseneth*, *Annales de bibliographie théologique*, 11, 1889, 161–172, cited in D. MAGGIOROTTI, "Giuseppe e Aseneth", 432, n. 36.

³⁵ K. KOHLER, "Asenath, life and confession or prayer of", *JewEnc*, II, 172–176, cited in D. MAGGIOROTTI, "Giuseppe e Aseneth", 434, n. 43.

³⁶ See P. RIESSLER, "Joseph und Asenath", 5–8.

³⁷ See J.J. COLLINS, "Joseph and Aseneth: Jewish or Christian?", 97–112.

suggestive for the transformation of converts to Christianity”³⁸, and this was the reason why Christian scribes were interested in handing it on.

Along these lines, the proliferation of studies which relate *Joseph and Aseneth* to the New Testament – already in 1995, Chesnutt listed more than forty³⁹ – shows an increasing consensus among New Testament scholars for holding that *Joseph and Aseneth* is an important witness for the study of the Jewish origins of many aspects which belong to early Christianity.

One aspect which seems particularly close to the New Testament and which has received scholarly attention is the controversial question as to whether the food, the chalice and the blessed oil offered to Aseneth by the angel after her process of transformation (*Jos. Asen.* 15:55) are to be considered in connection with the Last Supper. According to George D. Kilpatrick, the meal described is originally a ritual and preserves traces of mystery cults. It does not constitute the direct model for Jesus’ Supper but attests the existence of a traditional Jewish meal different from the Passover and adaptable to various occasions⁴⁰. According to Joachim Jeremias, who does not share Kilpatrick’s views, the blessed bread in *Joseph and Aseneth* has a value that is neither ritual nor sacramental; it would be a daily Jewish meal preceded by blessings and the anointing of the guests⁴¹.

Contrary to Kilpatrick and in agreement with Jeremias, Burchard holds that the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* was not describing a cultic meal of ancient Judaism but, rather, referring to the special Jewish way of using food, drinks and anointing. In this way, *Joseph and Aseneth* would be “irrelevant to the origin of the Lord’s Supper”⁴², but helps us to understand “why the central rite of that new religious movement, Christianity, was a solemn form of consuming ἄρτος and ποτήριον”⁴³, and why the gestures concerning these acts were recorded in writing. Moreover, although he recognises the differences, due for the most part to the different aims and sociological environments of the two respective texts, Burchard sees a closeness between John 6 and *Joseph and Aseneth*, chapter 16: “Both texts are aetiologies of sacramental foodstuffs believed to bring about eternal life after death as opposed to food which does not.”⁴⁴

In conclusion, it is indisputable that the text of *Joseph and Aseneth* was handed down to us by the Christians of the early centuries, but, according to the *opinio communis*, the novel is Jewish in origin because particularly Christian themes appear to be absent.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁹ R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 56–61.

⁴⁰ See G.D. KILPATRICK, “The Last Supper”, 4–8.

⁴¹ See J. JEREMIAS, “The Last Supper”, 91–92.

⁴² C. BURCHARD, “The Importance of Joseph and Aseneth for the Study of New Testament”, 118.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

ζ) The literary genre of *Joseph and Aseneth*

It is difficult to establish the literary genre of *Joseph and Aseneth*: is it a literary fiction or an historical work? What we can say is that it is a romance in the broadest sense of the word.⁴⁵ In fact, the variety of *motifs* leaves room for several classifications according to which, from time to time, the text has been classed as a religious romance, a love story, a sapiential novella, and a Hellenistic mystery-romance. Howard Clark Kee, in particular, associates it with the Hellenistic romance,⁴⁶ but not all scholars are in agreement. For example, George D. Kilpatrick includes *Joseph and Aseneth* among the religious novels, similar to *Ruth*, *Esther*, *Tobit* and *Judith* with whom it has some *motifs* in common such as the theme of marriage, the central position of a female character, exile, and the question of Jewish-Gentile relations⁴⁷.

Other authors have tried to define the literary genre of *Joseph and Aseneth* even better.⁴⁸ Christoph Burchard, for example, sees various analogies between *Joseph and Aseneth* and the erotic Hellenistic romance, but he admits that the studies in this field have to be taken further, and, in enquiring about the message and the leading ideas of the writing, he prefers to remain bound to an analysis closer to the text, avoiding any further enquiry and digression on the literary genre.⁴⁹ Although recognising the similarities between *Joseph and Aseneth* and the erotic romance, Randall D. Chesnutt highlights their numerous differences and states, prudently, that, on account of the heterogeneous nature of *Joseph and Aseneth* and the consequent difficulty of classification which derives from it, it is necessary to “proceed ... without any fixed answer to the question of genre beyond the loose classification of Joseph and Aseneth as Hellenistic novel or romance.”⁵⁰ In fact, Chesnutt considers that a comparative analysis between *Joseph and Aseneth* and the Hellenistic romances, which is developed before a descriptive analysis of the themes and motifs proper to the text itself, can distort the enquiry

⁴⁵ C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 186.

⁴⁶ Cf. H.C. KEE, “The Social-Cultural Setting of Joseph and Aseneth”, especially, 398. Kee lists the characters typical of the ancient romance (from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D.): a) the work serves as propaganda for a particular cult; b) there is a description of an experience of conversion; c) the conversion leads to a sacred marriage; d) the literary style passes from the narrative to the poetic and liturgical; e) the action develops by following the interior conflicts and objective difficulties of the hero or heroine until the liberation which is the result of a divine intervention; f) the climax of the account consists in the death and rebirth of the hero and heroine, a theophany, and the self-consecration of the protagonist to the divinity. *Joseph and Aseneth* would, therefore, be one of the few ancient romances in which all these elements are present.

⁴⁷ G.D. KILPATRICK, Review of *Untersuchungen zu Joseph und Aseneth*, by C. Burchard, and *Joseph et Aséneth*, by M. Philonenko, 234.

⁴⁸ For more details, see e.g., A.-M. DENIS, *Introduction à la littérature religieuse judéo-hellénistique*, 322–323; D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 450–458.

⁴⁹ Cf. C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 186.

⁵⁰ R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 91.

about the literary genre: often, the common elements perform different roles within the respective model of conversion-initiation present in each of the works.⁵¹

η) Conclusions

In the light of the questions dealt with in this chapter, we can conclude that *Joseph and Aseneth* should be considered a Hellenistic novel of Jewish origin, written in Greek, probably between 100 B.C. and 115 A.D. Scholars have advanced strong arguments for the theory that it was written before A.D. 38. In all probability, it comes from Egypt, and, if the approximate dating is not mistaken, it is likely that the book is addressed to Jewish readers.

2. Exegetical analysis

Within the narrative, we can identify three principal stages which develop the internal and external process of Aseneth who passes from idolatry to being a believer:

1. Idolatry (chapters 1–5);
2. The meeting with Joseph and its consequences (chapters 6–10);
3. Soliloquy and prayer addressed to God (chapters 11–13).

In particular, in what follows, we shall analyse some key texts which reveal the transformation of Aseneth who goes from abandoning the cult of the idols to the recognition of the God of Joseph. To this end, we shall study the vocabulary of the text with its technical terms and underlying theological ideas. Given the absence of an available commentary, it will be necessary to consult the few monographs and the notes which are found in the modern-language translations. By contrast with so many studies devoted to biblical or intertestamental texts, we shall seek to avoid an interpretation of the text which depends on a concept which turns out to be increasingly equivocal, such as that of “conversion” (see the first chapter of this monograph), because under this category are usually grouped aspects that are very different from one another, such as the offering of vows and sacrifices to YHWH without membership of the people of Israel (e.g. the sailors in Jonah 1:16) and the concrete integration of a proselyte into the Jewish community.⁵²

⁵¹ See *ibid.*, 15.

⁵² See e.g. the texts and examples quoted by S.J.D. COHEN, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew”, *passim*.

a) *The initial situation: Aseneth's idolatry*

The first chapters of *Joseph and Aseneth* introduce the reader to the principal characters in the story. They describe in particular detail the setting, the characters and the events which act as preamble to the story as a whole.

In chapter 1, taking up Gen 41:49, the author tells of Joseph's arrival at Heliopolis to collect the region's grain. Here, he meets Aseneth, daughter of Pentefres, priest and counsellor of Pharaoh. In this way, the novel elaborates on the concise information on the marriage of Joseph and Aseneth which is provided in the book of Genesis (Gen 41:45, 50; 46:20^{LXX}), explaining the prior events. Aseneth is described, on the one hand, as a young woman of rare beauty (*Jos. Asen.* 1:4) who is courted by many men, including also the son of the Pharaoh (*Jos. Asen.* 1:7), but, on the other hand, as a young woman who is "arrogant and proud who scorns every man" (*Jos. Asen.* 2:1: Καὶ ἦν Ἀσενέθ ἐξουθενοῦσα καὶ καταπτύουσα πάντα ἄνδρα καὶ ἦν ἀλαζῶν καὶ ὑπερήφανος πρὸς πάντα ἄνθρωπον). The marriage with Joseph, initially proposed to her by her father Pentefres (*Jos. Asen.* 4:8), meets with her strong opposition: she is a woman who is opposed to this union because she considers him "a foreigner, a fugitive, one sold as a slave" (*Jos. Asen.* 4:9) – a judgement which does not seem unjustified when one considers Joseph's origins (cf. Gen 37:27).

Aseneth lives in a luxurious tower together with seven virgins, her handmaids, "where she grew up in her virginal state" (*Jos. Asen.* 2:7: ὅπου ἡ παρθενία αὐτῆς ἐτρέφετο⁵³) and, as our author informs us, her interest is focused wholly on the worship of the gods, something which is explained on several occasions:

- *Jos. Asen.* 2:3: [...] εἰς τοὺς τοίχους πεπηγμένοι οἱ θεοὶ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων ὧν οὐκ ἦν ἀριθμὸς, χρυσοῖ καὶ ἀργυροῖ. καὶ πάντας ἐκείνους ἐσέβετο Ἀσενέθ καὶ ἐφοβεῖτο αὐτοὺς καὶ θυσίας αὐτοῖς ἐπετέλει καθ' ἡμέραν, "hanging on the walls were the Egyptian gods – who were innumerable – in gold and silver; and Aseneth worshipped them all, feared them and offered sacrifices to them every day."
- *Jos. Asen.* 3:6: [...] καὶ ἦσαν τὰ ὀνόματα τῶν θεῶν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων ἐγκεκολλημένα πανταχοῦ ἐπὶ τε τοῖς ψελίοις καὶ τοῖς λίθοις καὶ τὰ πρόσωπα τῶν εἰδώλων πάντων ἦσαν ἐκτετυπωμένα ἐν αὐτοῖς, "and the names of the Egyptian gods were inscribed everywhere, on her bracelets and on her jewels, and the images of all the idols were carved on them."
- *Jos. Asen.* 4:1: [...] Πεντεφρῆς καὶ ἡ γυνὴ [...] ἐώραν αὐτὴν κεκοσμημένην ὡς νύμφην θεοῦ, "Pentefres and his wife...saw her adorned as a spouse of God."

⁵³ The Greek text is being quoted according to the edition of Christoph Burchard. Possible differences with Uta Barbara Fink's edition will be noted.

It is probable that this description of Aseneth's daily life involves some heavy exaggeration, but it is nonetheless clear that the text intends to highlight three *motifs*:

- The gods worshipped by Aseneth are innumerable and omnipresent in her daily life. Her chamber is full of images (εἰδωλα⁵⁴) of these gods, and her whole attention is devoted to a cult that is very punctilious towards them.
- The narrator explicitly designates these gods as “gods of the Egyptians”. On the one hand, this genitive indicates that the gods worshipped by Aseneth are only the Egyptian ones, and that implies that they are not the gods of the Israelites for whom the novel is composed; on the other hand, these gods will be those whom the young woman will consider opposed to the creator God whom she will address later in her prayer which begins in *Jos. Asen.* 12:1.
- The state of virginity⁵⁵ and the lifestyle of Aseneth, who lives far away from the social context external to her house, highlight the particular union and veneration which she entertains for the Egyptian gods, so much so as to appear as the spouse (νύμφη – see also *Jos. Asen.* 4:10) of one of them.⁵⁶ In such circumstances, any kind of “transformation” of Aseneth's life, including her “religious” life, seems improbable.

b) Second phase: The encounter with Joseph and its consequences

As chapter 6 of the novel makes clear, Joseph's visit marks a passage of fundamental importance in the development of the story. In the light of Aseneth's encounter with him, the situation seems to have been turned on its head: in the face of Joseph's beauty, Aseneth receives a kind of revelation which causes in her a deep process of transformation and which changes profoundly her *status* as a proud and pagan woman. Recognising in Joseph the “son of God” (*Jos. Asen.* 6:3, 5), she addresses him for the first time, asking for his kindness and pardon for having spoken words of scorn about him when her father, Pentefres, announced the visit of Joseph to his house and proposed that she marry him (*Jos. Asen.* 4:10–11). In this connection, we shall investigate five particular passages in the novel.

⁵⁴ The use of the noun εἰδωλον for denoting “idols” is one of the numerous elements of typical LXX language the author of the romance *Joseph and Aseneth* is indebted to. See e.g. G. DELLING, “Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta in ‘Joseph und Aseneth’”, 237–238.

⁵⁵ For the implications of the virginity of both Aseneth and Joseph, see M. THIESSEN, “Aseneth's Eight-Day Transformation as Scriptural Justification for Conversion”, 231–232, who points out that both of them seem to share the same values, except for Aseneth's idolatry, which is what constitutes the gap between them. For the importance of sexual morality in the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*, see also M. TUVAL, “Doing without the Temple”, 197.

⁵⁶ It is difficult to answer the question of whether this expression is to be understood literally (for a similar idea see Isa 62:5; see also M. PHILONENKO, *Joseph et Aséneth*, 141, who points to alleged Egyptian parallels) or if the genitive is a genitive of quality or origin (for this idea, see C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 206, note a).

(1) The key passage which expresses this turning point is *Jos. Asen.* 6:2–8. We present here the Greek text and translation:

6:2	Τί νῦν ἐγὼ ποιήσω ἢ ταλαίπωρος; οὐχὶ λελάληκα λέγουσα ὅτι Ἰωσήφ ἔρχεται ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ποιμένος ἐκ γῆς Χαναάν; καὶ νῦν ἰδοὺ ὁ ἥλιος ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἦκε πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐν τῷ ἄρματι αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰσηλθεν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν ἡμῶν σήμερον καὶ λάμπει εἰς αὐτήν ὡς φῶς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.	“What shall I do now, unhappy as I am? Did I not say, perhaps, that Joseph is arriving, the shepherd’s son from the land of Canaan? And now, behold, the sun from heaven has come among us on his chariot; and come into our house today and is shining in it like light on the earth.
6:3	ἐγὼ δὲ ἄφρων καὶ θρασεῖα ἐξουδένωσα αὐτὸν καὶ ἐλάλησα ῥήματα πονηρὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ οὐκ ᾔδειν ὅτι Ἰωσήφ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν.	But, foolish and rude that I am, I have scorned him and spoken evil words of him. I did not know that Joseph is son of God.
6:4	τίς γὰρ ἀνθρώπων ἐπὶ γῆς γεννήσει τοιούτον κάλλος καὶ τίς κοιλία γυναικὸς τέξεται τοσοῦτον φῶς; ταλαίπωρος ἐγὼ καὶ ἄφρων, ὅτι λελάληκα τῷ πατρί μου περὶ αὐτοῦ ῥήματα πονηρὰ	Indeed, who, among men on earth, will father such beauty and what woman’s womb will bear such light? Unhappy and foolish I am! Because I have said evil words of him to my father.
6:5	Καὶ νῦν ποῦ ἀπελεύσομαι καὶ ἀποκρυβήσομαι ἀπὸ προσώπου αὐτοῦ, ὅπως μὴ ὄψηταί με Ἰωσήφ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, διότι λελάληκα πονηρὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ;	And, now, where shall I flee and hide from his face, so that Joseph, the son of God, does not see me, because I have said wicked things of him?
6:6	καὶ ποῦ φεύξομαι καὶ κρυβήσομαι, ὅτι πᾶσαν ἀποκρυβὴν αὐτὸς ὄρᾳ καὶ οὐδὲν κρυπτὸν λέληθεν αὐτὸν διὰ τὸ φῶς τὸ μέγα τὸ ὄν ἐν αὐτῷ;	Where shall I go to hide, since he sees every hiding place and no secret escapes him because of the great light that is in him?
6:7	καὶ νῦν ἴλεός μοι γενοῦ, κύριε, ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰωσήφ, διότι λελάληκα ἐγὼ κατ’ αὐτοῦ ῥήματα πονηρὰ ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ.	And, now, be gracious to me, O Lord, God of Joseph, because I have spoken wicked words about him in ignorance.
6:8	καὶ νῦν δότω με ὁ πατήρ μου τῷ Ἰωσήφ μᾶλλον εἰς παιδίσκην καὶ εἰς δούλην καὶ δουλεύσω αὐτῷ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον.	Now let my father give me to Joseph as his handmaid and slave, and I will serve him for ever

The following *motifs* of this passage merit our attention:

- Joseph’s visit disturbs Aseneth profoundly and this drives her into uttering in her heart words of repentance: she recognises that the son of a shepherd of Canaan is actually a “son of God”. However, we do not know what she intends exactly by this expression. It is possible that it is an allusion to the quality of “divine life” which Joseph enjoys already during his earthly life, just as, later, after her transformation, Aseneth will be presented as a “daughter of the Most High” (*Jos. Asen.* 21:4: θυγάτηρ ὑψίστου).⁵⁷
- Aseneth wishes to hide because she believes that no secret escapes Joseph, not even the scornful words which she uttered about him in the presence of her father, Pentefres (*Jos. Asen.* 4:9–11). Thus, it seems that Aseneth is attributing to Joseph powers usually attributed to God in various biblical texts (e.g. Jer 23:23–24; Job 34:21).⁵⁸ In any case, we already have an outline of the opposition between “the dumb and dead idols” (*Jos. Asen.* 13:11), whom Aseneth will reject, and the prophetic powers of God and his messengers.⁵⁹
- Here, we see already a *motif* which we shall find repeated several times in Aseneth’s words, the *motif* of “not knowing” (*Jos. Asen.* 6:3: οὐκ ᾔδειν) and of her “ignorance” (*Jos. Asen.* 6:7: λελάληκα ... ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ). As we shall see, the fact that Aseneth is aware of this ignorance introduces a process which leads to the overcoming of this state.
- At the same time, this discourse of Aseneth, initially a soliloquy, is a request for pardon from the one whom now, and for the first time, she calls “Lord” (κύριος), as if she already knew the name of the God to whom alone she now addresses herself. This is the first element of a theological language typical of the LXX of which we find other examples in the speeches and the prayer of Aseneth (*Jos. Asen.* 11–13).⁶⁰ In a certain sense, there is confirmation here that, just as from the beginning of the novel, Aseneth is being characterised as a young woman who has nothing in common with the other Egyptian young women but is completely like the daughters of the Hebrews (*Jos. Asen.* 1:5: κατὰ πάντα ὅμοια ταῖς θυγατράσι τῶν Ἑβραίων) with whom, in fact, she also shares the language of prayer.
- In this passage of *Joseph and Aseneth*, which presents the features of a love story, it emerges how, in the young woman, falling in love and the readiness to change are simultaneous.⁶¹ Aseneth has no need of a particular revelation, for example, a vision or an apparition, in order to

⁵⁷ For this interpretation, see the observations of R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, who concludes from the description of both Aseneth and Joseph, that “the people of God on earth are already living a kind of angelic life” (144).

⁵⁸ See also D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 472, note 4.

⁵⁹ In the final analysis, this opposition goes back to the texts of Deutero-Isaiah, e.g. Isa 41:21–29.

⁶⁰ For a more detailed study of this question, see E. BONIS, “Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*”, 436–442.

⁶¹ Thus, D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 472, note 5.

know the God of Israel; the encounter with Joseph seems sufficient to make her ready to call on this God for the first time.

(2) Joseph too is presented as a very beautiful man who hates foreign women and avoids all contact with them (cf. Gen 39:7–10). From this point of view, he is no different from Aseneth. His motivation, however, is bound up with his θεοσεβεία (*Jos. Asen.* 4:7: καὶ ἔστιν Ἰωσήφ ἀνὴρ θεοσεβῆς καὶ σώφρων καὶ παρθένος, “Joseph is a pious man, chaste and a virgin”) and, therefore, with his fidelity to the commandments which his father Jacob had handed on to him (*Jos. Asen.* 7:5: “My sons, keep yourselves strictly from union with a foreign woman; union with her is ruin and destruction”⁶²). Joseph practises the most rigorous chastity where the Egyptian women are concerned (*Jos. Asen.* 7:4: “all the wives and daughters of the nobles and satraps of the whole of the land of Egypt pestered him to sleep with him ... but Joseph scorned them ... for he said: ‘I will not sin before the Lord, the God of my father, Israel, or in the sight of my father, Jacob’”) and, though receiving Aseneth “as a sister” (*Jos. Asen.* 7:8) – but only because Pentefres guarantees that the daughter “is a virgin who hates all men” (*Jos. Asen.* 7:8) –, refuses all physical contact with her, withdrawing from the brotherly kiss. The *motif* of this refusal is expressed in *Jos. Asen.* 8:5 where it says:

8:5	<p>Οὐκ ἔστι προσῆκον ἀνδρὶ θεοσεβεῖ, ὃς εὐλογεῖ τῷ στόματι αὐτοῦ τὸν θεὸν τὸν ζῶντα (A) καὶ ἐσθίει ἄρτον εὐλογημένον ζωῆς (B) καὶ πίνει ποτήριον εὐλογημένον ἀθανασίας (C) καὶ χρίεται χρίσματι εὐλογημένῳ ἀφθαρσίας, (D) φιλῆσαι γυναῖκα ἀλλοτρίαν, ἣτις εὐλογεῖ τῷ στόματι αὐτῆς εἰδῶλα νεκρὰ καὶ κωφὰ (A¹) καὶ ἐσθίει ἐκ τῆς τραπέζης αὐτῶν ἄρτον ἀγχόνης (B¹) καὶ πίνει ἐκ τῆς σπονδῆς αὐτῶν ποτήριον ἐνέδρας (C¹) καὶ χρίεται χρίσματι ἀπωλείας· (D¹)</p>	<p>It is not appropriate for a pious man, who blesses the living God with his mouth, and eats a food of blessed life and drinks a chalice of immortality</p> <p>and anoints himself with blessed oil of incorruptibility, to kiss a foreign woman who blesses with her mouth dead and dumb idols, eats from their table food that has been strangled, drinks from their libation a chalice of deceit and anoints herself with the oil of ruin.</p>
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⁶² For the prohibition of exogamy, see e.g. the following passages: Gen 24:3.37; 28:1; Deut 7:3; 1 Kgs 11:2; for further details, see C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 211, note k; K.-W. NIEBUHR, “Ethik und Tora”, 197 (with note 28).

This formula, constructed by four clauses in antithetical parallelism,⁶³ articulates the basic difference between the religiosity of Joseph and that of Aseneth, and, in the final analysis, is intended to highlight his specific Jewish identity by contrast with that of the foreign woman.⁶⁴ As is inferred from the text, the contrast is such that there can be no intimacy between those who worship the living God and those who worship idols that are dead and mute. In the light of this contrast, the marriage proposed by Pentefres would seem *a priori* impossible. The social concern reflected in this text is clearly confirmed by the prohibition in *Jos. Asen.* 8:7 in which it is stated categorically, that is, without mentioning again the cultic practices, that:

8:7	ὁμοίως καὶ γυναικὶ θεοσεβεῖ οὐκ ἔστι προσῆκον φιλῆσαι ἄνδρα ἀλλότριον, διότι βδέλυγμὰ ἐστὶ τοῦτο ἐνώπιον κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ	In the same way, it is also not appropriate for a pious woman to kiss a foreign man, because this is an abomination before the Lord God.
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This prohibition serves to clarify the Jewish identity further, and the conduct appropriate for a Jew in an environment where contact with the Gentiles must have been frequent.

The formula concerning the prohibitions, which is introduced by “it is not appropriate for” (οὐκ ἔστι προσῆκον) and “it is not fitting” (οὐ προσήκει), returns on other occasions in the text (*Jos. Asen.* 21:1; 23:9, 12; 29:3) and is always set in relation to the term θεοσεβής.⁶⁵ As Burchard⁶⁶ and Chesnutt⁶⁷ maintain, this adjective, in *Joseph and Aseneth*, is a kind of technical term which is used to indicate the Jews who worship the one and only God and observe fully the ethical models belonging to their belief.⁶⁸ In this way, the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* would seem to be providing a series of clues as to the right conduct of Jews in their dealings with pagans, precisely by following the example of Joseph.

Despite Aseneth’s distance from the people of God, as it appears at the beginning of the story, she is nonetheless portrayed carefully in such a way that she has the potential to become Joseph’s wife. In fact, the author is concerned to anticipate the legitimacy of the marriage between the two protagonists by bringing the figure of Aseneth close to that of Joseph in some

⁶³ For an extended and more detailed treatment, cf. C. BURCHARD, “The Importance of Joseph and Aseneth for the Study of New Testament”, 109–111; R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 99–100.

⁶⁴ See also C. BURCHARD, “The Importance of Joseph and Aseneth for the Study of New Testament”, 111.

⁶⁵ See D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 476, note 2.

⁶⁶ See C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 206, note m.

⁶⁷ See R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 100–101.

⁶⁸ As for the expression οὐκ ἔστι προσῆκον, see also K.-W. NIEBUHR, “Ethik und Tora”, 192, who considers that this formula is characteristic of paraenetic language expressing the rules of living in accordance with Jewish law.

respects. Actually, already from chapter 1, the reader is told that the young woman is totally unlike the Egyptian women: her beauty “was wholly like the daughters of the Hebrews: she was tall like Sarah; attractive like Rebecca; beautiful like Rachel” (*Jos. Asen.* 1:5). That means to say that she is being compared to Joseph’s immediate ancestors, the wives of the patriarchs.

The author is careful to treat the figure of Aseneth with the use of some terms which correspond in many cases to the portrait of Joseph. In fact, just as for Joseph, who is described as a beautiful man, the object of constant desire to all the Egyptian women (*Jos. Asen.* 7:3), of Aseneth it is said that “the fame of her beauty was widespread ... and all the sons of the powerful wanted to marry her... and there was a great rivalry among them...and they sought to fight each other because of her” (*Jos. Asen.* 1:6); and, again, just like Joseph, she refused their advances and remained a virgin (παρθένος; *Jos. Asen.* 4:7; 8,1). Thus, Aseneth is a virgin who hates all men (*Jos. Asen.* 2:1; 7:8).

Even the epithets attributed to each of them recall one another, as will be seen again elsewhere in the novel: Joseph is the “powerful man of God” (ὁ δυνατὸς τοῦ θεοῦ; *Jos. Asen.* 3:4; 4:7; 18:1–2; 21:21) and “son of God” (*Jos. Asen.* 6:3, 5; see also 18:11; 21:4); Aseneth is described as being adorned “like a spouse of a god” (*Jos. Asen.* 4:1: ὡς νύμφην θεοῦ) and, after her transformation, “daughter of the Most High” (*Jos. Asen.* 21:4: θυγάτηρ ὑψίστου) in the same context in which Joseph is called “the firstborn son of God” (*Jos. Asen.* 21:4: ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ πρωτότοκος). Moreover, even heavenly beauty is associated with both: in fact, in *Jos. Asen.* 6:2–6, the description of Joseph seems the description of an angelic figure; the same could be said of the description of Aseneth in *Jos. Asen.* 18:9–11 and 20:6–7 where she is compared to the sun, just like Joseph. In this sense, “Aseneth and Joseph are almost mirror images of each other”⁶⁹, that is, the author seems intent on describing Aseneth as worthy to be the wife of the patriarch Joseph. However, the principal obstacle in the way of bringing together the two protagonists seems to be her idolatry.

(3) Aseneth’s failure to recognise Joseph at the beginning reflects the condition in which she is living: she does not know the God of Israel, and, therefore, as emerges from the words of Joseph when he pronounces over her the prayer of blessing, she is a vessel of darkness, error and death. Chapter 8 records the following prayer of blessing pronounced by Joseph, and some of its aspects deserve our attention:

⁶⁹ R.C. DOUGLAS, “Liminality and Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth”, 35.

8:9	<p>Κύριε, ὁ θεὸς τοῦ πατρός μου Ἰσραήλ, ὁ ὕψιστος καὶ δυνατὸς τοῦ Ἰακώβ, ὁ ζωοποιῶν τὰ πάντα καὶ καλέσας ἀπὸ τοῦ σκότους εἰς τὸ φῶς καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς πλάνης εἰς τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν, σύ, κύριε, εὐλόγησον τὴν παρθένον ταύτην καὶ ἀνακαίνισον αὐτὴν τῷ πνεύματί σου καὶ ἀνάπλασον αὐτὴν τῇ χειρί σου τῇ κρυφαίᾳ καὶ ἀναζωοποίησον αὐτήν· καὶ φαγέτω ἄρτον ζωῆς σου καὶ πιέτω ποτήριον εὐλογίας σου· καὶ συγκαταρίθμησον αὐτὴν τῷ λαῷ σου, ὃν ἐξελέξω, πρὶν γενέσθαι τὰ πάντα· καὶ εἰσελθέτω εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσίν σου, ἣν ἠτοίμασας τοῖς ἐκλεκτοῖς σου, καὶ ζησάτω ἐν τῇ ζωῇ σου εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον.</p>	<p>Lord, God of my father, Israel, Most High, Mighty One of Jacob, who have given life to everything, called [everything] from darkness to light, from error to truth, from death to life, you, O Lord, bless this virgin, renew her with your Spirit, recreate her with your hidden hand, make her live again with your life; eat the bread of your life and drink the chalice of your blessing; include her among your people whom you have chosen, before all things came to be, [make her] enter your rest which you have prepared for your chosen ones, and live in your life eternal, for ever.</p>
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This prayer with which Joseph asks God to receive Aseneth is the passage that closes the previous section which describes the opening situation and the details of the characters and that also opens the section which tells of Aseneth's change. The prayer is divided into two parts: a calling on God which contains various divine attributes and descriptions of his action expressed in participles;⁷⁰ and a prayer in which Joseph asks God for his favour towards the foreign woman. The following *motifs* seem worthy of note:

– God is invoked, as the God of Joseph's father, that is, as God of the patriarch Jacob/Israel, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a creator God. At the beginning, the prayer presents a different style from others (e.g. Neh 9:6) because it avoids mentioning the elements of inanimate nature. Joseph's prayer is focused on the fact, rather, that God gives life to everything and to all people. This type of formulation, which refers to God's creating in an absolute sense, aims at mediating the idea that he is also the creator of all living beings and so too of Aseneth.

⁷⁰ Concerning the composition of the invocation, see e.g. W·D· FURLEY, J·M· BREMER, *Greek Hymns. Selected Cult Songs from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period. Volume One: The Texts in Translation* 52: "... the precise naming of the god addressed was important both from the point of view of politeness and courtesy, so as not to offend a sensitive power, and from the point of view of establishing the precise channel along which one wished divine succour to flow."

– God’s activity is not limited to “creating” but is prolonged in history in such a way as to intervene in the *hic et nunc*. As a result, the second part of the prayer, which is introduced by the request to bless Aseneth, that is, to act towards Aseneth with favour, is motivated by the creative faculty of God. This is translated into a “re-creation”⁷¹ of Aseneth which transforms her profoundly, conferring on her the truth, that is, the abandoning of error⁷² which, in this context, is idolatry (see e.g. Deut 4:19), and a new life the details of which are not yet marked out.

– Joseph’s prayer does not stop at the simple request for Aseneth’s “transformation” but goes further, that is, he intercedes with God to receive the maiden into the people whom he has chosen (τῷ λαῷ σου, ὃν ἐξελέξω) and make her enter into “your rest” (εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσίν σου), which is, probably, a place prepared for those who are saved (cf., for example, Ps 94:11^{LXX}).⁷³ Although Israel did not exist yet as a people in the time of the patriarchs and the use of this category in Joseph’s prayer is a clear anachronism, it is obvious that Aseneth’s future adhering to the God of Joseph involves not only the choice of another God and the abandoning of idolatry but also adhering to the people whom God has chosen. It is not clear, however, what Joseph thinks are the exact outlines which define this people clearly, differentiating it from the others.

(4) After Joseph pronounces this prayer over her, the maiden is seized by a violent disturbance (*Jos. Asen.* 9:1: “...there were in her joy and sorrow, much fear and trembling and a continuous sweating”) and decides to abandon the idols:

9:2	Καὶ ἔκλαυσε κλαυθμῷ μεγάλῳ καὶ πικρῷ καὶ μετενόει ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν αὐτῆς, ὧν ἐσέβετο, καὶ προσώχθισε τοῖς εἰδώλοις πᾶσι καὶ περιέμενε τοῦ γενέσθαι ἑσπέραν.	She wept with strong and bitter tears and converted from the gods whom she worshipped; and repudiated all her idols and waited for evening to come.
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This verse represents a decisive turning point in the unfolding of the story and in the very life of Aseneth who, from now on, will no longer be an idolater but will embrace the faith in the

⁷¹ As M. THIESSEN, “Aseneth’s Eight-Day Transformation as Scriptural Justification for Conversion”, 234–235, points out, Aseneth’s transformation takes eight days, starting at the first day of the week, i.e. the first day of creation (*Jos. Asen.* 9:5): “[...] the author intends his readers to understand Aseneth’s conversion as paralleling God’s creation of the world, something alluded to in Joseph’s earlier prayer as well.”

⁷² See also M. VOGEL, “Einführung in die Schrift”, 28: “Die Schöpfung als Bewegung ‘vom Irrtum zur Wahrheit’ präfiguriert die Abkehr Aseneths von der Idolatrie und ihre Hinkehr zum wahren Gott und umgekehrt erscheint ihre Konversion in schöpfungstheologischen Kategorien.”

⁷³ For further information on this term, cf. C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 213, note f2.

God of Joseph.⁷⁴ Interestingly, in this context, the verb μετανοέω appears.⁷⁵ Even if *Joseph and Aseneth* no doubt shares a specific vocabulary with the LXX,⁷⁶ it is striking that the use of μετανοέω with reference to non-Israelites is absent from the LXX. On the contrary, the LXX occurrences of the verb usually refer either to God who changes his mind (e.g. Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:9; 4:2; Amos 7:3) or to Israel (or an individual in Israel) who is requested to repent and turn to God after having sinned (e.g. Sir 48:15; Jer 8:6; 38[31]:19).⁷⁷ Therefore, it is all the more significant that *Joseph and Aseneth* develops a specific vocabulary denoting the desire of non-Israelites to worship the God of the Israelites. As we shall see, this verb and the cognate noun μετάνοια will play a specific role in the book.

(5) In *Joseph and Aseneth*, the sin of idolatry constitutes the true breaking point which distinguishes and separates Joseph and Aseneth, and, in the final analysis, the Jews from the pagans of which the protagonists of the novel are the respective representatives.⁷⁸ Aseneth manifests her total repudiation of idolatry not only in smashing the idols⁷⁹ (*Jos. Asen.* 10:12: “Aseneth hurried to seize all the gods who were in her chamber – gods of gold and silver, innumerable⁸⁰, broke them into little pieces and threw all the idols of the Egyptians out of the window...”) and in throwing away the sacrificial food, so that not even her dogs could eat it, that is, the dogs that belonged to Aseneth (*Jos. Asen.* 10:13: “she took her royal food, the flesh of the fatlings, the fish, the flesh of the heifer, all the sacrifices for her gods, the vessels of wine for the libation in their honour. She threw everything out of the window and gave everything to stray dogs. In fact, Aseneth said to herself: ‘My dogs must not eat [the scraps] of my meal and of the sacrifice to the idols; rather, let stray dogs eat them’”), but also in manifesting this scorn in the rest of the story (*Jos. Asen.* 11:4–5; 12:12; 13:11). Even the announcement of her transformation with which she informs Joseph of her change is formulated in terms of a renunciation of idolatry (*Jos. Asen.* 19:5: “I have thrown all the idols far from me and they have

⁷⁴ For this opinion, see also D. SÄNGER, “Bekehrung und Exodus”, 33.

⁷⁵ See also D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 479, note 2: “Il verbo μετανοεῖν [...] ricopre i *Giuseppe e Aseneth* un’ area semantica che comprende diverse accezioni [...]: pentirsi, fare penitenza, convertirsi [...] In realtà, il pentimento per il culto tributato agli idoli corrisponde e coincide con la conversione al Dio di Israele.”

⁷⁶ See G. DELLING, “Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta in ‘Joseph und Aseneth’”, 233–255.

⁷⁷ After all, the LXX does not develop any specific vocabulary to denote the wish of non-Israelites to join the Jewish community and abandon their previous religious activities; for a brief overview of the LXX passages dealing with non-Israelites seeking to worship the God of Israel, see D. SCIALABBA, “The Vocabulary of Conversion in *Joseph and Aseneth* and in the *Acts of the Apostles*”, especially 502–504.

⁷⁸ Cf. R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 102.

⁷⁹ K.-W. NIEBUHR, “Ethik und Tora”, 199–200, recognizes some sarcastic features in this description of the destruction of the idols. However, these are motivated by the paraenetic intentions of the author.

⁸⁰ Note that the author is taking up, roughly, the vocabulary of *Jos. Asen.* 2:3.

been destroyed”). In other words, Aseneth has distanced herself in a concrete way from the objects which she had worshipped.⁸¹

(6) Repentance for the sin of idolatry and the total repudiation of the idols constitute the real leap which marks Aseneth’s transformation: from now on, her faith will be in the God of Israel, although her explicit professions will take place in the subsequent chapters (*Jos. Asen.*12:1). What still holds Aseneth back from putting into words her adhering to the God of Joseph is her feeling of inadequacy before him because of her new awareness of the gravity of her sin.⁸² For this reason, her rejection of her idolatrous conduct is accompanied by gestures and words which express the penitential state through which she is expiating her faults. In fact, immediately after having abandoned the idols, Aseneth begins a period of seven days of penitence, fasting and prayer which lead her to put on garments of mourning, to sprinkle her head with ashes, to weep and to call on the God of Joseph as her refuge (chapters 9–13). In fact, it says of her in those days:

10:1	καὶ ἄρτον οὐκ ἔφαγε καὶ ὕδωρ οὐκ ἔπιεν. καὶ ἐπῆλθεν ἡ νύξ [...] ἦν αὐτὴ γρηγοροῦσα μόνη καὶ ἐνεθυμεῖτο καὶ ἔκλαιε καὶ ἐπάτασσε τῇ χειρὶ τὸ στήθος αὐτῆς πυκνά [...]	She did not eat or drink water. When night came [...] she alone was awake, she reflected and prayed, often she beat her breast with her hand [...]
10:10–11	Καὶ ἔσπευσεν Ἀσενέθ καὶ ἀπέθετο τὴν στολὴν αὐτῆς τὴν βασιλικὴν τὴν βυσσίνην καὶ χρυσοῦφῃ καὶ ἐνεδύσατο τὸν χιτῶνα τὸν μελανὸν πένθους· καὶ ἔλυσε τὴν ζώνην αὐτῆς τὴν χρυσοῦφην καὶ περιεζώσατο σχοινίον ⁸³ καὶ ἀπέθετο τὴν κίδαριν ἐκ τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς καὶ τὸ διάδημα καὶ τὰ ψέλια ἀπὸ τῶν χειρῶν καὶ τῶν ποδῶν αὐτῆς καὶ ἔθηκε πάντα εἰς τὸ ἔδαφος. καὶ ἔλαβε τὴν στολὴν αὐτῆς τὴν ἐκλεκτὴν καὶ τὴν ζώνην τὴν χρυσοῦφην καὶ τὴν κίδαριν καὶ τὸ διάδημα	In haste, she took off her royal robe of byssus, embroidered with gold and put on the black tunic of mourning; undid her golden belt and girded herself with rope; took off the tiara and diadem from her head, the bracelets from her hands and feet and put everything on the floor. She took her precious robe, her golden belt, the tiara and the diadem and threw everything to the poor, from the window which faced north,

⁸¹ C. WETZ, *Eros und Bekehrung*, 122, speaks of a “Separationsphase”.

⁸² D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 479, notae 3.

⁸³ The phrase καὶ περιεζώσατο σχοινίον is missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

	καὶ ἔρριψε πάντα διὰ τῆς θυρίδος τῆς βλεπούσης πρὸς βορρᾶν τοῖς πένησιν ⁸⁴ ,	
10:14	[...] καὶ ἔλαβε τὴν δέρριν τοῦ σάκκου καὶ περιεζώσατο περὶ τὴν ὄσφυν αὐτῆς· καὶ ἔλυσε τὸ ἐμπλόκιον τοῦ τριχώματος τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς καὶ κατέπασε τέφραν ἐπάνω τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς	[...] she took a band of sackcloth and wound it round her waist. She untied the clip of the hairs of her head and sprinkled her head with ash.

These penitential practices, which recall those of self-abasement⁸⁵ mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (cf., for example, Gen 37:34; 2 Sam 1:11; Isa 58:5; Lam 2:10; Jonah 3:5–8), serve to emphasise the profound change which, on the one hand, consists of the recognition of her own error, on the other hand, of addressing herself to the God of Joseph, albeit initially with some timidity. The eighth day is followed by the two soliloquies (chapter 11) and Aseneth’s long prayer (chapters 12–13).

c) Third phase: Soliloquy and prayer to God

α) Chapter 11

(1) In the soliloquies which she utters “in her heart without opening her mouth” (*Jos. Asen.* 11:3⁸⁶), Aseneth seeks within herself the courage to address the God of Joseph. The awareness of her own guilt leads her to make her prayer to him without success on a good two occasions.

– In *Jos. Asen.* 11:9, Aseneth shows herself aware of the incompatibility of her behaviour in the past as an idolater with calling on the God of Joseph:

11:9	καὶ οὐκ ἔστι μοι τόλμη ἐπικαλέσασθαι κύριον τὸν θεὸν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ τὸν ὑψιστον καὶ παντοδύναμον τοῦ Ἰωσήφ, διότι μεμιάται τὸ στόμα μου ἀπὸ τῶν θυσιῶν τῶν εἰδώλων.	I do not have the courage to call on the The Lord, the God of heaven, the Most High, the mighty [God] of Joseph since my mouth is defiled from the sacrifices of idols.
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– In *Jos. Asen.* 11:17, Aseneth expresses herself more generally, acknowledging her sins. These could provoke the wrath of Joseph’s God:

⁸⁴ The adjective τοῖς πένησιν is missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

⁸⁵ For further details, see e.g. the article by E. KUTSCH, “‘Trauerbräuche’ und ‘Selbstminderungsriten’ im Alten Testament”, *passim*; see the exegesis of Jon 3:5–8 in the first chapter of the present monograph.

⁸⁶ For a similar formulation, cf. 1 Sam 1:13; Jdt 13:4.

11:17	καὶ νῦν ἐν τοῖς δάκρυσί μου τούτοις καὶ τῇ τέφρᾳ ταύτῃ κατεσποδωμένη καὶ τῷ ῥύπῳ τῆς ταπεινώσεώς μου, πῶς ἐγὼ ἀνοίξω τὸ στόμα μου πρὸς τὸν ὕψιστον καὶ πῶς ὀνομάσω τὸ ἅγιον αὐτοῦ ὄνομα καὶ φοβερόν, ⁸⁷ μήποτε ὀργισθῆ μοι κύριος, διότι ἐν ταῖς ἀνομίαις μου ἐγὼ ἐπεκαλεσάμην τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ἅγιον αὐτοῦ;	And now, in these my tears, in the sprinkled ash and in the filth of my humiliation, how can I open my mouth to the Most High, how can I utter his holy and terrible name, without the Lord being angry with me because in my sins I have called upon his holy name?
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(2) However, the feeling of inadequacy which Aseneth feels within herself does not give way to resignation: empowered by her contrition and the mercy of the living God of whom she has heard spoken, the maiden decides in her heart to address him in order to find refuge and pardon:

11:10	Ἄλλ' ἀκήκοα πολλῶν λεγόντων ὅτι ὁ θεὸς τῶν Ἑβραίων θεὸς ἀληθινός ἐστι καὶ θεὸς ζῶν καὶ θεὸς ἐλεήμων καὶ οἰκτίρμων καὶ μακρόθυμος καὶ πολυέλεος καὶ ἐπιεικῆς καὶ μὴ λογιζόμενος ἁμαρτίαν ἀνθρώπου ταπεινοῦ καὶ μὴ ἐλέγχων ἀνομίας ἀνθρώπου τεθλιμμένου ἐν καιρῷ θλίψεως αὐτοῦ.	But I have heard many who say that the God of the Hebrews is a true God, a living God, a God who is merciful, compassionate, patient, full of pity and gentle, who does not take account of the sin of the humble, who does not condemn the sins of the contrite in the moment of their affliction.
11:11	ὅθεν τολμήσω κἀγὼ καὶ ἐπιστρέψω πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ καταφεύξομαι ἐπ' αὐτὸν καὶ ἐξομολογήσομαι αὐτῷ πάσας τὰς ἁμαρτίας μου καὶ ἐκχεῶ τὴν δέησίν μου ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ.	I too will dare to address him, I will take refuge with him, and I will confess all my sins to him and pour out my supplication before him.
11:12	τίς οἶδεν εἰ ὄψεται τὴν ταπείνωσίν μου καὶ ἐλεήσει με; τυχὸν ὄψεται τὴν ἐρήμωσίν μου ταύτην καὶ οἰκτεیرهσει με	Who knows if he will see my humiliation and have mercy on me? Perhaps he will see this desolation of mine and have compassion on me.

This prayer allows for various observations:

– The allusions to the *theologumena* of the LXX leap to the eyes: Aseneth seems to blend together several texts or quotations in her prayer. In particular, at the beginning of the passage,

⁸⁷ The critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink gives a slightly different text: καὶ πῶς ὀνομάσω τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ἅγιον αὐτοῦ καὶ φοβερόν.

the maiden emphasises that she has “heard spoken of” the “God of the Hebrews”. It could be argued that this statement is not consistent with that of the isolated life of Aseneth who lives in her tower (*Jos. Asen.* 2:1). However, the quotations and allusions to the text of the LXX show that Aseneth is being presented as a young woman to whom these texts are familiar, something impossible historically but which is justified only in the light of the fact that this novel is telling a story that goes beyond historical reality.

– In particular, in *Jos. Asen.* 11:10, Aseneth seems to be alluding to various texts or expressions of the LXX: the profession of Exod 34:6 which attributes to God the qualities of mercy and compassion; the divine epithets ἐπιεικῆς καὶ πολυέλεος, which occur also in Ps 85:5^{LXX88}; the verb λογίζομαι used in the context of the forgiveness of sins (Ps 31:2^{LXX}: μακάριος ἀνὴρ οὗ οὐ μὴ λογίσηται κύριος ἀμαρτίαν); the broken and contrite heart which God does not despise (Ps 50:19^{LXX}: καρδίαν συντετριμμένην καὶ τεταπεινωμένην ὁ θεὸς οὐκ ἐξουθενώσει); and, finally, the confession of sins expressed with the verb ἐξομολογέω (Dan 9:20^{LXX}: ἐγὼ ἐλάλουν προσευχόμενος καὶ ἐξομολογούμενος τὰς ἀμαρτίας μου).

– This implicit connection with various elements of the theology of the Old Testament permits Aseneth to address a God who, being merciful, recognises and accepts the conversion of the person who is sorrowful.

– Just as Joseph, in *Jos. Asen.* 8:9, speaks to God of Aseneth as if she were a divine creature, so the maiden addresses this God, whom she knows only “through hearsay”, employing another *theologoumenon*, namely, that of Exod 34:6. In other words, Joseph, in his prayer, seeks to include Aseneth among the divine creatures, something which will cause God’s favour towards the young woman. Aseneth, on the other hand, submits to this God whom she knows to be merciful and who forgives sins. However, and this is the high point of her prayer, Aseneth recalls the appropriateness of the *theologoumenon* of Exod 34:6 in reference to herself. In this way, by contrast with Jonah, who knows but does not seem to accept the appropriateness of this *theologoumenon* in relation to the Ninevites (see Jonah 4:2–3),⁸⁹ Aseneth takes a step forward in seeking from God the forgiveness of her sins and, in particular, of her idolatry, because this God is merciful and compassionate.

– This part of the prayer concludes with a verse in which Aseneth asks God to have mercy on her too. At the beginning of this verse, we find the formula τίς οἶδεν which would be a literal

⁸⁸ See also E. BONS, “Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*”, 437. However, the *motif* of forgiveness of sins is absent from Psalm 85^{LXX}.

⁸⁹ See the exegesis of these verses in the first chapter of this monograph.

translation of the Hebrew יָשֶׁנֶת . Such a question, in the sense of “perhaps”⁹⁰, is found in texts like Jonah 3:9 and Joel 2:14. In other words, what we have here is a Hebraism which is rendered in Greek almost literally in order to allude to texts which recount similar situations: this “who knows” introduces the hope that God will show himself to be merciful and that he will not punish.⁹¹

(3) Aseneth’s soliloquy concludes with a brief reflection in which she expresses her trust in a merciful God:

11:18	καὶ ἀνοίξω τὸ στόμα μου πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ ἐπικαλέσω τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ. καὶ εἰ θυμῷ κύριος πατάξει με, αὐτὸς πάλιν ἰάσεται με· καὶ ἐὰν παιδεύσῃ με ἐν ταῖς μάστιξιν αὐτοῦ, αὐτὸς ἐπιβλέψει ἐπ’ ἐμοὶ πάλιν ἐν τῷ ἐλέει αὐτοῦ· καὶ ἐὰν θυμωθῇ ἐν ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις μου, πάλιν διαλλαγῆσεται μοι καὶ ἀφήσει μοι πᾶσαν ἀμαρτίαν. τολμήσω οὖν ἀνοίξαι τὸ στόμα μου πρὸς αὐτόν.	I will open my mouth to him and call upon his name. And if, in wrath, the Lord strikes me, he himself will heal me again; if he instructs me with his blows, again, he will turn his face towards me in his mercy; if he is angry on account of my sins, again, he will be reconciled with me and will absolve me from every sin. I will, therefore, have the courage to open my mouth to him.
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This text summarises the central *motif* of the reflection in *Jos. Asen.* 11:10–12: the connection between the divine mercy and the forgiveness of sins. In fact, having decided to invoke the name of the Lord, Aseneth formulates her prayer by employing three times conditional clauses in which she expresses the certainty that God will go beyond her sin and that she will not undergo his wrath for ever. In each of these clauses, in fact, Aseneth somehow expresses her conviction that a possible reaction of anger by God will not be an end in itself and will not last for ever. Rather, it will be transformed into something positive for her. In this sense, the verse records elements which are mutually opposed but which express the positive outcome of what initially indicates something negative. Thus, God’s striking will be also the condition which will result in the cure (see also Isa 19:22; Hos 6:1^{LXX} where the same Greek verbs are used in parallel); God’s educating through his blows will be transformed into a favourable stance towards her, and his anger will become reconciliation and pardon. In the second of these three parallel expressions, we find the true motive for this “change” on God’s part: ἐν τῷ ἐλέει αὐτοῦ.

⁹⁰ See C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 219, note i2, and our exegesis of Jon 3:9.

⁹¹ E. BONS, “Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*”, 436: “The fear that the ‘God of the Hebrews’ will punish her for having worshipped the idols prompts Aseneth to pronounce this τίς οἶδεν εἰ: perhaps God will see her humiliation and have mercy on her.”

In this connection, what emerges from this prayer is that it is precisely the mercy of God which makes it possible for him to abandon his wrath. The third expression adds a further element: if God changes his attitude towards human beings, he does so not in an arbitrary way but because he is inclined to forgive sins. These final words prepare the way for Aseneth's long prayer which extends from chapter 12 to chapter 13.

β) Chapter 12

(1) From a literary point of view, the long account of chapters 10–13 fulfils the function of illustrating Aseneth's interior change which had been spoken of in *Jos. Asen.* 9:2 and confirming its truth. As Chesnutt observes, the acts of penance recorded in chapter 10 and Aseneth's prayers in chapters 12–13, display an independent and personal character. In the light of this, we can exclude the fact that Aseneth is obeying the rules of a pre-established ritual of conversion or initiation.⁹² On the contrary, the detailed narrative of Aseneth's self-abasement and repudiation of idolatry enables the author to confirm the sincerity and genuine nature of her approach to the God of Joseph. This important step in Aseneth's life does not seem to be entirely immediate. In fact, on the one hand, Aseneth in some ways fears to address Joseph's God because he is "a God who is jealous and fearful towards all those who worship foreign gods" (*Jos. Asen.* 11:7: θεὸς ζηλωτῆς ἐστὶ καὶ φοβερὸς ἐπὶ πάντα τοὺς σεβομένους θεοὺς ἄλλοτριούς). On the other hand, however, she finds the courage to address him both by virtue of the fact that he is a merciful God, thus recalling to herself the *theologoumenon* of Exod 34:6, and by virtue of the conviction that he is "father of orphans, protector of the persecuted and defender of the afflicted" (αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ πατὴρ τῶν ὀρφανῶν καὶ τῶν δεδιωγμένων ὑπερασπιστῆς καὶ τῶν τεθλιμμένων βοηθός). This expression occurs twice: in *Jos. Asen.* 11:13 and in 12:13. This state of being an "orphan", which is to be understood metaphorically, that is, as the position of one who is without the protection of gods and parents, allows Aseneth to address Joseph's God as her "father" (*Jos. Asen.* 12:8).

In this prayer (chapters 12–13), Aseneth addresses God by acknowledging him as creator and giver of life. To him she confesses her sin and seeks forgiveness for her impiety, especially for having "worshipped dead and dumb idols" (*Jos. Asen.* 12:5: εἰδῶλα νεκρὰ καὶ κωφά) whom she now recognises as "children of the old wild lion" (*Jos. Asen.* 12:9) from whose persecution she seeks to be freed so as not to be "devoured" (*Jos. Asen.* 12:11). Now Aseneth reposes all

⁹² See R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 121–124.

her hope in the Lord and in his mercy, and appeals to her state as a penitent⁹³ and to her ignorance in order to obtain the pardon of Joseph's God.

To this day, there has been no detailed study of the themes and structure of Aseneth's prayer. However, some studies have compared it with various texts from the Jewish literature⁹⁴ as well as with others that have to do with Egyptian cosmology⁹⁵. In the following sections, we shall seek to analyse the more important passages of this prayer, in particular the formulae which refer to the relationship between Joseph's God and Aseneth, and the implications attaching to them.

(2) The first question to which we shall give particular attention concerns the way in which Aseneth addresses God in her prayer.

a) The previous chapters could lead us to think that the primary aspect in this prayer is an exclusive concern with the request for pardon for her sins. In fact, as has been seen, Aseneth's lament, like her fast, the donning of sackcloth and the covering herself with ashes are all expressions of a deep repentance which Aseneth confesses before God in the light of the sins which she has committed, and, first and foremost, the sin of idolatry. However, these penitential acts, already known to the Old Testament and following its pattern, are accompanied by something which plays an equally important role. This concerns the calling for help which Aseneth addresses to Joseph's God so that he pardon her sins and grant her his mercy.

12:1	Κύριε ὁ θεὸς τῶν αἰώνων, ὁ κτίσας τὰ πάντα καὶ ζωοποίησας ὁ δοὺς πνοὴν ζωῆς πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει σου ὁ ἐξενέγκας τὰ ἀόρατα εἰς τὸ φῶς,	O Lord, God of the ages, you have created all things and given life, you have given the breath of life to all creation, you have brought to the light the things that are unseen,
12:2	ὁ ποιήσας τὰ ὄντα καὶ τὰ φαινόμενα ἐκ τῶν ἀφανῶν καὶ μὴ ὄντων ὁ ὑψώσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ θεμελιώσας αὐτὸν ἐν στερεώματι ἐπὶ τὸν νῶτον τῶν ἀνέμων ὁ θεμελιώσας τὴν γῆν ἐπὶ τῶν ὑδάτων ὁ θείς λίθους μεγάλους ἐπὶ τῆς ἀβύσσου τοῦ ὕδατος,	You have made the things which are and the visible phenomena from what is not seen and does not exist, you have raised up the heaven and founded it in a firmament, on the outer layers of the winds, you have founded the earth above the waters, you have set great rocks upon the abyss of the water,

⁹³ In verses 1–11 of chapter 13, the expression *ιδού* occurs a good ten times (vv. 1.2.3.4.5.6.7.8.9.11). Aseneth uses it to attract God's attention to what she has performed (acts of penance and repudiation of her idols) as if wishing to emphasise the sincerity of her profound repentance.

⁹⁴ See the various notes by C. BURCHARD, "Joseph and Aseneth", 220–222.

⁹⁵ See M. PHILONENKO, *Joseph et Aséneth*, 60.

<p>καὶ οἱ λίθοι οὐ βυθισθήσονται ἀλλ' εἰσὶν ὡς φύλλα δρυὸς ἐπάνω τῶν ὕδατων καὶ εἰσὶ λίθοι ζῶντες καὶ τῆς φωνῆς σου ἀκούουσι κύριε καὶ φυλάσσουσι τὰς ἐντολὰς σου ἃς ἐνετείλω αὐτοῖς καὶ τὰ προστάγματα σου οὐ μὴ παραβαίνουσιν ἀλλ' εἰσὶν ἕως τέλους ποιοῦντες τὸ θέλημά σου. ὅτι σὺ κύριε ἐλάλησας καὶ ἐζωογονήθησαν ὅτι ὁ λόγος σου κύριε ζωὴ ἐστὶ πάντων τῶν κτισμάτων σου</p>	<p>and the rocks will not be submerged, but are like the branches of an oak above the waters, they are living rocks and they hear your voice, O Lord, they keep the orders which you have imposed on them, and certainly they do not transgress your commands but carry out your will to the end.</p> <p>Because you, O Lord, have spoken, and they have received life, because your word, O Lord, is the life of all your creatures.</p>
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For our study, it is not necessary to analyse in detail every element of these two verses, taking into consideration their cosmological models and the biblical and non-biblical background. However, it seems important to make the following observations:

- Aseneth’s prayer begins with praise addressed to the God of Joseph as creator of all things. As in Joseph’s prayer in *Jos. Asen.* 8:9, Aseneth does not seek directly the forgiveness of her sins but, in her initial *invocatio*⁹⁶, describes God by means of his attributes which are expressed with a long series of participial constructions. In particular, Aseneth refers to a kind of “Jewish creed in Greek” which contains some *motifs* typical of faith in the God of Israel whom Aseneth acknowledges here as κύριε ὁ θεὸς τῶν αἰώνων, “Lord, God of the ages” (see also Sir 36:17 for the same divine title); as ὁ κτίσας τὰ πάντα, “creator of all things” (see also for the same or similar formulations *3 Macc* 2:3; Sir 24:8); as ζωοποιήσας, “giver of life” (2 Esdr 19:6); as ὁ ἐξενέγκας τὰ ἀόρατα εἰς τὸ φῶς “who have brought to the light the things that are unseen” (see for a similar formulation Philo, *Somn.* 1:76); as the one who created τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν, “the heaven and the earth” (Gen 1:1; 14:19.22; Exod 20:11; 4 Kgdms 19:15; 2 Chr 2:11; Ps 113:23^{LXX} [115:15^{MT}]; 120:2^{LXX}; 123:8^{LXX}; 133:3^{LXX}; 145:6^{LXX}; Isa 37:16), and τὸ στερέωμα, the “firmament” (Gen 1:6–8.20).
- Aseneth’s knowledge of the language of the Greek Bible⁹⁷ belongs to the fiction of the account. Whereas Aseneth, the wife of the patriarch Joseph mentioned in the book of Genesis, could not have had any knowledge of the LXX and its language, the Aseneth of the novel

⁹⁶ For the terminology of ancient prayer, see H.S. VERSNEL, “Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer”, 2.

⁹⁷ D. SÄNGER, “Bekehrung und Exodus”, 22–25, goes so far as to claim that the *invocatio* of Aseneth’s prayer corresponds to the literary genre of the “beschreibender Lobpsalm”.

demonstrates an awareness of the biblical traditions about the creation and, above all, the vocabulary specific to the Jewish tradition concerning the cosmological conception of Israel, that is, that God is creator of all things, creates first the inanimate things and then the living beings. Moreover, Aseneth seems to be aware of the idea according to which the inanimate creatures obey a divine command, a kind of divine law which is given to them right from the moment of creation.⁹⁸ Even if not developed much in the prayer⁹⁹, this aspect plays a role of some importance there and is bound in a special way to the fictitious character of the narrative. In fact, the story of Aseneth is being set here in a wholly Egyptian *milieu* and in the period of the patriarchs, which is why she could not have had knowledge of the Torah given to the Israelites later at Sinai or of the messages which God directed to the patriarchs and which are recounted in the biblical text from Gen 12:1 onwards. The only way in which Aseneth could have come to the knowledge of the God of Joseph is in the contemplation of the creation. That is why if, on the one hand, the novel puts on Aseneth's lips concepts belonging to the Jewish traditions about creation, on the other hand, she makes use of precisely this subject, namely, that of creation, in order that her prayer may obtain from God pardon and salvation. In other words, her Egyptian origins do not allow Aseneth to call on Joseph's God by recalling the wonderful deeds by which he manifested his protection to the Israelite patriarchs. Much less is Aseneth able to appeal to the story of the Exodus and the salvific action which God performed to free his people from Egypt since, as we have seen, the novel locates Aseneth's transformation in a period prior to the Exodus, that is, during the period of the patriarchs.

– What seems to emerge in these two verses is that Aseneth is not only describing the creation but also alluding to her own life. The final two stichs of verse 2 seem to confirm this since Aseneth calls on God acknowledging him as creator of everything and everyone. Therefore, just as the creatures - even the inanimate ones like the rocks – submit themselves to their creator, so Aseneth too, acknowledging herself as a creature of this God, intends to submit to him.¹⁰⁰ These two stichs of verse 2 constitute the transition between the prayer of praise which Aseneth

⁹⁸ For such an idea, see e.g. Ps Sol 18:10–12. It should be stressed that the two nouns τὰ προστάγματα and αἱ ἐντολαί are used as technical terms in the LXX for denoting divine commandments, see already Gen 26:5^{LXX}.

⁹⁹ These aspects are mostly neglected in studies of Aseneth's prayer, e.g. R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 146–147.

¹⁰⁰ It is pointless arguing about whether Aseneth intended to observe the Jewish laws. Admittedly, before the gift of the Law, i.e. in the era of the patriarchs, this would be impossible. But even if Aseneth represents women of the Hellenistic era willing to worship the God of the Jewish people, it cannot be taken for granted that, as depicted in the novel, she would adopt the Torah. For this problem, see M. VOGEL, "Einführung in die Schrift" 18–19 and note 80.

addresses to God as creator, and the supplication (*preces*¹⁰¹) through which she seeks liberation and salvation. It is clear that there is a connection, on the one hand, between the idea of God who is the one who brings things to life, who gives life to all creatures and who gives them an order, and, on the other hand, the plea which Aseneth sets before him. It is to him, in fact, that Aseneth confesses her sins and from whom she seeks pardon for her iniquities, first and foremost the sin of idolatry.

– Since she is not able to share with Joseph his ethnic and religious identity, Aseneth calls on his God as the giver of life and the Lord of all creatures. In this way, on the one hand, Aseneth approaches the Lord as creator of all things, she herself being his creature, and, on the other hand, draws near to Joseph – and, so, to all the descendants of Abraham – on the common ground of a generation which transcends genealogical descent and latches directly on to descent from God who is the origin of every life. This recognition of herself as a creature among creatures is one of the elements which obtains for Aseneth the possibility of being considered a fully-fledged believer: in fact, even if she is not presented to the reader as a Hebrew either by descent or by tradition, she now shares with the sons of Israel – here too we are dealing with a fictitious element of the novel - the common creed in the one God, Lord of the creation and, so, father of all.

– The creative work of God which makes possible the passage from “what does not exist and is not seen to what exists and to the visible phenomena” seems to refer to the work that God has performed in Aseneth in her *iter* from idolatry to believer¹⁰²; in fact, as she herself declares in *Jos. Asen.* 12:2, the creatures enjoy life since they listen to the voice of the Lord, and that very life which they enjoy is the work of the word of God so that without him there is no life but only death and destruction.

b) The supplication begins as follows:

12:3	πρὸς σε καταφεύγω κύριε καὶ πρὸς σὲ κεκράζομαι κύριε σοὶ προσχέω τὴν δέησίν μου σοὶ ἐξομολογήσομαι τὰς ἀμαρτίας μου καὶ πρὸς σὲ ἀποκαλύψω τὰς ἀνομίας μου.	I take refuge with you, O Lord, and I cry to you, O Lord, to you I shall pour out my supplication, to you I shall confess my sins and to you I shall reveal my transgressions.
	φεῖσαί μου κύριε ἡμαρτον ἐνώπιόν σου πολλὰ ἠνόμησα καὶ ἠσέβησα καὶ λελάληκα πονηρὰ καὶ ἄρρητα ἐνώπιόν σου.	Spare me, O Lord, I have sinned greatly before you: I have committed iniquities and impieties; I have said wicked and unworthy things before you,

¹⁰¹ For the terminology, see H.S. VERSNEL, “Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer”, 2.

¹⁰² For this interpretation, see also D. SÄNGER, “Bekehrung und Exodus”, 26–27.

– Verses 3 and 4 contain the confession proper which Aseneth addresses to God the creator concerning her sin. The confession of sins is a typical element of penitential prayers in the Jewish world and they generally ask also for help (cf. Dan 9:14–19; Bar 1:15–22). In the case of Aseneth’s prayer, her confession is wholly focused on her awareness of her sin, particularly the sin of idolatry, which has rendered her culpable of iniquity and impiety. Before dealing with this theme in detail, it seems necessary to make three observations¹⁰³:

Aseneth describes her first “action” in approaching Joseph’s God as a “taking of refuge” (πρὸς σε καταφεύγω κύριε). The verb καταφεύγω has appeared already in the soliloquy in *Jos. Asen.* 11:3 in which, having destroyed her idols, Aseneth asks: τί ποιήσω [...] ἢ ποῦ ἀπέλθω, πρὸς τίνα καταφύγω; “what shall do [...], or where shall I go, with whom will I take refuge?” In *Jos. Asen.* 11:11, still in her soliloquy, Aseneth has taken her decision: καταφεύξομαι ἐπ’ αὐτόν, “I will take refuge with him [i.e. the God of Joseph]”. In *Jos. Asen.* 12:3, this decision is transformed into a declaration made to God: Aseneth is taking refuge with the Lord. In this way, Aseneth’s prayer is rooted in the firm decision to choose the Lord as her refuge.

– The expressions in this verse seem to be inspired by the Psalter of the LXX. This is the case both for the use of the verb κράζω (e.g. Ps 29:9^{LXX} πρὸς σέ κύριε κεκράξομαι) and for the idea of “pouring out one’s supplication” (see already *Jos. Asen.* 11:11) which is attested also in Ps 101:1^{LXX} (καὶ ἐναντίον κυρίου ἐκχέη τὴν δέησιν αὐτοῦ) and Ps 141:3^{LXX} (ἐκχεῶ ἐναντίον αὐτοῦ τὴν δέησίν μου), as well as for the formula in which Aseneth manifests her intention of revealing her transgressions (ἀποκαλύψω τὰς ἀνομίας μου). In a negative form, this formula occurs also in Ps 31:5^{LXX} (καὶ τὴν ἀνομίαν μου οὐκ ἐκάλυψα, “and I did not cover my transgression”).

– Verses 3 to 4 are constructed in parallel by the substantives ἁμαρτία and ἀνομία and the corresponding verbs ἁμαρτάνω and ἀνομέω. However, far from forming synonymous parallelism, Aseneth emphasises in verse 3 her wish not to hide her sins from God while in verse 4 she confesses them. As if wishing to create a certain *crescendo*, verse 4 adds yet another verb of the same semantic field, ἀσεβέω. Among these elements of synonymous parallelism comes the plea for pardon: φεῖσαί μου. In this connection, Aseneth seems to use a verb which we have already found in the final part of the book of Jonah (Jonah 4:10–11) but which is also attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible with reference to a favourable attitude on the part of God in his dealings, for example, with Israel (e.g. Joel 2:17–18). In other words, with the expression φεῖσαί

¹⁰³ For the following exegesis, see also G. DELLING, “Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta in ‘Joseph und Aseneth’”, 235; E. BONIS, “Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*”, 438–439.

μου, Aseneth expresses all the hopes which she has placed in him: the hope of not being punished for her sins and that of being protected by him.

– The use of this biblical vocabulary is surprising on the lips of Aseneth. As presented in the novel, the figure of Aseneth oscillates between that of an Egyptian woman of the patriarchal period and a Jewish woman of the Hellenistic or Roman periods familiar with the theological language of the LXX. In other words, the narrator is making use of categories which do not belong to a woman like Aseneth who comes from the world of Egypt, but they nonetheless answer to her desire to abandon the gods of Egypt to come close to the God of Joseph. We shall return to this later.

– The final part of verse 4 acts as hinge between Aseneth’s confession and the *pars epica*¹⁰⁴ of the prayer, that is, the description of the nature of sin (verse 5): what is declared in very general terms in verse 4 will be developed in verse 5.

c) The confession of sins *sensu stricto* is expressed in verse 5. The first six phrases of verse 5 make up a unit. They are parallel and constructed according to a concentric scheme:

12:5	μεμιάται τὸ στόμα μου ἀπὸ τῶν θυσιῶν τῶν εἰδώλων (A) καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν θεῶν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων. (B) Ἕμαρτον, κύριε, (C) ἐνώπιόν σου πολλὰ ἤμαρτον ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ (C ¹) καὶ ἐσεβάσθην εἰδῶλα νεκρὰ καὶ κωφά. (B ¹) καὶ νῦν οὐκ εἰμὶ ἀξία ἀνοῖξαι τὸ στόμα μου πρὸς σέ κύριε (A ¹).	My mouth is defiled by the sacrifices of idols and by the table of the Egyptian gods. I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned greatly against you in [my] ignorance. I have worshipped dead and dumb idols. Now I am unworthy to open my mouth before the Lord.
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This part of the prayer deserves some observations:

– Standing at the centre, the confession of sin refers essentially to the sin of idolatry. In the previous verses, Aseneth had described her sin in general terms with the use of the words ἀμαρτία and ἀνομία. Now it is being specified: Aseneth acknowledges herself to be guilty in particular of having worshipped idols whom she now recognises to be “dead and dumb”. In a certain sense, Aseneth’s words contain what the narrator had already recorded in *Jos. Asen.* 2:3 in relation to the cult of idols: καὶ πάντα ἐκείνους ἐσέβετο Ἄσενεθ.

¹⁰⁴ For the term *pars epica*, see H.S. VERSNEL, “Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer”, 2, who defines as *pars epica* the part of the prayer “in which the suppliant explains why he is calling on this particular god for help”.

- It is idolatry that separates Aseneth from God, which makes her a sinner “before him” (ἐνώπιόν σου) and unworthy to address him. Moreover, it is also idolatry that is the dividing line separating Joseph from Aseneth. In this connection, we have already seen that it is for this reason too that Joseph refused Aseneth’s kiss in *Jos. Asen.* 8:5.
- In *Jos. Asen.* 12:5, Aseneth also gives the reason for her sin: she has erred before God “through ignorance” (ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ). This aspect is not developed further in *Jos. Asen.* 12:5. However, the theme of ignorance has appeared already in *Jos. Asen.* 6:3, 7 where the young woman recognises herself as guilty for not having grasped immediately who Joseph really was and for having uttered wicked words against him. As we have seen, a first stage in the process of Aseneth’s transformation consists precisely in the recognition and overcoming of her ignorance about Joseph (see *Jos. Asen.* 6:2–7). *Mutatis mutandis*, in *Jos. Asen.* 12:5, Aseneth recognises that she sinned through ignorance about Joseph’s God. This confession of guilt which concerns her ignorance, on the one hand, serves to explain her sin, that is, her idolatry, and, on the other hand, highlights a further step: the overcoming of her ignorance of Joseph’s God. In other words, in using the expression ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ, Aseneth is referring to her past ignorance.¹⁰⁵ This interpretation of her ignorance is confirmed by her prayer in *Jos. Asen.* 21:15 where she links her sin with her non-awareness of the God of heaven and the fact that she did not have trust in him.

21:15	ἥμαρτον, κύριε, ἥμαρτον ἐνώπιόν σου πολλά ἥμαρτον· καὶ οὐκ ᾔδειν κύριον τὸν θεὸν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οὐδὲ ἐπεποιθεῖν ἐπὶ τῷ θεῷ τῷ ὑψίστῳ τῆς ζωῆς.	I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned, before you I have sinned greatly. and I did not know the God of heaven, and I did not trust in the God of life, the Most High.
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d) As we have seen, the central element at the base of Aseneth’s transformation consists in her repudiation of the idols. This is also confirmed by what is said afterwards. Verse 5, in fact, continues with a self-presentation by Aseneth who speaks of her condition before abandoning idolatry:

12:5	ἐγὼ Ἀσενέθ ἡ θυγάτηρ Πεντεφρῆ τοῦ ιερέως παρθένος καὶ βασίλισσα ἢ ποτε σοβαρὰ καὶ ὑπερήφανος καὶ εὐθνηοῦσα ἐν τῷ πλούτῳ μου ὑπὲρ πάντας ἀνθρώπους, νυνὶ ὑπάρχω ὀρφανὴ καὶ ἔρημος καὶ ἐγκαταλελειμμένη ἀπὸ πάντων ἀνθρώπων.	I, Aseneth, daughter of Pentefres, the priest, virgin and queen, who was once arrogant and proud and prospered in wealth more than all, I am now an orphan, desolate and abandoned by all people.
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¹⁰⁵ For this exegesis, see also R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 142.

12:6	σοὶ προσφεύγω κύριε καὶ σοὶ προσφέρω δέησίν μου ¹⁰⁶ καὶ πρὸς σὲ κεκράζομαι.	I take my refuge with you, O Lord, to you I present my supplication, to you I will cry.
12:7	ῥῦσαί με πρὶν καταληφθῆναι με ὑπὸ τῶν καταδιωκόντων με.	Free me before I am caught by my persecutors.

Four elements from this part of the prayer seem to us to be interesting:

- With regard to the structure, it emerges that, on the stylistic level, Aseneth distinguishes neatly between her past (adverb πότε) and her present (adverb νυνί). Moreover, verse 6 takes up elements of the beginning of verse 3, that is, of part of the supplication. Among these, in particular, there is a return of the idea of finding refuge in God (which is expressed here with προσφεύγω, by contrast with verse 3 which has καταφεύγω), the verb “cry” (κεκράζομαι) and the substantive δέησις, “prayer, supplication”. In this way Aseneth’s confession of sins, present in verses 4–5, is found set within verses 3–6 which form a kind of frame in which the elements refer to one another, forming a sort of inclusion. A further element of supplication is added to the text as a coda in verse 7.
- As for the content, it is clear that, in verses 5–6, Aseneth’s condition in the present is contrasted with that in her past. In the present, Aseneth feels herself as an orphan, abandoned by everyone (ἀπὸ πάντων ἀνθρώπων). This is because she believes that abandoning the worship of the Egyptians has provoked the hostility and estrangement of her parents (see *Jos. Asen.* 11:5)¹⁰⁷. In the past, on the other hand, Aseneth prospered with wealth “more than anyone” (ὕπερ πάντας ἀνθρώπους). In this context, particular emphasis is given to the pride and arrogance which characterised her attitude (σοβαρὰ καὶ ὑπερήφανος) before she recognised Joseph’s God as the true God. More than referring to the sin of pride, however, these terms could refer to the pride that results from the rejection of God. This *motif*, though, is not developed in the prayer.¹⁰⁸
- If Aseneth’s condition prior to her transformation obtained for her wealth and social recognition, her single aspiration now is recognition by God.¹⁰⁹ In fact, her condition as orphan and

¹⁰⁶ καὶ σοὶ προσφέρω δέησίν μου: This clause is missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

¹⁰⁷ R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Live*, 166–167, assumes that Aseneth has been disowned by her parents. In fact, an orphan, like a widow, would have been “cut off from their natural means of protection and support.” Nevertheless, there is no evidence for this assumption. At best it can be deduced from the declaration that Aseneth puts in her parents’ mouth: “Aseneth is not our daughter” (*Jos. Asen.* 11:5; 12:12). According to J.K. ZANGENBERG, “Josef und Asenet”, 110, Aseneth becomes alienated from her parents.

¹⁰⁸ See C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 189, who states: “Pride becomes a symbol for pagan enmity against God, and passion the sudden desire to be accepted by him aroused by a meeting with a true follower of God.”

¹⁰⁹ See also R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 167.

abandoned, does not press her into lamenting for the past but rather into addressing her cry of help to the God of Joseph who represents for her the only source of salvation and freedom.

– It is not clear who are the persecutors mentioned in verse 7. However, this last verse forms a kind of hinge with what will be said later in the sense that it announces a theme which Aseneth will develop later in her prayer.

e) Before mentioning the danger which she fears, Aseneth includes in her prayer a comparison in which she underlines once again her need of protection and salvation. This comparison develops the theme of the paternity of God which inevitably recalls her condition of being an “orphan and abandoned” (*Jos. Asen.* 11:3, 16; see also 12:13–14;13:2).

– Aseneth fears that she no longer enjoys the protection either of the Egyptian gods, to whom she was staunchly bound, or of her parents. In fact, it is expressed like this in *Jos. Asen.* 11:4–5:

11:4	πάντες γὰρ μεμισήκασί με καὶ σὺν τούτοις ¹¹⁰ ὁ πατήρ μου καὶ ἡ μήτηρ μου, διότι κἀγὼ μεμίσηκα τοὺς θεοὺς αὐτῶν καὶ ἀπόλεσα αὐτοὺς καὶ δέδωκα αὐτοὺς καταπατεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων.	All now hate me, including my father and my mother, because I too hate their gods, and have destroyed them and I have allowed ¹¹¹ them to be trodden underfoot by men.
11:5	καὶ διὰ τοῦτο μεμισήκασί με ὁ πατήρ μου καὶ ἡ μήτηρ μου καὶ πᾶσα ἡ συγγένειά μου καὶ εἶπον· οὐκ ἔστι θυγάτηρ ἡμῶν Ἀσενεθ διότι τοὺς θεοὺς ἡμῶν ἀπόλεσεν	Therefore, my father, my mother and all my relations hate me and have said to me: “Aseneth is not our daughter because she has destroyed our gods.”

– It should be emphasised that these last words do not belong to the narrator describing the concrete situation in which the girl finds herself. Rather, they are pronounced by Aseneth and reflect her point of view and her feelings. In particular, Aseneth is expressing here the fear of being abandoned by her parents and even by all her family. In this connection, it is necessary to take care not to point the interpretation of these verses in a direction which could turn out to be inadequate. In other words, rather than thinking of a concrete abandonment of Aseneth by her parents¹¹² or of a real state of poverty which would be the result of this, it is necessary to

¹¹⁰ σὺν τούτοις: missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

¹¹¹ For this meaning of δίδωμι, see e.g. T. MURAOKA, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 166.

¹¹² See also D. MAGGIOROTTI, *Giuseppe e Aseneth*, 483 note 4, who affirms: “In realtà Aseneth non incontra ostacoli da parte dei familiari alla propria conversione, né, tantomeno, viene abbandonata o rifiutata.”

read the image of abandonment here in relation to the image of the “orphan” which, in its turn, recalls that of the fatherhood of the God of Joseph which Aseneth has already invoked. In fact, both in her soliloquy (*Jos. Asen.* 11:13) and in her prayer (*Jos. Asen.* 12:13), Aseneth speaks of the God of Joseph as “father of orphans, protector of the persecuted, and defender of the afflicted” (ὁ πατήρ τῶν ὀρφανῶν καὶ τῶν δεδιωγμένων ὑπερασπιστῆς καὶ τῶν τεθλιμμένων βοηθός). These three divine attributes cannot be linked directly to the concrete situation of Aseneth. Rather, they express the *motif* of the protection which God grants to those who go through situations of affliction and suffering. In particular, Aseneth develops the image of God as father of orphans by making use of expressions which dwell on describing his particular tenderness towards his children (*Jos. Asen.* 12:8).

– The image of the orphan is better understood against its biblical background. In Hos 14:4, wishing to return to their God, the Israelites are sure that he has compassion for the “orphan”, that is, his people: “[...] we will no longer say to the work of our hands: ‘You are our God’, because with you the orphan finds mercy” (אֲשֶׁר-רָבָה יְרַחֵם יְהוָה וְלֹא-נֹאמַר עוֹד אֶל־הַיָּדַיִם לְמַעַשְׂהָ יְדֵינוּ [...]). In this case, Israel is declaring her abandoning of idolatry, that is, renouncing the protection of those idols whom she now recognises as vain. Having thus become an “orphan”, namely, by abandoning the idols, Israel knows that she can count on God’s protection. In relation to the image of the orphan which Aseneth uses, it is impossible to state with certainty that the author was thinking of Hos 14:4¹¹³. However, it is impossible to deny the similarities between the two texts. Furthermore, we should not forget other texts of the Hebrew Bible in which the orphan metaphor is used, for example, Lam 5:3 where, lamenting over the disaster that has befallen them, the Israelites compare themselves to orphans: “We have become orphans [LXX: ὀρφανοὶ ἐγενήθημεν] without a father, our mothers are as widows”. God’s reason for accepting the transformation of his daughter who has become an orphan is to be interpreted also against the background of other biblical texts which reiterate concern for the *personae miserae*: in fact, it is orphans, together with widows and strangers, who come under the categories which enjoy a special protection from the God of Israel. Thus, in Ps 67:5–6^{LXX}, God is called explicitly “father of the orphans”: παραχθήσονται ἀπὸ προσώπου αὐτοῦ, τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν ὀρφανῶν καὶ κριτοῦ τῶν χηρῶν, ὁ θεὸς ἐν τόπῳ ἁγίῳ αὐτοῦ, “they will be overwhelmed before him, father of orphans and defender of widows, such is God in his holy dwelling”.¹¹⁴ In Sir 4:10, the pupil is

¹¹³ If so, the author of the novel *Joseph and Aseneth* would have known the Hebrew text because the LXX is different: ὁ ἐν σοὶ ἐλεήσει ὀρφανόν, literally “he, who is in you, will pity the orphan”.

¹¹⁴ As for Aseneth’s use of the divine attributes, see also E. BONS, “Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*, 441, who notes: “Of course, only the first title, ‘father of orphans’, is fitting in this case, Aseneth being a young woman and not a widow.”

exhorted to protect the orphans and widows: γίνου ὀρφανοῖς ὡς πατήρ καὶ ἀντὶ ἀνδρὸς τῆ μητρὶ αὐτῶν, “be a father to the orphans and as a husband to their mothers”, an exhortation which is completed by a promise: “thus you will be a true son of the Most High, who will love you more than your mother”. In the light of such passages, the use of ὀρφανός in *Jos. Asen.* 10–13 is probably a traditional *motif*, describing the condition of Aseneth who, on repenting, is received by the mercy of the divine Father whose “daughter” she becomes¹¹⁵. This will be confirmed later by Pharaoh at the time of the wedding: σὺ θυγάτηρ ὑψίστου κληθήσῃ “you shall be called a daughter of the Most High” (*Jos. Asen.* 21:4).

– From henceforth far from sin and foreign gods, her penitential state leads Aseneth into describing herself, as we have seen, as, “orphan and abandoned”. This condition now allows her to repose all her hope exclusively in Joseph’s God in whose mercy she looks for refuge and freedom. Moreover, the image of “orphan and abandoned” is completed by the *motif* of the fatherhood of God whom Aseneth invokes with the comparison ὡς πατήρ φιλότεκνος “as a loving father”, literally “loving his children”. Aseneth’s abandonment to the merciful arms of this father is expressed in verse 8 by means of a simile, a plastic image which describes the embrace of a frightened child who, after a scare, is picked up from the ground by its father who embraces it and presses it to his breast:

12:8	<p>ὡς γὰρ παιδίον νήπιον φοβούμενον φεύγει πρὸς τὸν πατέρα αὐτοῦ, καὶ ὁ πατήρ ἐκτείνας τὰς χεῖρας αὐτοῦ ἄρπάζει αὐτὸ ἐκ τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐναγκαλίζεται αὐτὸ πρὸς τὸ στήθος αὐτοῦ, καὶ τὸ παιδίον σφίγγει τὰς χεῖρας αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὸν ἀχένα τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναπνεῖ¹¹⁶ ἀπὸ τοῦ φόβου αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναπαύεται πρὸς τὸ στήθος τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ, ὁ δὲ πατήρ μειδιᾷ ἐπὶ τῆ ταραχῇ τῆς νηπιότητος αὐτοῦ, οὕτως καὶ σύ, κύριε, ἔκτεινον τὰς χεῖράς σου ἐπ’ ἐμὲ ὡς πατήρ φιλότεκνος¹¹⁷ καὶ ἄρπασόν με ἐκ τῆς γῆς.</p>	<p>For just as a little child who is afraid takes refuge with its father, and the father, taking its hands, raises it from the ground and presses it to his breast, and the child presses its arms around its father’s neck, gets back its breath after its fear and rests on its father’s breast – but the father meanwhile smiles at his childish worry –, so, you too, O Lord, stretch out your hands to me, as a loving father towards his child, and raise me from the earth.</p>
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¹¹⁵ See also D. MAGGIOROTTI, *Giuseppe e Aseneth*, 483 note 4.

¹¹⁶ Instead of ἀναπνεῖ, the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink reads ἀσθ<μαίνε>: “[the small child] breathes hard.”

¹¹⁷ The phrase ὡς πατήρ φιλότεκνος is missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

Three important factors emerge from these verses:

– The simile is structured by the conjunctions ὡς and οὕτως. The first part, which presents the image of the father who picks up the little child, is more extended than the part which refers to Aseneth’s plea for protection where, comparing herself to a small and frightened child, she seeks the safe arms of the God of Joseph whom she now calls on and recognises as her own father.¹¹⁸.

– The expression ὡς γὰρ παιδίον νήπιον φοβούμενον at the beginning of this simile has no equivalent in the second part. In fact, Aseneth does not specify here the nature of her fear. As noted in the following, this aspect will be clarified in the very next verses.

f) As emerges from *Jos. Asen.* 12:9–11, Aseneth’s fear is linked to the “wild old lion”, “father of the Egyptians” who is following her in order to tear her to pieces and throw her “into the depths of the sea” because, on account of her change, she has thrown away and destroyed all his children, the Egyptian idols, who hate her from now on:

12:9	Ἴδου γὰρ ὁ λέων ὁ ἄγριος ὁ παλαιὸς καταδιώκει με, διότι αὐτός ἐστι πατήρ τῶν θεῶν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων καὶ τὰ τέκνα αὐτοῦ εἰσιν οἱ θεοὶ τῶν εἰδωλομανῶν ¹¹⁹ καὶ γὰρ μεμίσηκα αὐτούς, διότι τέκνα τοῦ λέοντός εἰσι καὶ ἔρριψα πάντας ¹²⁰ ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ καὶ ἀπόλεσα αὐτούς.	For behold, the wild old lion is following me, because he is father of the Egyptian gods, and his children are the gods of those who worship idols. I hate them because they are children of the lion, and I have thrown them all far away from me and destroyed them .
12:10	καὶ ὁ λέων ὁ πατήρ αὐτῶν θυμωθεὶς καταδιώκει με.	And the lion, their father, comes after me in his fury.

¹¹⁸ It should be emphasised that Aseneth never uses a vocative form like “father”, “my father” when speaking to God; see also A. STROTMANN, “*Mein Vater bist du! (Sir 51,10)*”, 275.

¹¹⁹ καὶ τὰ τέκνα αὐτοῦ εἰσιν οἱ θεοὶ τῶν εἰδωλομανῶν: missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

¹²⁰ πάντας: the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink reads: πάντας τοὺς θεοὺς τῶν Αἰγυπτίων.

12:11	<p>ἀλλὰ σύ, κύριε, ῥῦσαί με ἐκ τῶν χειρῶν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ ἐξελοῦ με μήποτε ἀρπάσῃ με ὡς λέων καὶ διασπαράξῃ με καὶ βάλῃ με εἰς τὴν φλόγα τοῦ πυρός, καὶ τὸ πῦρ ἐμβαλεῖ με εἰς τὴν καταιγίδα, καὶ ἡ καταιγὶς περιελίσσεται με ἐν σκότει καὶ ἐκβαλεῖ¹²¹ με εἰς τὸν βυθὸν τῆς θαλάσσης, καὶ καταπίεται με τὸ κῆτος τὸ μέγα τὸ ἀπ' αἰῶνος, καὶ ἀπολοῦμαι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον.</p>	<p>But you, O Lord, free me from his hands, and pull me from his mouth, so, that like a lion, he does not seize me and tear me in pieces and fling me into the flames of fire, the fire will throw me into the hurricane, the hurricane will wrap me in darkness and throw me into the depths of the sea. The great sea monster, the one which is from eternity, will swallow me and I shall be lost for ever.</p>
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These verses of her supplication require some observations:

Structurally, this part of the prayer contains another *pars epica*¹²² in which Aseneth remembers the past, and, in particular, her destruction of the idols. This *pars epica* is found at the centre of the double statement about the “lion” chasing Aseneth: ὁ λέων [...] καταδιώκει με (versetti 9 e 10). The fear of having to undergo the lion’s violence presses Aseneth into addressing the God of Joseph. Her invocation is composed according to the scheme a – b – b’ – a’ and expresses two requests: ῥῦσαί με ἐκ τῶν χειρῶν αὐτοῦ // καὶ ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ ἐξελοῦ με¹²³. These are followed by a further section in which Aseneth explains to God the possible consequences of an attack by the lion. Expressions of this type are found several times in the LXX Psalter where, as in *Jos. Asen.* 12:11, they are introduced by the conjunction μήποτε (see e.g. Ps 7:3; 12:5).

– Aseneth is now alone, “abandoned” but stretches out to the God of Joseph. She asks him, as a loving father who comes to the aid of his frightened child, to take her hand and raise her up from the ground to escape the wild and furious lion¹²⁴ – something which functions as a metaphor for a persecutor¹²⁵ – who wants to seize her in order to tear her to pieces and hurl her into the depths of the sea.¹²⁶ He too is a father, but father “of the gods of those who worship

¹²¹ ἐμβαλεῖ: the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink reads ἐκβαλεῖ

¹²² For the term *pars epica*, see H.S. VERSNEL, “Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer”, 2.

¹²³ The imperative forms ῥῦσαι and ἐξελοῦ are used in parallel e.g. in Ps 30:2^{LXX}; 143:7, 11^{LXX}.

¹²⁴ For the phrase μήποτε ἀρπάσῃ με ὡς λέων, see also Ps 7:3.

¹²⁵ See also G. DELLING, “Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta in ‘Joseph und Aseneth’”, 251, who recalls texts like Ps 22:14, 22; C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 221, note c2.

¹²⁶ The sequence of the different mortal dangers is somewhat enigmatic. See also M. PHILONENKO, *Joseph et Aséneth*, 44; G. DELLING, “Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta in ‘Joseph und Aseneth’”, 251–252.

idols”, just as she had been. Henceforth, Aseneth knows that only Joseph’s God is the true Father because he represents her only hope of rest, of refuge and, in the final analysis, of salvation. In fact, whereas he is the Father who “raises up from the ground” (ἀρπάζει ἐκ τῆς γῆς) and, so, saves those who call upon him, the other is one who “seizes” (ἀρπάσσει) in order to devour and hurl into the abyss. The verb ἀρπάζω, here employed in the case of both fathers, means literally “to take something by force (firmly, quickly, greedily)”¹²⁷: thus, in Greek, what is at stake for Aseneth is salvation in the battle between the living God and the father of the dead and dumb idols (*Jos. Asen.* 12:11: “he will devour me and I shall be lost for ever”). At the end of this chapter, it should be noted that Aseneth’s fear for the “revenge” which could be sought by the “father of the gods” does not concern a return to idolatry or the desire to maintain a relationship with the Egyptian gods. In this respect, Aseneth is different from the Syrian officer, Naaman (2 Kgs 5:23). It is perhaps a fear which makes even more necessary the protection which Aseneth is looking for from God, a fear of losing salvation definitively. In fact, not having till now any “confirmation” from this God whom she addresses, Aseneth does not seem to exclude the possibility that the gods she has rejected, and, above all, their “father”, can exercise power over her.

g) Verses 12–15 of chapter 12 are dominated particularly by two themes which are interconnected through the *motif* of fatherhood in its human and divine aspects. As we shall see, these verses complete the preceding ones in the sense that Aseneth clarifies her relationship with Joseph’s God who will be her only hope and her only refuge.

12:12	<p>ῥῦσαί με, κύριε, πρὶν ἔλθῃ ἐπ’ ἐμὲ ταῦτα πάντα. ῥῦσαί με, κύριε, τὴν ἔρημον καὶ ἀπερίστατον¹²⁸, διότι ὁ πατήρ μου καὶ ἡ μήτηρ μου ἠρνήσαντό με καὶ εἶπον· οὐκ ἔστιν ἡμῶν θυγάτηρ Ἀσενέθ, διότι ἀπόλεσα καὶ συνέθριψα¹²⁹ τοὺς θεοὺς αὐτῶν καὶ μεμίσηκα αὐτούς.</p>	<p>Deliver me, Lord, before this all comes upon me. Deliver me, Lord, desolate and lonely because my father and my mother have rejected¹³⁰ me and said: Aseneth is not our daughter any more, because I have destroyed and broken into pieces their gods, and have come to hate them.</p>
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¹²⁷ See e.g. Gen 37:33; Lev 19:13. For further meanings of the verb, see e.g. MONTANARI, s.v.

¹²⁸ καὶ ἀπερίστατον: missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

¹²⁹ καὶ συνέθριψα: missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

¹³⁰ For this translation, see also MONTANARI, s.v. (“rifiutare, respingere, rinnegare”). The translation “disowned me” (see C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 222) does not fit the context because nothing is said about such consequences of Aseneth’s decision to destroy the gods.

12:13	Καὶ εἰμι νῦν ὀρφανὴ καὶ ἔρημος καὶ ἄλλη ἐλπίς οὐκ ἔστι μοι εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ σοὶ, κύριε ¹³¹ , οὐδὲ ἕτερα καταφυγὴ πλὴν τοῦ ἐλέους σου, κύριε, διότι σὺ εἶ ὁ πατὴρ τῶν ὀρφανῶν καὶ τῶν δεδιωγμένων ὑπερασπιστῆς καὶ τῶν τεθλιμμένων βοηθός.	And now I am an orphan and desolate, and I have no other hope, except in you, O Lord, and no other refuge but your mercy, O Lord. For you are a father of the orphans, a protector of the persecuted, and a helper of the afflicted.
12:14	ἐλέησόν με, κύριε, καὶ φύλαξόν με τὴν παρθένον ¹³² τὴν ἐγκαταλελειμμένην καὶ ὀρφανήν, διότι σὺ εἶ, κύριε, πατὴρ γλυκὺς καὶ ἀγαθὸς καὶ ἐπιεικῆς.	Have mercy upon me, Lord, and guard me, the virgin abandoned and an orphan, because you, Lord, are a sweet, good and gentle father.
12:15	τίς πατὴρ οὕτω γλυκὺς ἐστὶν ὡς σὺ, κύριε, καὶ τίς οὕτω ταχὺς ἐν ἐλέει ὡς σὺ, κύριε, καὶ τίς μακρόθυμος ἐπὶ ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ἡμῶν ὡς σὺ, κύριε; ἰδοὺ γὰρ πάντα τὰ δόματα τοῦ πατρὸς μου Πεντεφρῆ, ἃ δέδωκέ μοι ἐν κληρονομίᾳ, πρόσκαιρά εἰσι καὶ ἀφανῆ, τὰ δὲ δόματα τῆς κληρονομίας σου, κύριε, ἀφθαρτὰ εἰσι καὶ αἰώνια.	What father is as sweet as you, O Lord, who is as fast in mercy as you, O Lord, and who is as long-suffering toward our sins as you, O Lord? For behold, all the gifts of my father Pentephres that he gave me as an inheritance are temporary and uncertain, but the gifts of your inheritance, O Lord, are incorruptible and eternal.

In what follows, we shall dwell on some aspects of this part of the prayer:

- The expression πρὶν ἔλθῃ ἐπ’ ἐμὲ ταῦτα πάντα in verse 12 acts as a hinge between verse 11 and what follows. Aseneth calls on God to intervene on her behalf before “all this comes upon her”, referring with this expression to the dangers described in verse 11. Rather than repeating this aspect, however, verses 12–15 concentrate on the supplication.
- On the level of content, we note that, in verses 13 and 15, the theme of Aseneth’s paternal home returns. On the one hand, Aseneth resumes her discourse on her abandonment by her parents, motivated by the destruction of the gods whom they worship (verse 11; see already *Jos. Asen.* 11:5). On the other hand, her breach with sin leads Aseneth to break off every other link with her past life: even the heritage of Pentephres, her earthly father, becomes for her the objection of rejection. In fact, her father, priest of On, has left her as an inheritance gifts that are “temporary and uncertain” (verse 15: πρόσκαιρά εἰσι καὶ ἀφανῆ), which cannot be compared to the gifts of the inheritance of the Lord, that are, instead, “incorruptible and eternal”

¹³¹ εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ σοὶ κύριε: the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink reads πλὴν σοῦ, κύριε.

¹³² τὴν παρθένον: the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink reads τὴν παρθένον ἀγνήν.

(verse 15: ἄφθαρτά εἰσι καὶ αἰώνια). From now on, Aseneth reposes all her hope of refuge in the divine father alone.

- This perspective is still present in verses 13–15. Once again, Aseneth recalls her condition as an “orphan” (verse 13), thus alluding to her need of the protection which only God is able to grant her. On a more careful examination, we see that, contrary to the previous parts of the prayer, above all, compared with the beginning where Aseneth calls on Joseph’s God as the creator God, in *Jos. Asen.* 12:13 he is addressed in another way. On the one hand, Aseneth resumes the divine attributes of her soliloquy (see *Jos. Asen.* 11:13): ὁ πατήρ τῶν ὀρφανῶν καὶ τῶν δεδιωγμένων ὑπερασπιστῆς καὶ τῶν τεθλιμμένων βοηθός; on the other hand, the maiden reiterates that she reposes trust in no God other than the God of Joseph, the only one who is her sole hope and refuge (verse 13). For the first time, she uses the expressions ἐλπίς (ἄλλη ἐλπίς οὐκ ἔστι μοι εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ σοί, κύριε) and καταφυγή (οὐδὲ ἕτερα καταφυγή πλὴν τοῦ ἐλέους σου) which are both characteristic of the LXX Psalter.¹³³ Like the verb καταφεύγω, the corresponding substantive καταφυγή occurs various times in Aseneth’s speeches in which it refers first and foremost to the God of Israel.¹³⁴ The use of this word is widely attested in the LXX where it replaces the metaphor of God as rock.¹³⁵ This metaphor, referring to the power and strength of God who protects, occurs particularly in the Psalms of the Greek Bible where the formula πρὸς σὲ κατέφυγον appears a single time (Ps 142:9), while expressions such as σύ μου εἶ καταφυγή (see Ps 31:7^{LXX}) are more frequent (for example, Ps 70:3; 90:2^{LXX}).
- The decision to address Joseph’s God is not the result of a kind of “failure of alternatives”, but is based on the characteristics which Aseneth recognises in him. He is “fast in mercy”, that is, he does not withhold his mercy, and he is “long-suffering” (verse 15) in spite of sins. On the stylistic level, these attributes are highlighted by the formulation of rhetorical questions which stress their value and lead to the idea that no human father possesses these qualities of God.
- Concerning this last passage of her prayer, it should be reiterated that Aseneth is addressing a God whom she recognises as creator of all things that exist and as one who is merciful and

¹³³ Both of the terms are used in parallel e.g. in Ps 90:9^{LXX}; see also C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 222, note n2. As for ἐλπίς, see E. BONS, “Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*”, 442: “this use of ἐλπίς is typical of the Septuagint Psalter insofar as it reveals a certain shift of meaning: The prepositional phrase governed by the word does not express something that is desired or expected, but [its] source [...] Once again, one cannot but conclude that Aseneth’s prayer is inspired by the Septuagint Psalter and its specific vocabulary. However, she does not follow this model slavishly, but makes explicit what is implicit in most of the Psalter occurrences of ἐλπίς: God is her *only* hope.”

¹³⁴ In chapters 14–17, which recount the meeting of the angel with Aseneth, the term will refer instead to the girl.

¹³⁵ For a more detailed study of the theme, cf. A. PASSONI DELL’ACQUA, “La metafora biblica di Dio come roccia e la sua soppressione nelle antiche versioni”, *passim*.

long-suffering, qualities mentioned in Exod 34:6. In other words, Aseneth is calling on Joseph's God using categories which do not belong to a personal experience in which God has been directly revealed to her. Even if Aseneth does not know the fabric of the story which this God has woven with the human race, she addresses him, seeking his protection and the forgiveness of her sins. In short, Aseneth is calling on God as creator, that is, as the one who is at the origin of all life and who, therefore, cannot be other than merciful towards all he has created.

γ) Chapter 13

In chapter 13, the structure seems quite linear.

- Aseneth continues her prayer, beginning with a new supplication (verse 1) in which she takes up again the *motif* of her search for refuge in God.
- Verses 2–11 contain another *pars epica*¹³⁶ composed of nine elements each introduced by the interjection ἰδοῦ. Here, Aseneth presents to God her process of change, contrasting her previous situation with where she is now. In particular, she explains to God the nature of her penitential practices. This series of statements introduced by the interjection ἰδοῦ concludes with a recalling of the worship which Aseneth, in her ignorance, had offered to the idols (verse 11).
- The last part of the prayer resumes the *motifs* of the search for refuge, the plea for pardon, the idea of ignorance, and the request to be able to serve Joseph (verses 12–15).

For the analysis of this prayer, it will not be necessary to elaborate a verse by verse exegesis since it contains elements which we have already examined, especially those in verses 2–10. Instead, it seems more appropriate to dwell more carefully on verses 1 and 11–13 because they summarise Aseneth's deep process of change.

a) In *Jos. Asen.* 13:1, in particular, Aseneth appeals to her condition as orphan to obtain God's compassion. He who is "father of orphans" (*Jos. Asen.* 11:13; 12:13) will know how to listen to her prayer and forgive her sin.

13:1	Ἐπίσκεψαι κύριε τὴν ταπείνωσίν μου (A) καὶ ἐλέησόν με. (B) ἐπίβλεψον ἐπὶ τὴν ὀρφανίαν μου (A') καὶ οἴκτειρόν με, τὴν τεθλιμμένην ¹³⁷ (B'), ἰδοῦ γὰρ ἐγὼ ἀπέφυγον ἐκ πάντων καὶ πρὸς σὲ κατέφυγα κύριε τὸν μόνον φιλόανθρωπον ¹³⁸ .	Look, O Lord, on my humiliation, and have mercy on me. Watch over my condition as orphan and have compassion on me who am afflicted. For behold, I have fled from everything and taken refuge in you, O Lord, the only one who loves men.
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¹³⁶ For the term *pars epica*, see H.S. VERSNEL, "Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer", 2.

¹³⁷ τὴν τεθλιμμένην: missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

¹³⁸ τὸν μόνον φιλόανθρωπον: missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

Some elements here seem important:

- There are three statements, all introduced by an aorist imperative of three verbs which belong to the semantic field of “seeing”: the first, ἐπισκέπτομαι, means literally “observe, look”¹³⁹ and has for its object Aseneth’s ταπείνωσις; the second, ἐπιβλέπω, which means “look, consider, watch over”, is accompanied by the complement of movement and direction expressed by the preposition ἐπί + the accusative of ὀρφανία; the third, ὀράω, has for its object the twofold action of Aseneth: on the one hand, she has fled from everything (ἐγὼ ἀπέφυγον ἐκ πάντων); on the other, she has taken refuge in the Lord (πρὸς σὲ κατέφυγα κύριε).
- The first two stichs of the verse are constructed in such a way that there is a correspondence between the two aorist imperatives, ἐπίσκεψαι and ἐπίβλεψον, and the two equivalent complements, τὴν ταπείνωσιν and ἐπὶ τὴν ὀρφανίαν, both accompanied by the same complement of specification, μου. Moreover, the expression ἐλέησόν με corresponds in construction, tense, mood and meaning to οἴκτειρόν με, to which is added another term which has no parallel in the two stichs in question: τὴν τεθλιμμένην.
- Also introduced by an aorist imperative (ἰδοῦ), the following stich contains the conjunction γάρ which fulfils an explanatory function with regard to what has been stated in the two previous stichs. Furthermore, the same stich has two complements of movement: one that expresses movement *from* a place, ἐκ πάντων, accompanied by the verb ἀπέφυγον “flee, withdraw oneself”, the other, which expresses movement *to* a place or direction, πρὸς σέ, which is accompanied by the verb κατέφυγα, another compound of φεύγω which designates the opposite movement: “flee into, take refuge, take shelter, hide”.
- An exegetical analysis of this verse shows how, by means of the verbs ἐπισκέπτομαι, ἐπιβλέπω and ὀράω, in the aorist imperative and in the emphatic position, Aseneth wishes to attract the attention of God, whom she trusts, to her and to her condition of being “afflicted”, τὴν τεθλιμμένην, a term which, in position and meaning, summarises the two previous ones which refer to her person, τὴν ταπείνωσίν μου and τὴν ὀρφανίαν μου, indicating the state of humiliation and being an orphan in which she finds herself since she has fled from everything (ἐγὼ ἀπέφυγον ἐκ πάντων). The expression ἐγὼ ἀπέφυγον ἐκ πάντων¹⁴⁰, just like πρὸς σὲ κατέφυγα,

¹³⁹ See e.g. L. ROCCI, *Vocabolario Greco Italiano*, s.v.

¹⁴⁰ The genitive plural πάντων is probably to be understood as neuter. See also E. BONS, “Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*, 439, who argues that in *Jos Asen.* 13:2–11), “Aseneth explains in detail what ἐκ πάντων means: expensive clothes, luxurious rooms, sumptuous dishes, and, finally, her gods. At the end of this long enumeration, Aseneth seems to have lost everything she was proud of in the past.”

κύριε, both of which express the passage from one thing to another, refer directly to her development: Aseneth has left the idols and everything that binds her to her former life in order to find refuge and mercy in the merciful God of Joseph who is now also her κύριος. This context also contains the use of the substantive καταφυγή, which refers to God in *Jos. Asen.* 12:13, and the use of the verb καταφεύγω in *Jos. Asen.* 12:3. In this way, *Jos. Asen.* 13:1 would seem to be condensing the whole process gone through by Aseneth up to now in order to find refuge in God. Her repentance and abandonment of her sin, which refers, as we have already said, essentially to idolatry, has made her a penitent young woman and orphan because she has cut off every link with the Egyptian gods and so, also, with her own roots, her family, since she is a daughter of a priest of the pagan gods. If the abandonment, the having fled from everything (ἐγὼ ἀπέφυγον ἐκ πάντων), has made her an “orphan” and so “afflicted”, on the one hand, on the other and at the same time, it has pressed her into seeking refuge with the God of Joseph, and precisely with him since, as she herself affirms, he is “the only one who loves men” (adjective, φιλόανθρωπος).

At the end of this section, we can affirm that Aseneth is familiar not only with some fundamental *theologumena* of the Bible, like those attested in Exod 34:6, but also with the divine titles used in Greek-speaking Judaism (particularly κύριος, ἐλπίς, καταφυγή, πατὴρ τῶν ὀρφανῶν). Also in this connection, Aseneth is presented to the readers as a young woman of pagan origin who possesses the right potential for becoming a believing Jew.¹⁴¹ In *Joseph and Aseneth*, the use of the image of God as refuge has, therefore, to do with the power and might of God whom Aseneth addresses in order to find protection and salvation. At the same time, it should be made clear that, in calling God καταφυγή, Aseneth is making use of biblical language attested in the LXX. Thus, the young Egyptian woman is addressing God using terminology like that of the anonymous speakers in the Psalms when they call upon God in their misery.

b) As we have already been able to observe, each time Aseneth confesses her sin (ἁμαρτία: *Jos. Asen.* 11:11; 12:3) and seeks pardon for her iniquities (ἀνομία: *Jos. Asen.* 11:17; 12:3), she refers almost exclusively to the sin of idolatry. In fact, if, on the one hand, she confesses her pride (*Jos. Asen.* 12:5; see also 21:12, 16, 19, 21) and to having uttered damaging words against Joseph (*Jos. Asen.* 13:13), on the other hand, she links the condemnation of these sins with a repentance which does not specifically concern pride in its strictly moral sense but the

¹⁴¹ G. DELLING, “Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta in ‘Joseph und Aseneth’”, 254, advocates the opposite opinion: The biblical language is to be explained by the fact that the author of the novel was familiar with the specific religious language of the Jewish Hellenistic communities. According to D. SÄNGER, “Bekehrung und Exodus”, 32, Aseneth is presented as a person who has already converted to Judaism.

arrogant rejection of God; not merely the fault of having offended Joseph as rather that of failing to recognise him and, so, God. In this way, sin in itself, as it is conceived in *Joseph and Aseneth*, does not concern so much individual actions or a single error so much as the very root of idolatry which consists in not recognising God.¹⁴² It is not surprising, therefore, that Aseneth returns to this theme at the end of her prayer where she refers also to the condition which characterises her state as a sinner, ignorance:

13:11	ἰδοὺ οὖν τοὺς θεοὺς πάντας οὓς ἐσεβόμην τὸ πρότερον ἀγνοοῦσα νῦν ἔγνων ὅτι ἦσαν εἰδῶλα κωφὰ καὶ νεκρὰ καὶ δέδωκα αὐτοὺς καταπατεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ οἱ κλέπται διήρπασαν αὐτοὺς οἵτινες ἦσαν ἀργυροῖ καὶ χρυσοῖ,	Behold, then, all the gods whom I worshipped before because I was ignorant. Now I know that they were dumb and dead idols. I have given them to be trampled underfoot by men, and the thieves have looted those that were of silver and gold.
13:12	Καὶ πρὸς σὲ κατέφυγον, κύριε, ὁ θεὸς μου. ἀλλὰ σὺ, κύριε, ρῦσαί με ἀπὸ τῶν πολλῶν μου ἀγνοημάτων ¹⁴³	And I have taken refuge in you, O Lord, my God. But you, O Lord, free me from my many errors
13:13	καὶ σύγγνωθί μοι, διότι ἤμαρτόν σοι ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ [...]	and pardon me, because I have sinned against you through ignorance [...]

Some observations appear to be interesting with regard to these verses:

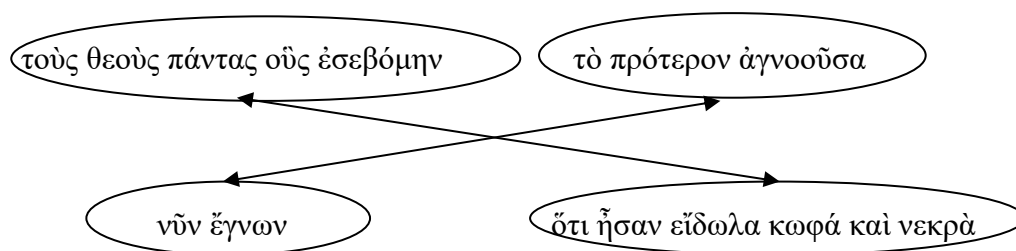
– The first two stichs of verse 11 are constructed with a chiasm. In this way, there is a correspondence between:

τοὺς θεοὺς πάντας οὓς ἐσεβόμην (A) and the clause

ὅτι ἦσαν εἰδῶλα κωφὰ καὶ νεκρὰ (A¹);

between τὸ πρότερον ἀγνοοῦσα (B) and

νῦν ἔγνων (B²).



¹⁴² For this exegesis, see also R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 141–142.

¹⁴³ ἀπὸ τῶν πολλῶν μου ἀγνοημάτων: missing in the critical edition of Uta Barbara Fink.

- The adverb οὖν, correlated with the interjection ἰδοῦ, the last of the series in chapter 13, has the function of introducing a kind of synthesis which summarises in this verse the change which has taken place in Aseneth. In fact, in addition to having the same root and to being both linked to an adverb of time, τὸ πρότερον and νῦν (in emphatic position), respectively, the verbs ἀγνοέω and γινώσκω refer to Aseneth: the one, in relation to her past action concerning the worship of the pagan gods (σέβομαι); the other, in relation to her present knowledge regarding the essential identity of the latter (εἶδωλα κωφά καὶ νεκρά).
- The term ἀγνοέω / ἄγνοια¹⁴⁴ occurs many times in *Joseph and Aseneth*. It is always linked to Aseneth's sin (*Jos. Asen.* 12:5; 13:11–13; 17:10; 21:15) and is a sort of technical term indicating lack of knowledge of the true God.¹⁴⁵ The worship of the idols and, therefore, the non-recognition of God by Aseneth acts as a watershed between her condition prior to her transformation and her present state. Thus, if, formerly, the maiden's life was characterised by sin and ignorance, it is now characterised by knowledge. The object of this knowledge is the true identity of all the gods: they are not only not gods but, on the contrary, dead and dumb idols. She has taken her distance from them showing absolute scorn for and rejection of them (δέδωκα αὐτοῦς καταπατεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων). In a certain sense, verse 11 reflects an idea like that already present in Isa 37:19^{LXX} where Hezekiah speaks of the gods destroyed by the Assyrians who are actually only idols: καὶ ἐνέβαλον τὰ εἶδωλα αὐτῶν¹⁴⁶ εἰς τὸ πῦρ οὐ γὰρ θεοὶ ἦσαν ἀλλὰ ἔργα χειρῶν ἀνθρώπων ξύλα καὶ λίθοι καὶ ἀπόλεσαν αὐτούς “and they have thrown their idols [MT: עֲבֹדֹתָם “their gods”] into the fire – for they were no gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone – and have destroyed them.”
- This part of the prayer concludes with a final supplication in which Aseneth asks God to be freed from her numerous errors (ῥῦσαί με ἀπὸ τῶν πολλῶν μου ἀγνοημάτων)¹⁴⁷ because she has taken refuge with him. These words summarise the whole of this long prayer which extends over two chapters.

¹⁴⁴ Sin through ignorance is a well-known theme in Jewish biblical and extra-biblical literature (cf., for example, Lev 4:2.13.22.27; 5:15; 22:14; Num 15:24–29; 35:11–15; *Testamentum Levi* 3:5). In the LXX, ἀγνοέω / ἄγνοια can indicate sin committed through inadvertence (e.g. Lev 5:18; Eccl 5:5) and, in an absolute sense, that ignorance of the true God which is characteristic of the pagan world (Wis 14:22). For more extensive treatment, cf. e.g. R. BULTMANN, art. ἀγνοέω κτλ., *passim*.

¹⁴⁵ R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 142.

¹⁴⁶ In the parallel text, 4 Kgdms 19:18, the LXX reads: τοὺς θεοὺς αὐτῶν.

¹⁴⁷ D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 492, note 4, explains the expression as follows: “sono le azioni dettate dall'ignoranza.”

We can conclude, therefore, that in *Joseph and Aseneth* the recognition of error and adhering to the God of Joseph are two aspects with a reciprocal and simultaneous correspondence. This knowledge is not the fruit of an extraordinary revelatory intervention (the angel's visit in *Jos. Asen.* 14:3 will be a divine intervention which ratifies Aseneth's change) but springs from an encounter between two people, Joseph and Aseneth.

d) The divine recognition of Aseneth's actions

α) A brief summary of the apparition of God's messenger

Chapters 14–17 tell of the encounter between the heavenly figure and Aseneth which takes place as soon as the maiden concludes her supplication to the Lord at the end of chapter 13. Clothed in dazzling light, the angel introduces himself to her as “the chief of the house of the Lord and the supreme commander of the army of the Most High” (*Jos. Asen.* 14:8: ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ οἴκου κυρίου καὶ στρατιάρχης πάσης τῆς στρατιᾶς τοῦ ὑψίστου¹⁴⁸). Having ordered her to cast aside her garments of mourning, to wash her face and head, and to put on a robe of new linen (*Jos. Asen.* 14:12), the angel addresses her again, telling her that her prayer has been heard and her penitence seen (*Jos. Asen.* 15:2–3): her name is henceforth written in heaven, and will never be blotted out from there; from now on, she will be “renewed, recreated and recalled to life” (*Jos. Asen.* 15:5: ἀνακαινισθήσῃ καὶ ἀναπλασθήσῃ καὶ ἀναζωοποιηθήσῃ). Moreover, the angel tells her of her marriage with Joseph (*Jos. Asen.* 15:6), who will become her spouse for ever, and announces to her that she will be called “City of Refuge”: in her, in fact, “many nations will find refuge with the Lord God, the Most High” (*Jos. Asen.* 15,7: 7 καὶ τὸ ὄνομά σου οὐκέτι κληθήσεται Ἀσενέθ, ἀλλ’ ἔσται τὸ ὄνομά σου πόλις καταφυγῆς, διότι ἐν σοὶ καταφεύζονται ἔθνη πολλὰ ἐπὶ κύριον τὸν θεὸν τὸν ὑψίστον). At this point, the angel goes on to speak about μετάνοια: she is the “the most beautiful and very good daughter of the Most High” (*Jos. Asen.* 15:7: θυγάτηρ τοῦ ὑψίστου καλὴ καὶ ἀγαθὴ σφόδρα); keeps all those who repent, especially the virgins; intercedes and prepares for them “a place of rest in the heavens” (*Jos. Asen.* 15:7: τόπον ἀναπαύσεως ἡτοίμασεν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς). She is much loved by God, and all the angels honour her (*Jos. Asen.* 15:8: ὁ πατὴρ ὁ ὑψίστος ἀγαπᾷ αὐτήν καὶ πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι αἰδοῦνται αὐτήν).

Before the words of the angel Aseneth experiences a great joy, prostrates herself before him and blesses the Most High God because he has sent one of his messengers to free her from darkness and to bring her back from the abyss (*Jos. Asen.* 15:11–12). Aseneth then asks to be

¹⁴⁸ The groups *a* and *d* have the terms στρατιάρχης in place of ἄρχων and ἀρχιστράτηγος in place of στρατιάρχης. Probably, as noted by D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 493 note 4), this marks a later substitution of the unusual term στρατιάρχης since the archangel Michael, who is traditionally designated as commander of the heavenly hosts, is usually identified by the title of ἀρχιστράτηγος.

able to know his name, but, to this question, the angel replies that all the names written in the book of the Most High, like his own, cannot be uttered in the world of men because they are extraordinarily great (15,12x: ὅτι μεγάλα ἐστὶ τὰ ὀνόματα ἐκεῖνα καὶ θαυμαστὰ καὶ ἐπαινετὰ σφόδρα). At this point, Aseneth wishes to prepare a table so that he can eat and drink good wine (*Jos. Asen.* 15:14). The angel agrees but requires the maiden to serve him a honeycomb. She does not have such food in her pantry but inexplicably finds it because, as she herself will recognise, the angel procures it for her by getting it to come out of his own mouth (*Jos. Asen.* 16:1–11). Before Aseneth eats it, the angel blesses her and all those who adhere to God in repentance because, by eating this bread, “they will not die for eternity” (*Jos. Asen.* 16:14). As soon as Aseneth eats it, the angel says to her that she has received the “food of life”, “chalice of immortality” and “unction of incorruptibility” (*Jos. Asen.* 16:16); her strength and her bones will be reinvigorated and become a “fortified motherland for all those who find refuge in the name of the Lord God, king of the ages” (*Jos. Asen.* 16:16: καὶ ἔση ὡς μητρόπολις τετειχισμένη πάντων τῶν καταφευγόντων ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ βασιλέως τῶν αἰώνων).

Then, from the honeycomb, a multitude of bees come out who cover Aseneth and form on her mouth a honeycomb similar to that which was in front of the angel (*Jos. Asen.* 16:19). At his command, the bees return to their place of origin. Those who were found dead on the ground, because they had tried to sting the maiden, rise and they too fly away (*Jos. Asen.* 16:20–23).¹⁴⁹ The encounter between the angel and Aseneth concludes with the blessing of her seven handmaids and the prediction that they will become the seven columns of the “City of Refuge” (*Jos. Asen.* 17:4–6).

β) The purpose of the apparition and the nature of salvation

The encounter with the heavenly figure constitutes a new phase in the story of Aseneth’s transformation. Beyond all the questions which have been opened up concerning the possibility that it contains (or not) elements which refer to a true ritual of initiation, what seems important to point out is that, before this encounter, the process of Aseneth’s transformation has already been concluded in itself.¹⁵⁰ In fact, the role which the angel performs in this episode does not turn

¹⁴⁹ The significance of the episode of the bees remains of uncertain interpretation for scholars. For a more coherent reading, cf. C. BURCHARD, “The Importance of Joseph and Aseneth for the Study of New Testament”, 115–116, who proposes an allegorical reading. For an approach along the same lines, cf., also, R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 114; however, Chesnutt mentions the adequate interpretation of this episodes as among the “desiderata” of research on the novel: “Perhaps a thorough study of the symbolic connotations of bees in the ancient world, with special reference to Egyptian tradition, would provide the key which would unlock this door to a better understanding of *Joseph and Aseneth*.”

¹⁵⁰ For this interpretation, see also D. SÄNGER, “Bekehrung und Exodus”, 32; J.K. ZANGENBERG, “Josef und Asenet”, 111.

out to be linked to a divine revelation which is the starting point for Aseneth's change. Rather, the heavenly figure announces to Aseneth that he has come to know of her prayer and of her humiliation. That emerges in *Jos. Asen.* 15:2–3: ἰδοὺ ἀκήκοα πάντων τῶν ῥημάτων τῆς ἐξομολογήσεώς σου καὶ τῆς προσευχῆς σου. ἰδοὺ ἐώρακα καὶ τὴν ταπείνωσίν καὶ τὴν θλίψιν τῶν ἑπτὰ ἡμερῶν τῆς ἐνδείας σου σου, “behold, I have heard all the words of your confession and your prayer. Behold, I have seen the humiliation as well as the affliction of the seven days of your want [i.e. her fasting]”. Because of this, her name has been written (aorist ἐγράφη) in the book of the living in heaven and will never be blotted out (*Jos. Asen.* 15:4: ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἐγράφη τὸ ὄνομά σου ἐν τῇ βίβλῳ τῶν ζώντων ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ [...] καὶ οὐκ ἐξαλειφθήσεται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα). From this, it seems clear that the apparition of the angel is not the occasion that triggers the change in Aseneth. Rather, the angel's announcement seems to have the function of confirming what had already happened to her before his arrival and specifying its value. In this connection Chesnutt states: “The man from heaven verifies that the change in Aseneth's life on the earthly level corresponds to transcendent objective reality.”¹⁵¹ Chapters 14–17, therefore, have the function not of recounting the process of the transformation of the maiden or of describing its details from the ritual point of view but of confirming that such a change has been really and fully effectuated in Aseneth and that this has been recognised by God.

The honeycomb offered the maiden by the angel represents the food of immortality.¹⁵² On the one hand, the angel pronounces a macarism according to which all those who adhere to the Lord God in μετάνοια will be blessed because they will eat of this honeycomb which is the spirit of life (*Jos. Asen.* 16:14: μακάριοι πάντες οἱ προσκείμενοι κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ ἐν μετανοίᾳ, ὅτι ἐκ τούτου τοῦ κηρίου φάγονται, διότι τοῦτο τὸ κηρίον ἐστὶ πνεῦμα ζωῆς); on the other hand, the angel promises to those who are blessed that “He who eats it [i.e. from the honeycomb] will not die for eternity” (*Jos. Asen.* 16:14: [...] πᾶς, ὃς ἂν φάγη ἐξ αὐτοῦ, οὐκ ἀποθανεῖται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον). It nourishes not only those who adhere to God by virtue of their repentance but also all the angels of God, the elect and the sons of the Most High (*Jos. Asen.* 16:14). After Aseneth eats it, the angel tells her that she has received the food of life, has drunk the chalice of immortality and has received anointing with the oil of incorruptibility. Immediately afterwards, he assures her that her strength will be reinvigorated and that her youth and her beauty will last for ever (*Jos. Asen.* 16:16). All these elements lead to the thought that Aseneth and all the children of God, for whom the food of angels is destined, share a kind of angelic

¹⁵¹ R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 125.

¹⁵² For the exegesis of these verses, see also D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 502, note 8; R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 143.

existence. This is confirmed by the following scene in which Aseneth meets with Joseph: the description of her extraordinary beauty makes her like the figure of an angel (see *Jos. Asen.* 18:9–11; 20:6–7). This happens too for the description of Joseph (see *Jos. Asen.* 5:4–7; 6:2–6). From this it would seem that, from the author’s perspective and in the final analysis, all those who adhere to the living God, whether they are descendants of Abraham or Jacob or else believers coming from the non-Israelites, enjoy an attribute which belongs *par excellence* to the angelic status: immortality. In fact, what the angel announces to Aseneth as soon as he appears to her in the room concerns the fact that her name has been written in the book of the living in heaven. This is a kind of guarantee which assures Aseneth of a definitive salvation.

Furthermore, it seems clear that in *Joseph and Aseneth* the participation in this angelic status of all those who worship the God of Joseph does not refer primarily to a future, eschatological, condition but seems to be a characteristic that has already been realised in them: the supernatural beauty and vitality of Joseph and Aseneth after her transformation; the likeness between Joseph and the angel (see *Jos. Asen.* 14:9); and the idea that those who worship the creator God share the food (and, therefore, the immortality) of the angels (*Jos. Asen.* 16:14): all these contribute to the suggestion that the people of God already participate on earth in a kind of divine life.

In *Joseph and Aseneth*, other soteriological conceptions are less developed and less clear. Certainly, the idea of salvation has also to do with eschatological reality (in *Jos. Asen.* 8:9; 15:7; 22:13, there is talk of τόπος ἀναπαύσεως and of τόπος τῆς καταπαύσεως, of a «place of rest» prepared by God) but nothing is said as to the when and how of this new existence, for example, by means of a resurrection or some other divine intervention.¹⁵³

In conclusion, the emphasis in *Joseph and Aseneth* is placed more on the privileges of the condition in which the children of God live already, expressed in the terms of a kind of angelic existence the principal characteristic of which is immortality. However, in this connection it should be reiterated that Joseph and Aseneth share the same qualities: Joseph, as a descendant of Abraham, and Aseneth, an Egyptian who has abandoned idolatry and taken refuge with the God of Joseph, the creator God.

γ) Aseneth called “City of Refuge”: analysis of *Jos. Asen.* 15:7.

After the angel announces to Aseneth that her name has been written for ever in the book of the living in heaven, he gives her a new name: she will be called “City of Refuge”. Verse 7, one of the *cruces interpretum* of the novel¹⁵⁴, requires some observations because it contains an

¹⁵³ See also C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 194.

¹⁵⁴ See U. MITTMANN-RICHERT, “Joseph und Aseneth”, 243

important element: Aseneth's decision to abandon idolatry and to take refuge with the creator God is not an "isolated case" but assumes an exemplary character.

15:7	<p>Καὶ τὸ ὄνομά σου οὐκέτι κληθήσεται Ἀσενέθ ἀλλ' ἔσται τὸ ὄνομά σου πόλις καταφυγῆς διότι ἐν σοὶ καταφεύξονται ἔθνη πολλὰ ἐπὶ κύριον τὸν θεὸν τὸν ὑψίστον καὶ ὑπὸ τὰς πτέρυγὰς σου σκεπασθήσονται λαοὶ πολλοὶ πεποιθότες ἐπὶ κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐν τῷ τείχει σου δισφυλαχθήσονται οἱ προσκείμενοι τῷ θεῷ τῷ ὑψίστῳ ἐν ὀνόματι τῆς μετανοίας. [...] καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς μετανοοῦσι τόπον ἀναπαύσεως ἡτοίμασεν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς. καὶ ἀνακαινεῖ πάντα τοὺς μετανοήσαντας καὶ αὕτη διακονήσει αὐτοῖς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον.</p>	<p>You will no longer be called Aseneth, but your name will be City of Refuge, because in you many nations will find refuge with the Lord, the Most High God; under your wings many peoples will take shelter trusting in the Lord God, and within your wall will be kept those who adhere to the Most High God in the name of repentance [...] and for all those who repent, she [i.e. repentance personified] has prepared a place of rest in heaven. And she will renew all those who repent, and she herself will serve them for ever.</p>
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Some observations on the text:

- The verse is constructed along the lines of other biblical texts in which someone receives a new name: first, it is said that the previous name is being replaced by another name and, then, an explanation of the new name is given (e.g. Gen 17:5; 32:29; 35:10; Jer 20:3). In *Jos. Asen.* 15:7, the caesura between the two parts of the verse is expressed by the conjunction διότι.
- In the first part of this verse, which is constructed by five parallel statements, we note the wide use of the future tense: Aseneth's change opens up a new time for her and, in her, for all those who, like her, turn to the living God. Starting from the conjunction διότι, the focus is on those who follow Aseneth's example, who remain anonymous, and the promises made to them.
- In the nominative, followed by a genitive, the substantive τὸ ὄνομα occurs three times: twice, at the beginning of the period, it refers to Aseneth (τὸ ὄνομά σου); the other time, at the end of the period, in the dative case preceded by ἐν, it refers to repentance (ἐν ὀνόματι τῆς μετανοίας). In the text, we find another three complements of place referring to Aseneth: ἐν σοὶ and ὑπὸ τὰς πτέρυγὰς σου, accompanied by the verb σκεπασθήσονται; and ἐν τῷ τείχει σου, accompanied by the verb φυλαχθήσονται. Subjects of these three verbs are, respectively, ἔθνη πολλὰ, λαοὶ πολλοὶ πεποιθότες ἐπὶ κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ and οἱ προσκείμενοι τῷ θεῷ τῷ ὑψίστῳ.

- The change of name in this verse plays a decisive role in the story of Aseneth. From now on, in fact, her personal identity (she will no longer be called “Aseneth”), which corresponds to the new dimension she has entered because of her conversion¹⁵⁵ (her name has been written in heaven in the book of the living for ever), takes on a more universal value: she will be πόλις καταφυγῆς¹⁵⁶, “City of Refuge” for all those who repent. The new name refers to an identity which is no longer bound solely to her individual dimension as a woman who has found refuge with the creator God; rather, her conversion gives the maiden an identity which is bound up with a destiny of life which concerns all the nations, all those people who convert to God, the Most High.
- The term πόλις refers to a collective reality. In the Greek of the LXX, the precise political significance which the term has in classical Greek (*city*, understood also as *State*) gives way to another connotation: thanks to their walls, cities could oppose an attack and so guarantee a good defence for the inhabitants (see e.g. Isa 26:1; 27:2; Prov 25:28).¹⁵⁷ In this sense, referring to Aseneth, πόλις gives the idea of a place where all the nations which adhere to the God of Israel in the name of repentance can find a solid protection and a strong defence. The term καταφυγή, “refuge” which accompanies it reinforces this idea of protection and recalls the appellative with which, in her turn, Aseneth addressed the God of Joseph in order to find protection and salvation. In this way, she becomes, by transference, *City of God*, i.e. of that God who is a refuge for all those who seek his protection. Her new identity is confirmed in *Jos. Asen.* 16:16 where it says: “She will be a fortified motherland [μητρόπολις] for all those who find refuge in the name of the Lord God, king of the ages”. In this case, the term πόλις is replaced by μητρόπολις, “mother city, motherland”. Once again, this term would seem to be deepening the role which Aseneth acquires *vis-à-vis* those who want to adhere to the God of Israel: she is their model *par excellence*.
- So far, we have sought to explain the metaphor of the fortified city which Aseneth represents for all those who wish to follow her example, namely, abandoning idolatry and reposing their

¹⁵⁵ This term is used here *cum grano salis*. As has been shown, the novel does not use the words μετανοέω and μετάνοια as *termini technici* denoting what can usually be called “conversion”. Rather, the novel employs either the metaphor of “refuge” or (as in *Jos. Asen.* 15:7) the verb πρόσκειμαι which, on several occasions in the LXX, refers to non-Israelites entering into a relationship with the God of Israel; see e.g. Isa 56:3, 6. Furthermore, the word ἐπιστρέφω appears in *Jos. Asen.* 11:11 where it means the “turning around” towards God; for similar occurrences, see also Acts 14:15; 15:19; 26:20. The issue is dealt with in detail in D. SCIALABBA, “The Vocabulary of Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth and in the Acts of the Apostles”, *passim*.

¹⁵⁶ According to C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 189, there is a reference to Zion, the City of God.

¹⁵⁷ See also H. STRATHMANN, art. πόλις, 522.

faith in the creator God. But what does “being the city of refuge” in which the people will be guarded consist of in concrete terms? Will their *μετάνοια* involve effective membership of the Jewish people?¹⁵⁸ Have they to practise their faith in the assembly of a community of believers? Finally, will the choice to worship the God of the Israelites have ethical demands, for example, the observance of the Torah? Such questions receive no explicit answers from the text. In fact, it is not explained how the *μετάνοια* of those who decide to follow Aseneth’s example is to be translated into practice. In this connection, we have to remember that the novel is presenting the facts narrated within a fictional framework, that is, in a period when the people of Israel did not exist and before the Torah was given to the people on Sinai. Aseneth’s faith, both in its idolatrous phase and after her meeting with Joseph, is described not as participation in public worship but as something that is individual and private. The decision to abandon idolatry is certainly bound up with her meeting with Joseph, but the process of her transformation takes place in her room. It is here that Aseneth practises the rites of penance, pronounces her soliloquy, addresses her prayer to God and encounters the angel. From all this, we can affirm that Aseneth is being presented to the readers as an example, as a prototype, of a non-Israelite converted to the God of Joseph.¹⁵⁹ Her qualities, especially her capacity to undertake the personal process of *μετάνοια*, are not qualities with which she alone is endowed.¹⁶⁰ Others too in her condition could follow her example and enjoy the promises made to her. In fact, as emerges from the macarism of *Jos. Asen.* 16:14, these promises regard not only Aseneth but also all those who, like her, will wish to adhere to the God of Joseph. Aseneth, who has sought refuge in him, considering him her only *καταφυγή* (see *Jos. Asen.* 12:13), becomes, in her turn, *καταφυγή* for the others who wish to follow her example; in fact, Aseneth becomes *πόλις καταφυγῆς*, that is, the fortified place in which many others will be able to take refuge.¹⁶¹

– In the second part of verse 7, the subject is *μετάνοια* personified: she will prepare a place of rest in heaven for all those who convert like Aseneth, renew them and serve them for ever. The role of *μετάνοια*, which is personified here, assumes a fundamental importance in the process of salvation which is performed by God himself. In this verse, the action of salvation refers to

¹⁵⁸ For such a hypothesis, cf. C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 189.

¹⁵⁹ See also D. MAGGIOROTTI, “Giuseppe e Aseneth”, 497, note 6.

¹⁶⁰ As for the qualities and promises, see also C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 189–190, but he does not develop this aspect.

¹⁶¹ For a very hypothetical interpretation of the “City of Refuge”, see U. MITTMANN-RICHERT, “Joseph und Aseneth”, 247–250, who argues that the celestial Aseneth as “City of Refuge” embodies the Shekhinah where people seek refuge. However, this interpretation requires that *Jos. Asen.* 15:7 is to be understood against the background of several other Jewish texts of the Hellenistic era with which *Jos. Asen.* 15:7 has little in common.

a reality which is also metahistorical, a τόπος ἀναπαύσεως ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, “a place of rest in heaven”. The expression certainly refers to the eschatological reality to which all the descendants of Abraham are heading together with those non-Israelites who have chosen the way of μετάνοια, but the text is lacking in all those references which would give us more information about the author’s eschatological vision. For example, it is not clear what destiny awaits all the others; in this sense, one asks: what is the nature of this place of rest? How and when does entrance for believers take place? The soteriological concept expressed in *Joseph and Aseneth* certainly implies an eschatological perspective, but this finds its realisation more clearly expressed in the present of those who are saved of whom it is said that they participate in a renewal of life which implies a status of glorification and privilege already in their earthly existence.¹⁶²

3. Conclusions

a) *The problem of idolatry and ignorance*

From our analysis in this chapter, we can deduce that it is the μετάνοια of Aseneth that is the leading *motif* of the whole of the first part of the work (chapters 1–22). In the beginning, Aseneth is a pagan and, as such, worships idols. The model of the pagan who is converted to the God of Israel is presented in an archetypical way: we are shown a young woman who is beautiful, rich, the daughter of a counsellor of Pharaoh and priest who officiates before the gods of the Egyptians. Her house and her clothes are adorned with the figures and the names of all the Egyptian idols to which she was particularly devoted so much so as to appear as the spouse of one of them.

Aseneth’s μετάνοια is expressed principally in the abandonment of the idols. Her separation from them is total. In fact, it is both physical (she breaks them and throws them out of the window, throws the sacrifices so far that not even her dogs can eat them) and interior (her prayer is addressed to the God of Israel whom she now recognises as her only refuge). Idolatry is also the principal sin which Aseneth acknowledges before God because it is that which largely separates a pagan from a Jew and which is the true obstacle to the marriage between Joseph and Aseneth. Moreover, in *Joseph and Aseneth*, idolatry, together with pride, are an indication of a failure to recognise the only God. This failure is linked to the theme of ignorance (ἄγνοέω / ἄγνοια) which Aseneth recognises and overcomes. In fact, Aseneth passes from a status of ignorance to a status of knowledge: now she knows that the idols she worshipped are

¹⁶² For a similar idea, cf. R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 148.

only dead and dumb gods and that her sole refuge is in the God of Israel, the only Lord of life. In *Joseph and Aseneth*, the abandonment of the idols and the recognition of God are two aspects of the same process in which Aseneth passes from being a pagan to being a believer. In conclusion, her example demonstrates that ignorance, the origin of idolatry and of the non-recognition of the creator God, is not an insurmountable obstacle, but something that can be transformed into knowledge.

b) The process of Aseneth's μετάνοια

Aseneth's change originates from her meeting with Joseph. He too is a virgin, of a high social rank, son of the patriarch Jacob, a pious and just man. His beauty and the prayer of intercession which he pronounces over her are the point of departure for Aseneth's μετάνοια. In this connection, as has been said, Aseneth's change is not the fruit of an extraordinary mystical revelation or a particular divine appeal but the fruit of a human encounter with a person who profoundly embodies the creed which he professes and of prayer. Her process of μετάνοια is described in detail. Her transformation involves a change in her social position: from a rich young woman she becomes an "orphan", alone and abandoned by all. However, this does not make her decide to return to the past; rather, it presses her to trust more in the God of Joseph as "father of the orphans". Before addressing God directly, Aseneth expresses the sincerity of her μετάνοια by means of various penitential practices such as weeping, fasting, dressing in sackcloth and covering herself with ash, which are rites of self-abasement. These are not ends in themselves but prepare for her approach to the God of Joseph of whom Aseneth "has heard speak" (*Jos. Asen.* 11:10). In this connection, we should take note of three aspects:

- In her soliloquy, Aseneth recalls the appropriateness of the *theologoumenon* of Exod 34:6 which she invokes with reference to her own situation. This distinguishes her from Jonah who is aware of this *theologoumenon* but does not seem to hold it valid where the Ninevites are concerned (see Jonah 4:2–3). In this connection, Aseneth is taking a step forward by seeking from God the forgiveness of her sins, and, in particular, that of idolatry, because she recognises Joseph's God as merciful and compassionate to all his creatures.
- In Aseneth's prayer, she shows that she recognises God as creator and giver of her own life. In this way, she addresses her supplications to the God of Joseph by combining two aspects: on the one hand, she addresses him as creator of everything that exists; on the other hand, her words echo what is said of him in Exod 34:6, namely, that he is a merciful God. All this would presuppose that Aseneth knows this God and his attributes already. In fact, she has never received any type of personal and direct revelation from God nor can she know the particular

story of his dealings with Israel or with any other human being. Her trust, therefore, rests above all in the fact that, as creator, he can only have mercy on those creatures who call upon him.

– Aseneth does not speak of her process of adhering to the God of Joseph as a “conversion” but as a process which leads her to seek and to “find refuge” in him. Therefore, her change is expressed, on the one hand, through her penitence and the abandonment of the idols, on the other hand, with her taking refuge with God. In addition to the term *καταφυγή*, Aseneth uses various other terms which are attested in the language of prayer of the LXX, particularly in the Psalms, *ἐλπίς*, for example. In this connection, we have to remember that we have here an anachronism. In reality, the wife of the patriarch, Joseph, could not have known such vocabulary. In this way, the novel elaborates a literary fiction which presents Aseneth as an Egyptian who already has all the qualities and preunderstandings which draw her close to the God of Israel. In fact, the vocabulary which appears in the novel, and, so, on the lips of Aseneth, is that used in the Greek-speaking Jewish communities.

In conclusion, we can say that Aseneth’s status as a creature of God is sufficient to allow her to address him as her God and appeal to his mercy even though she has never known him either directly or through the story of the miraculous events he performed during the Exodus since that would be incompatible with the literary fiction. Finally, the ethical aspect has a certain importance in *Joseph and Aseneth* in connection with the example of the relations between the two sexes, but this does not seem to constitute a *conditio sine qua non* for establishing a contact with the creator God.¹⁶³

c) The divine recognition of Aseneth’s μετάνοια and the message of the angel

Aseneth’s μετάνοια can be accepted by God since she too is a daughter of a unique creator and father. In fact, her rites of penance and prayers do not remain unanswered. This is ratified by the angel who seems to have the function of confirming what has already happened in her before his arrival and specifying its value. In particular, by means of the angel, God confirms Aseneth’s reception among his children, granting her a salvation that consists in a new life already on earth and a future of immortality for which all those who believe in Joseph’s God are destined.

In this connection, the angel’s dialogue with Aseneth shows that her μετάνοια has a paradigmatic character. In becoming the *City of Refuge* for all the nations who adhere to the Lord of life, Aseneth becomes the model of every pagan who, following in her footsteps, will be able

¹⁶³ See also C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, 193.

to obtain from the creator God full pardon and salvation. In the final analysis, if *μετάνοια* implies the passage from ignorance to knowledge, many like Aseneth, and following her example, will be able to come to the knowledge of God the creator of all who is merciful to those who take refuge in him. However, it remains open as to just what such adhering to God involves. Does it envisage observance of the Torah in detail? Or else, does it involve other ethical demands? The text does not give a clear answer. We could presuppose that what is chiefly in question is the rejection of idolatry, but the text does not seem to go further. It should be remembered in this connection that Aseneth's *μετάνοια* is carried out in the private sphere, in her room, in fact, without any public or official character. Thus, are those who follow Aseneth's example individuals who abandon idolatry to worship the God of Israel but only in private? What can be stated with certainty is that one of the messages of the novel consists in defending the idea that the *μετάνοια* of a non-Israelite, even if carried out in private, is accepted by the God of Israel by virtue of the fact that he is the creator of all and merciful to all those who call upon him.

d) The literary fiction of the novel and its purpose

According to an interpretation which has found a certain number of followers in recent decades, the purpose of the novel can be attributed to the following reason. In the face of the problematic inclusion of new converts of pagan origin within the Jewish community, Aseneth's conversion would be the prototype and symbol of the effective possibility of radical change for all those coming from idolatry.¹⁶⁴ Through the novel, therefore, the author, a Jewish member of the Greek-speaking diaspora, would be tackling the problem of the admission of proselytes within his community. Thus, in the description of the process of Aseneth's change, he would have provided those elements necessary to depict an authentic model of conversion to Judaism. This could enable the smoothing over of the dissensions which probably arose within the Jewish community of his time over the possibility of a pagan becoming a Jew. At the same time, the novel would be presenting some categories which would have allowed the confirmation of the religious dignity of individuals who had passed over into Judaism, since they came from extremely different religious-cultural spheres and did not boast of any descent within the people of Israel.

One can neither prove nor totally reject such a theory about the historical and social context of the novel. Since we do not have precise information about the author, the date and the *milieu*

¹⁶⁴ See, e.g., D. MAGGIOROTTI, "Giuseppe e Aseneth", 472, note 5; R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 97–117.

of composition, it is difficult to formulate neat hypotheses. However, it seems quite clear that the novel did not have a missionary purpose. As is shown by the vocabulary influenced by the particular language of the LXX, the author is addressing a Jewish public. In fact, the text contains no appeal to conversion and lacks all those *motifs* which, by contrast, would have been particularly connected with the practices belonging to Judaism such as circumcision, ablutions and observance of the Torah.¹⁶⁵ With regard to *μετάνοια* in itself, the novel's perspective seems to be interested in observing the interior change in Aseneth who does not receive any explicit call to convert and does not herself make any appeal for the conversion of others. Aseneth is not a missionary; if anything, she potentially performs the role of mediatrix in the process of conversion for all those who will choose of their own freewill to adhere to the God of Israel following her example.¹⁶⁶

Prescinding from such considerations, we should underline some aspects that are often neglected: the story of Aseneth and her *μετάνοια* are located in a patriarchal period. According to the historiography of the Pentateuch, Israel did not yet exist as a nation. Still less did the protagonists of the novel have a knowledge of the Torah or of the history of Israel after the Exodus. However, this fiction implies some consequences: Aseneth has little in common with the presumed readers of the novel because it reflects a "pre-Mosaic" perspective¹⁶⁷. That means that Aseneth can neither know nor observe the Torah. Moreover, as a woman, she has no need to fulfil the obligations of a male convert to Judaism, such as the specific requirement of circumcision. These aspects play no role in the novel. On the contrary. Aseneth is presented as the ideal model of a person who, of her own free will, almost *ex nihilo*, approaches the God of Israel since she is convinced that, being the creator of all human beings, he will show himself merciful to those who take refuge in him. In this connection, Aseneth's *credo* seems sufficient since God accepts her prayer and the author presents her as model for all who wish to follow in her footsteps. How, then, are we to describe all those who, as non-Israelites, wish to abandon idolatry and worship the God of Israel? Are they to be regarded as "God-fearers", "proselytes" or "true Israelites"? To these questions the novel gives no answer. It limits itself to putting into

¹⁶⁵ See also C. BURCHARD, "Joseph and Aseneth", 192.

¹⁶⁶ See J.K. ZANGENBERG, "Josef und Asenet", 119: "Weder erhält Asenet den Auftrag zu konvertieren [...] noch äußert sie selbst einen solchen Appell an alle, die noch nicht konvertiert haben. Gewiss hat Asenets Weg positives Potential für andere ('Stadt', Patronin), doch eher in dem Sinn, dass nun andere, die ihr aus eigenem Antrieb folgen, wissen können, dass der Weg ein Ziel und Aussicht auf Erfolg hat. Auch wird Asenet am Ende nicht selbst zur Missionarin, sondern was thematisiert wird, ist die überstandene Gefahr, gewaltsam wieder von Josef getrennt zu werden."

¹⁶⁷ For this idea, see J.K. ZANGENBERG, "Josef und Asenet", 118.

the angel's mouth the macarism declaring "blessed" those who adhere to God in μετάνοια following the example of Aseneth (*Jos. Asen.* 16:14).

General Conclusions

We have carried out an exegetical analysis of chapters 1, 3 and 4 of the book of Jonah, Psalm 33 and some chapters of the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*. It is now time to bring together the main ideas which characterise each text in relation to the leading theme of our study. The aim of this approach is to understand better how texts different in genre and date tackle the problem of the delicate balance between the idea of a special relationship between YHWH and Israel, on the one hand, and, on the other, a relationship between YHWH and the other peoples and nations which is based on the idea of the creation. In comparing these texts, therefore, we intend to have a better understanding of how they mark out the contours of those categories which make up the conceptual framework within which the texts are elaborated, albeit in a nuanced way. Starting here, we shall seek to have a better grasp as to how these texts were able to respond, each in its own way, to a question which must have been increasingly expressed in Second Temple Judaism, namely, that Judaism which was sprawling among the different worlds of other races and peoples, yet remaining always deeply bound to YHWH. How to reconcile the two aspects which concern the special relationship between YHWH and Israel, and the fact that YHWH is both the creator of all and Lord of history? How to conceive a relationship between YHWH and the “others”, that is, the non-Israelites, in the context of this special relationship between YHWH and the created world? Can non-Israelites enjoy the same privileges which God has reserved for Israel in particular? If so, how to conceive the possibility of a relationship between God and the other peoples which implies the favour of God being poured out on the latter? In this connection, the element which leaps to the eyes in the texts we have analysed concerns the fact that these never mention directly or explicitly the categories which generally refer to the special relationship which YHWH has with Israel, first and foremost the covenant and the gift of the Torah.

In the texts which we have examined, what emerges sufficiently clearly is the predominant presence of three themes in particular: (a) that of the creation, which is bound up with the idea of God as origin of everything that exists; (b) that of mercy, that characteristic of God which stands out above all the others; and we should not neglect to point out (c) if and how the non-Israelites are placed in relation to YHWH and what will be the result of this.

In the first part of these conclusions, then, we shall record how each text tackles these elements. In particular, we will ask what terminology is employed and how the three themes mentioned intersect. Furthermore, how do they form the hermeneutical framework within which Israel understands the way in which God makes himself known to the non-Israelites, how

the latter can enter into relation with him, and how they can take part in the relationship between God and the world? In a second part, we shall consider a category that is often used in theological vocabulary, that of conversion, seeking to understand if and how it is applicable to the texts examined. In the final part of this conclusion, we shall touch upon some texts which belong to the Jewish literature of the Hellenistic-Roman period in which the theme of the relations between God, Israel and the nations is taken up. Here, we shall note some links with the following texts: Pseudo-Philo “On Jonah”; the account of the so-called conversion of Queen of Adiabene, Helena, and her son Izates recounted in the “Jewish Antiquities” of Josephus; and some verses of the Wisdom of Solomon, especially 11:23–26 in which are interwoven some important theological *motifs* present in the texts examined in this study.

1. Creation, mercy and salvation in Jonah, Psalm 33 and *Joseph and Aseneth*

In the texts we have looked at, the theme of creation constitutes the frame within which God’s action is carried out and within which everything that exists finds a place in relation to him.

a) Creation, mercy and non-Israelites in the book of Jonah

In the book of Jonah, the element of creation constitutes the frame in which the whole scene recounted in the first chapter is developed, that is, Jonah’s flight and the tempest which endangers him and the sailors. In this scene, the elements of nature play an important role because they form the expression of the reaction of God who wishes to bring the prophet back to the mission entrusted to him. In this context, we see how the elements of nature, the sea and the wind, for example, are directly and as if spontaneously linked to an action of the divinity which, time after time, raises up each element and has control over it. This dominion of God over nature emerges also in a certain way when Jonah links the name of YHWH with the title “God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land” (Jonah 1:9). The fact that this God raises up and controls the elements of nature is confirmed by the prophet when he confesses that the storm has been unleashed by God on account of his flight and that it will cease only when he has been thrown into the sea (Jonah 1:12).

In this first chapter of the book of Jonah, other elements come together which seem important to the aim of having an overall view of the theology of the book concerning the relations between YHWH and the non-Israelites. The latter, represented here by the sailors, are those who, in the face of the unleashing of the forces of nature and the admission of his sin by Jonah, display an extremely biddable and responsible disposition: seeing that with their strength they

are unable to retain control of the boat, first each one prays to his god and the captain urges Jonah to do the same. In a second stage, they cast lots, and the lot falls on the prophet. Having heard his story, they are immediately aware of the gravity of Jonah's sin in the sight of that God whom he has revealed to them. The sailors are overawed, fear greatly, and this attitude leads them to comply with what the prophet tells them to do. This allows them to escape from the danger of death to which they had seemed to be destined inexorably on account of the prophet's disobedience. The account almost seems to be contrasting, in a game of mirrors, the *pietas* of the sailors and Jonah's refusal to wish to communicate with YHWH. In fact, not only had he fled towards the opposite direction to that indicated by God but, once aboard the ship for Tarshish, he had taken refuge in the lowest point where he was sleeping deeply. It is the captain who awakens him and exhorts him to pray, manifesting already a certain hope in the calling on Jonah's God. This anticipates and creates a presupposition of what is going to happen. Interesting to note in this connection is Jonah's silence and inactivity in the face of these tumultuous events. It is not even known if Jonah actually accepts the captain's exhortation to him to address his God. He opens his mouth only at that moment in which it becomes clear to all that he and his behaviour are the cause of the storm. Moreover, he says that he is a Hebrew and fears YHWH, not so much as moved by a prophetic intention in their regard as rather because, by saying this, he is anticipating what he will have to admit later, that is, that he is the cause of the disaster because he is fleeing from YHWH, that God in whom everything has its origin and who alone can exercise control over the elements of nature and so can quell the storm. This declaration presses the sailors to call on YHWH at the very moment when they seem bound to throw Jonah into the sea. What they are seeking ultimately is that in obeying what YHWH wills they will not perish and not be stained with innocent blood.

In the sailors' invocation there emerge two aspects which, even if nuanced, correspond to a plea for mercy for what they are doing and, at the same time, an attitude of submission to the will of YHWH. The latter seems to accept the sailors' invocation and their actions. In obeying what they have been asked to do, they are spared from death. YHWH is revealed to them, therefore, as a gracious God and, at the same time, Lord of creation and history, that is, the only one able to change their fate and have dominion over the elements of nature. They recognise this, in fact, and adhere to him by fearing him and offering him sacrifices and vows. In this account, therefore, it emerges how the three aspects which concern the idea of God as creator, the favour which God shows to the non-Israelites, and the obedience which marks all their behaviour weave together thus constituting a harmonious frame within which all the action is carried out. In fact, these aspects are the preliminary for the sailors' adhering to the God of

Israel and act as prelude to what will be recounted in the following chapters, namely, the announcement to Nineveh, the change of the Ninevites followed by the change of God (chapter 3) and, finally, the dialogue between God and Jonah (chapter 4).

In chapter 3, the aspect of creation and its elements passes, in some ways, into the background. What comes to the fore is the message addressed to the Ninevites. Despite the prophet's refusal, YHWH seems to insist on the need to reach Nineveh to announce to them their imminent condemnation on account of their evil. In this there emerges in first place, therefore, the attitude of God who is interested in reaching these non-Israelites in an almost programmatic manner so that they know that their evil is really great and that this has provoked his wrath which will lead to their destruction. However, this announcement immediately produces a positive reaction from the inhabitants of Nineveh. They respond swiftly by "believing" in the message they have received. It induces them to implement a series of rites of self-humiliation and penance and to abandon evil, making a deep change in their behaviour. Thus the Ninevites' attitude shows itself prepared for change. Even if the announcement of condemnation does not explicitly include this perspective, it is clear that the Ninevites react in the only way in which they could have hoped to be spared from this punishment. This is what emerges from the words of the king of Nineveh who, in announcing his decree, expresses the hope that Jonah's God can change this judgement. Basically, this way of reacting by Nineveh, even if it concerns non-Israelites, is also presented as unexceptionably appropriate to this situation. Actually, Israel has to react like this when it finds itself in danger (cf. Ps 78:22). Therefore, even if at the base of the announcement of disaster which reaches them there is an extremely grave sin, the Ninevites are being presented as a people disposed to change before God by believing, acknowledging their sin and the lordship of God, and, finally changing their conduct. Here, the process of adhering to Jonah's God and the change which involves the Ninevites is presented in a very structured manner. It draws into play other factors which do not emerge in the account of the sailors. First and foremost is the element of the "great evil" risen before God which is a fundamental threat to the existence of Nineveh. This element does not appear in relation to the sailors who, instead, are presented as individuals who are pious and responsible for their actions.

It seems precisely to have been the great sin of Nineveh which unleashed all the action of the story of Jonah but, at the same time, neither it nor the announcement of destruction constitute the last word. Rather, the evil of Nineveh and the announcement of disaster are the impulse which triggers a process of change which implies the believing in the God of Jonah, the prayer, the practices of penance and the change of conduct by the Ninevites. These are the

elements which lie at the base of this process connected with non-Israelites and which are presented as obligatory transitions which will lead to the change in God. The text, therefore, seems to be suggesting that the relation with YHWH Elohim, which also implies an act of salvation on his part, is not limited, in the case of wicked conduct, to the simple gesture of invocation or adhering to the message received without any consequence for behaviour. The believing must be followed by a real awareness of the evil done and of a repentance which must lead, inevitably, to a drastic change of conduct. Just in what the evil of Nineveh consists is never said, but, in the account, it is certainly linked to God because it has come “before him” (Jonah 1:2). Moreover, the announcement of the evil also has repercussions on the actions of the Ninevites who actually decide to put into practice a whole series of acts with which to attract the favour of Elohim. In the face of such a process of transformation, accompanied – we must not forget – by the hope of being saved, Elohim does not remain indifferent. He “saw their deeds and relented concerning the evil which he had said to bring upon them” (Jonah 3:10). This is the expression, now more marked, of the favour of Elohim who decides to reverse the decision taken to destroy Nineveh.

In the third chapter, therefore, God’s reaction undergoes a real change. If the gracious reception of the sailors’ invocation and their saving from death are a consequence of the fact that they show themselves, so to speak, docile to his will because, despite themselves, they agree to throw Jonah into the sea, where the Ninevites are concerned we have a real reversal of a decision taken by Elohim with regard to the inhabitants of Nineveh who are destined for destruction. Thus, God shows himself not only attentive to the Ninevites’ way of reacting to his message but even transforms for them his judgement of condemnation into one of salvation. In the third chapter, therefore, the scene focuses in a particular way on the behaviour of the Ninevites in the face of the announcement of disaster, their adhering to the God of Jonah and so Elohim’s reaction to this.

God’s change, expressed at the end of chapter 3, links up with the theme of mercy in chapter 4. This constitutes the epilogue of the whole account and here come together the principal themes which regard the creation and the mercy of God which become the aspects underlying the dialogue between Jonah and YHWH. Jonah, challenging YHWH’s dealings with the Ninevites, that is, the fact of having mercy on them, raises a kind of dispute in which Jonah’s lack of understanding emerges. He challenges God precisely for having changed his mind about the destruction of the city. Jonah shows himself annoyed and justifies his disobedience precisely on the grounds that he knew that YHWH was “a merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger and of great kindness and who repents of evil”. Here the theme of God’s mercy is

expressed explicitly for the first time and reaches its greatest development in the book of Jonah: it turns out to be the true object of challenge on the part of the prophet so much so as to have caused his flight and all his attempts at refusal and alienation from YHWH. In the fourth chapter, this theme of mercy is entwined with that of creation. Now, once again, after the episode of the great fish which saves him from death (chapter 2), Jonah is the beneficiary for whom God works on nature. This time, in chapter 4, God intervenes in the creation by causing the growth of a plant, sending the worm which makes it wither, and the dry wind which dazes the prophet. Although Jonah knows and does not seem to deny that everything that exists has its origin in YHWH, through his action on nature YHWH wishes to inspire in Jonah a change of perspective. He does not accept the mercy effected in particular for the Ninevites to whom he has been sent. However, he has to be able to understand that YHWH can only have pity on all his creatures – non-Israelites included – and, ultimately, on him himself, a disobedient prophet. As we have seen, at the end of chapter 4, Jonah and God are no longer disputing the “validity” of the divine epithets in Jonah 4:2. Instead, it seems that the idea expressed with the verb *חָוַס* in Jonah 4:10–11 is the common denominator appropriate to this debate: Jonah obviously has compassion on the plant for which he has not laboured. *A fortiori*, God must have compassion on the Ninevites and their cattle, that is, the living beings he has created.

Thus, in addition to containing Jonah’s motives for rejecting God’s action, the fourth chapter contains the reasons which press YHWH to act mercifully towards the non-Israelites as well. They have their origin in him, and for this reason he continues to concern himself with them, exercising over them, as over Jonah, every decision concerning life or death. In the book of Jonah, therefore, the wrath of God seems to be functional to the Ninevites’ change of conduct, and, at the same time, the fact that God changes his mind is functional to a possible change of perspective in Jonah’s way of thinking. It is for this reason that the book of Jonah is established as a didactic narrative which has the aim of laying the foundations for a comprehensible and theologically grounded relationship between God, Israel and the nations. If YHWH has sought a link with Israel based on the covenant and the gift of the Law, for the non-Israelites he has nonetheless reserved another possible way to reach a reciprocal relationship with him: fear of him, faith and hope in his mercy by virtue of the link of creation with which God has bound every living being to himself.

Is this relationship between God, on the one hand, and the non-Israelites, on the other, permanent and exclusive? Do the sailors and the Ninevites continue to have other gods and to worship them? The book of Jonah says nothing about this. We cannot exclude that the sailors, with their sacrifices and vows, are expressing their intention of binding themselves to YHWH

even in the future. However, an idea like this is not mentioned explicitly. Still less do we know whether the Ninevites become “worshippers of Elohim” for ever, despite God’s repentance as expressed in Jonah 3:10. In fact, it must not be forgotten that the book of Jonah is a fictional narrative. It could be argued that, by means of this “improbable” account, the author intended only to open up a new way: the God of Israel, precisely in his attribute as creator, is also a God of the non-Israelites, whether he is called YHWH or whether he is called Elohim, and that is why he shows himself merciful to those who call on him and believe in him. The question as to whether, with their prayers and their acts, these non-Israelites become Israelites or remain “pagans” is not yet posed in the book of Jonah. Moreover, there is not even an explicit mention of the special relationship between YHWH and his people Israel.

b) Creation, mercy and non-Israelites in Psalm 33

Twentieth century exegesis classified Psalm 33 as a hymn directed particularly at Israel because of the presence of a vocabulary that was often classed as specific to the language relating to the category of the covenant. In particular, scholars referred to the use of some terms, principally *דָּקָה*, but others too, such as, for example, *צַדִּיקִים*, or *יְשָׁרִים*, present in the psalm, which would establish within it some theological ideas oriented to Israel alone, the true addressee of the declarations and promises contained in the hymn. From our analysis, however, it emerged that this interpretation turns out to be partial and incomplete. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that the psalm employs a type of vocabulary traditionally used to express some theological ideas which are part and parcel of the religious baggage of Israel and which refer to a certain degree to the special covenant relationship between YHWH and his people. On the other hand, however, one cannot ignore the need to read such terms within the context of the psalm as a whole. There they appear repeatedly with reference to other categories. Thus, by referring to the entire cosmos (cf. verse 5: “the earth is full”) and the whole of humanity (cf. expressions like “all who dwell in the world”, “the nations”, “the peoples” “all the sons of men”, “all the inhabitants of the earth”, in verses 8, 10, 13 and 14), they construct a scenario within which Israel, even if not explicitly mentioned, is certainly taken into consideration but in which it is part of a much wider, indeed universal, reality. To ignore this would mean having a partial view of the vision which the psalm seems to be offering precisely in relation to a cosmic perspective in which God weaves relations with Israel, with the non-Israelites and with the whole of the creation of which he is the origin and over which he exercises his lordship.

Psalm 33, therefore, carries a theological message. If, on the one hand, this makes use of categories already well known to Israel, on the other hand, it confers on these a new meaning

since they are placed not only in relation to Israel but also in relation to the cosmos and to the whole of humanity. This is the starting point from which Psalm 33 would seem to be being proposed as that “new song” which calls on all the “just” and the “right” to the praise of YHWH according to a vision which is new precisely because it is a view which embraces all the created reality of which he is the upholder and in which all, Israelites and non-Israelites, are considered part of the cosmic and salvific plan of God.

The reason for the call to praise lies in the fact that the word of God, through which he created everything, is upright and his word is faithful. The theme of God’s creation by means of his word finds its development particularly in the first part of the psalm, namely, in verses 4–9 which introduce cosmic elements like “the heavens”, “their hosts” and “the waters” (verses 6–7) and an exhortation to all the dwellers of the earth to fear this God through whose word everything was made and completed (verses 8–9). Already in this first part of the psalm, the theme of creation is neatly woven with the theme of the divine mercy. In fact, the רָחֻם of YHWH plays a role of outstanding importance throughout the psalm. It is presented as a reality which pervades the whole of the earth (verse 5) and, in the first section of the psalm, constitutes the culmination of the expressions which accompany the statements about the characteristics of God’s creative action. The text is suggesting, therefore, that those who are being exhorted to fear God on account of his word, through which everything exists, are also those who can implicitly observe and experience his רָחֻם which pervades the earth which they themselves inhabit. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the image of God as creator is not relegated to a contemplation demanded of Israel alone. On the contrary, all the inhabitants of the earth are also called on to fear God (verse 8) precisely because of his power which extends over everything and which is at the origin of their own existence.

The verses making up the second main part of the principal section of the psalm, verses 10–18, are developed chiefly on the other theological axis, that is, the one which concerns God’s exercise of power over the created world, that is, his lordship over everything. It emerges suddenly in verse 10 where it is said that YHWH exercises full control over the counsels and plans of the nations which are destined to be fleeting in the face of his power, whereas his plan endures for ever and throughout all generations. In this connection, we note that the divine action which is directed at the created world is of such an extent as not omit anything or anyone: nothing escapes YHWH’s divine gaze which examines everyone from heaven by virtue of the fact that he “has fashioned their heart” and “understands all their works” (verse 15). Once again, then, there emerges the close link that exists between YHWH and creation: not only is he at the origin of life itself but he continues for ever to exercise his dominion over everything. God

exercises his lordship not only on the level of the macrocosm, that is, according to a collective and communitarian view, over created things, nations and all the inhabitants of the earth, but also over each individual whose deeds and thoughts he understands because he has fashioned each one of them. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the expressions used refer once again to a cosmic dimension of God's activity which seems to know no boundaries or limits. In this way, this second part of the psalm is also presenting as protagonist God in his relation with the cosmos and all living beings beyond the people of Israel. In this connection, however, it is necessary not to pass over the fact that, although not mentioned explicitly, Israel is taken into consideration and, what is more, as the people of God's heritage (verse 12). The macarism in verse 12, the expression that condenses all the theological density of the psalm which, although addressed primarily to "the people whose God is YHWH" without necessarily thus designating the people of the covenant, seems in the second stich to be making a clear allusion to Israel by taking up terminology that refers to the privileged link of YHWH with his people. However, this element too has constituted a cornerstone for the interpretation of the psalm, one which has profoundly influenced the understanding of it. In fact, the macarism, rather than being understood in its double structure, which takes into consideration both the one and the other category, opening, that is – both to non-Israelites as well as also to Israel – the possibility of being blessed, has contributed to directing the traditional exegesis towards a univocal understanding both of the macarism and of the psalm according to which Israel would be the single and real addressee of the whole text. Our analysis, on the other hand, has allowed us to show that, not only do the two stichs which make up verse 12 have as addressees the non-Israelites and the Israelites respectively, but that these are placed on the same level: blessedness, in fact, does not belong only to the people of YHWH's heritage but also to all those who, without any distinction, choose him as Lord.

This concept is reinforced in the following verses where it emerges that YHWH, creator and Lord of all creation, who watches over the actions which are carried out on earth and exceeds every human power, is also the one who undertakes to preserve from death and hunger "all those who fear him and hope in his יְהוָה " (verses 18–19). This aspect constitutes one of the most innovative and interesting elements of the psalm. Here, in fact, YHWH is being presented as the God whose protection and salvation reaches not only Israel but, precisely, all those who fear him and trust in his mercy. Once again, in Psalm 33, the theme of the divine יְהוָה returns to beat out the rhythm of the verses. While, in verse 5, it is introduced at the peak of the description of the activity with which God works in the created universe, in verse 18, it has the aim of orienting and directing the action of people of whatever ethnic origin so that they can obtain from him

protection in misfortune and life in the case of danger of death. In this way, fearing YHWH “hoping, waiting for” his רָצִיָּה means underlining the active and dynamic aspect of the way in which people should act in order to preserve and obtain life from the one from whom they have also received it and who alone has the power to maintain it. Thus “fearing” YHWH and “waiting for/hoping in” his רָצִיָּה are the two necessary and complementary aspects for the relation between humanity and YHWH to be dialogic, lasting and the guarantee of a life far from danger and death. Thus, the divine רָצִיָּה seems to be that terrain where YHWH and the whole of humanity, Israel included, meet and coexist without there being any tension between Israelites and non-Israelites: the one and the other, without any difference, can enjoy the divine protection and obtain God’s salvation providing they fear him and hope in his רָצִיָּה . That is no longer the prerogative of Israel alone which has “known” the רָצִיָּה of its God through his wonderful deeds: according to the theology of Psalm 33, the others too can now be taken into consideration by God with a view to salvation on condition that they submit to him and look for his favour. Thus, the principle of the relationship is not based on the Torah’s being transferred as a whole and imposed forcibly on the other peoples but is to be recognised in the רָצִיָּה of YHWH. That is justified by the fact that it is that common thread which binds YHWH and the creation together right from the beginning, and, at the same time, constitutes for people the guarantee of the salvation which YHWH alone can assure.

All can hope in the רָצִיָּה of YHWH. Calling on his mercy constitutes the praying response of one who addresses him to obtain attention which is translated into protection and salvation. In its final verses, in fact, the psalm contains a “we” section in which a group of worshippers manifests this trust in YHWH and in his mercy. This section, verses 20–22, constitutes the praying response to the initial call in verses 1–3 in which the “just” and “right” are invited to hymn YHWH with joy. As we have shown in our analysis, the category of the just and upright are, therefore, to be identified not just with Israel alone but with all those who, fearing YHWH and hoping in his רָצִיָּה , rejoice in him. That happens precisely in the final section of the psalm where the רָצִיָּה of God is invoked. In this way, Psalm 33 seems to be redefining in hymnological terms the paradigm of the relationship between YHWH, Israel and the nations which sees a new arrangement in God’s disposition to confer salvation on all, Israelites and non-Israelites, provided they turn to him in fear and call upon his mercy.

We studied the more important variants of the LXX text of Psalm 33. It seems to emphasise further the element of mercy as an essential aspect which connotes the divine action in the cosmos and the response of the people who live in it. That emerges from the fact that, instead of מִשְׁפָּט (“justice”), the Greek text prefers to employ the term $\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\eta\mu\sigma\acute{o}\nu\eta$ (“compassion”),

thus distancing itself from other LXX texts which generally translate $\eta\zeta\eta\zeta$ with $\delta\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\sigma\upsilon\eta$. Even though the LXX does not eliminate the aspect of judgement as part of God's action, this is now oriented more explicitly to the exercise of his kindness. Although it does not disappear, judgement becomes functional to the kindness with which God acts in the created cosmos. Moreover, by employing the term $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\eta\mu\omicron\sigma\upsilon\eta$, the Greek text harmonises all the work of God particularly under a precise unifying aspect which is made explicit in verse 5 through the use of the term $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$: "the whole earth is full of his $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ ". In fact, if, on the one hand, the term $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ is the one which the LXX uses most to render the Hebrew term $\eta\zeta\eta$, on the other hand, the use of the term $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ in Psalm 32^{LXX} responds to a lexical choice that is not automatic but rather a deliberate way of introducing a further element into the psalm, namely, what pertains to the divine "mercy" as a constant characteristic permeating the whole of reality (verse 5).

The LXX also utilises a vocabulary that describes and emphasises the creative activity of God much more. This is inferred, for example, from the choice of the term $\sigma\tau\epsilon\rho\epsilon\acute{\omicron}\omega$ (verse 6) instead of $\pi\omicron\iota\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ to render the Hebrew verb $\pi\psi\psi$. In the LXX, in fact, the verb $\sigma\tau\epsilon\rho\epsilon\acute{\omicron}\omega$ is almost a technical term which appears chiefly in relation to God's creation of the cosmic elements. Moreover, what happens in verse 7 is significant. Translating as $\acute{\omega}\varsigma\ \acute{\alpha}\sigma\kappa\acute{\omicron}\nu$, "like a wineskin", the expression which the MT vocalises as $\eta\zeta\eta$ "as in a dam", the LXX eliminates all possible ambiguity of the Masoretic Text which might lead one to think of events in the particular story of Israel, such as the crossing of the sea of Reeds where the term $\eta\zeta$ occurs to indicate the waters which stand up as in a "dam" (Exod 15:8) and the waters of the Jordan which, standing up miraculously in a single "heap", allowed the Ark of the Covenant to pass (Josh 3:13, 16). In this way, therefore, the LXX shifts the attention on to a cosmic dimension, that is, the separation of the waters and the dry land where Israel does not play any particular role. That is also due to the fact that, without a vocalised text, the Greek translator probably read and translated with $\acute{\alpha}\sigma\kappa\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ the term $\eta\zeta$ "wineskin", instead of $\eta\zeta$, "dam".

This universalist openness which removes every doubt about the leading position of Israel is underlined yet more in verse 9^{LXX} where, by contrast with the Masoretic text where the verb is found in the third person singular ($\eta\zeta\eta$ "and it came to be"), the Greek verb $\kappa\tau\acute{\iota}\zeta\omega$ is in the third person plural, thus indicating unequivocally that "all the dwellers of the world", who are called on to fear YHWH (verse 8), are the work of his same creation.

Finally, the emphasis on the use of the verb $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\pi\acute{\iota}\zeta\omega$ in the final verses underlines the need to answer to the initial call to rejoice in YHWH addressed to the just and upright who respond positively to this call. As if in an explosion of joy, they invoke the $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ of God and declare on

several occasions that they hope in him, thus placing themselves under the protection and salvific grasp of God promised in verse 18.

In the light of these elements, therefore, the LXX seems to give greater emphasis to the cosmic action of God on the creation, toning down those elements which would lead to reading a clear reference to Israel between the lines, underlining the origin in him of all the creation and, particularly, of all the inhabitants of the world. This cosmic action of God is combined with the theme of mercy which, in its turn, is highlighted right from the start as a particular aspect which distinguishes the action of God on the creation and, again, as that which permits all those who fear him and hope in his mercy to obtain from him protection and salvation from death.

c) Creation, mercy and non-Israelites in Joseph and Aseneth

The novel *Joseph and Aseneth* is a text of extraordinary originality and narrative competence precisely on account of its aim: to tell the story of the conversion to the God of Israel on the part of Aseneth, the one mentioned in Gen 41:45, who, from being a pagan girl devoted to the Egyptian gods, adheres in faith to the God of Joseph and becomes the patriarch's wife. This novel, which was formed in all probability in the *milieu* of the Jewish diaspora, taking its cue from an episode briefly mentioned in the authoritative texts of ancient Judaism, seeks, according to some authors to construct a precedent to speak of the inclusion in the community of Israel of one who, though not originally a member of the chosen people, approached them with interest and with the intention of embracing their faith. Aseneth's adhering to the God of Israel is recounted with a wealth of details. The maiden's change is described as a total rejection of idolatry which, in addition to being designated as the most serious of sins in the sight of the God of Israel, is also described as a state of ignorance: Aseneth declares her guilt and repents bitterly, justifying it in her prayer by the fact that, before she knew the God of Joseph, she did not know that the gods whom she worshipped were dead and dumb. Thus, having presented Joseph and Aseneth as respective models of *pietas*, the one as θεοσεβής (*JosAsen* 4:7) and belonging by birth to the people of Israel, the other "as a spouse of God" (*JosAsen* 4:1: ὡς νύμφην θεοῦ) wholly devoted to the cult of the Egyptian gods, the text describes Aseneth's change by highlighting first of all the need for the rejection and consequent condemnation of idolatry. Idolatry turns out to be the worst sin in the novel and the necessary condition for the process of change in Aseneth to begin. It is precisely with the rejection and even physical distancing herself from the idols, which the girl throws out of the window, that the turning point occurs which will open the way to a radical transformation of the maiden who becomes a

believer in the God of Joseph and even wife of the patriarch from whom the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh will descend. This rejection of idolatry springs not from an extraordinary event, such as a divine epiphany or a revelation proper from the God of the patriarchs, but rather from knowing Joseph who appears to her as a son not of man but of God (*JosAsen* 6:5: ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ).

Joseph's falling in love coincides with the change in Aseneth which consists, firstly, as has been said, precisely in the abandoning of the idols. Her taking her distance from idolatrous worship is accompanied by rites of humiliation by which the young girl manifests her sincere repentance before the God of Joseph from whom she seeks forgiveness strenuously with supplications and prayers. Her plea is based precisely on two arguments which open up the possibility of a stranger like her finding mercy with that God whom she now recognises as the true one. Her first reason is the fact that Joseph's God is also the creator of everything and so of every human being. This declaration is placed firstly on the lips of Joseph who, once he has met Aseneth, pronounces a prayer of blessing and intercession over her, asking the God of Israel to renew her with his Spirit and to recreate her with his hand precisely because he is the one who "has given life to everything", calling everything "out of darkness into light, from error to truth, from death to life" (*JosAsen* 8:9). In Joseph's words, therefore, according to his vision which mirrors that of the pious Israelites, it is clear that, although Aseneth is a foreigner who is very far from living and acting like his people, she is presented nevertheless as someone who can be integrated with those who form part of the chosen people (*JosAsen* 8:9: "include her among your people, whom you have chosen, before all things came to be; [make her] enter into your rest which you have prepared for your chosen ones"). Thus, if, on the one hand, this prayer depicts Aseneth in her state of error, darkness, distance from the truth, from light and even from life itself since she is still a pagan, on the other hand, it does not exclude the possibility that she could be placed among those who form part of that people with whom God has decided to have a special relationship, reserving a new existence for its members.

In her own prayer, Aseneth appeals precisely to the fact that she recognises in the God of Joseph the one who created all things by his word, who brought to the light the things that are visible and who gave the breath of life. This prayer, which certainly takes up some theological *topoi* proper to Israel, constitutes one of the fundamental elements which allow Aseneth to address the God of Joseph and to break down every impediment which could stand in the way of a relationship between her and him. Recognising herself as one creature among all the other ones existing, Aseneth overcomes that sense of anxiety and inadequacy which at first prevented her, despite her wishes, from being able to address a single word to Joseph's God. God's

creation is not limited only to the giving of life to things but extends to his exercising his lordship over them: in fact, all the elements of the earth obey his every command and wish. It is by force of the fact that the maiden recognises herself as part of this creation that she is permitted to implore forgiveness and to seek refuge with him from whom she expects mercy and salvation: from the one in whom everything receives life she can also obtain pardon.

In this connection, it is worth noting that the theme of God as creator is bound up closely with the theme of mercy as a distinguishing characteristic of Joseph's God. It occurs on several occasions in the novel and constitutes the other reason giving Aseneth the courage to begin to address him. Although, understanding her error, the girl fears God, in her words there occur themes like that of the fatherhood of God and his special care for the *personae miserae*. These serve to bring to light the aspect of the kindness of Joseph's God as that God who does not remain indifferent in the face of those who address him but, on the contrary, like a loving father, raises up whoever entrusts himself to his help and especially the afflicted. Thus, Aseneth's prostration for her sin, and primarily that of having worshipped in her life those which she now recognises in the sight of the true God as dead and dumb idols, does not give way to desperation but becomes the reason for her calling on the "God of the Hebrews" (*JosAsen* 11:10) whom she has heard is a God who is "living, merciful, compassionate, patient, full of pity and gentle, who does not take account of the sin of a humble man, who does not condemn the sins of the contrite in the moment of their affliction" (*JosAsen* 11:10). This way of addressing Joseph's God certainly echoes the formula of grace in Exod 34:6 which the author does not hesitate to put on the lips of a stranger, as if intending to say that Joseph's God does not withdraw in the face of the contrition of someone afflicted, whoever it is. In this way, the formula seems to constitute the *passe-partout* through which Aseneth can find grace, pardon and refuge with the living God. However, this formula does not function as a magic expression which opens God's heart to mercy in a mechanical way and which produces *tout court* his pardon. It is associated with an active and conscious dynamism on the part of Aseneth who employs this formula as a supplication but in the light of profound repentance and humble submission as well. It is accompanied, furthermore, by an outburst of hope and trust in the mercy of Joseph's God which leads her to exclaim: "Who knows if he will see my humiliation and have mercy on me? Perhaps he will see this desolation of mine and have compassion on me" (*JosAsen* 11:12).

On the one hand, the novel initially presents Aseneth as the perfect model of a pagan who worships her gods, but, on the other hand and in the light of her repentance, will become the model of a pagan who worships the God of Israel. That emerges from the contrition and prayers which she addresses to Joseph's God as well as the practices of humiliation which she

undertakes in order to seek his pardon and mercy. These too are not foreign to the Jewish world; on the contrary, in the Hebrew Bible, they often constitute the paradigm through which the sinner shows himself repentant and needing the mercy of God.

The vision of the angel ratifies the change in the maiden and announces to her a state of immortality which all who adhere to the God of Israel enjoy already in the present whether they are Jews by birth or come from other cults. In particular, Aseneth's change consists of a true transformation which confers a new state of life on the maiden. This coincides also with her change of name: from the time of her conversion, Aseneth will be called "City of Refuge" because in her all those who convert will find refuge with the God of Israel (cf. *JosAsen* 15:7) and so enjoy for ever God's protection and salvation. In this way, Aseneth's conversion takes on a universal value: every non-Israelite who wishes to adhere to faith in the God of Israel will be able to find in Aseneth, described also as μητρόπολις "mother city, motherland", a model of conversion in which all will be able to participate through adhering to the living God and being admitted to his salvation.

The novel emphasises a type of conversion which displays a deep change in the person. On the one hand, it consists in the radical abandoning of idolatry, on the other, in a humble request for forgiveness associated with a great faith in the mercy of God as creator God. The category of conversion takes on such importance that it is actually personified as "as a pure and always smiling virgin" (*JosAsen* 15:8): it will be she who will intercede for those pagans who adhere in faith to the God of Israel who prepares for them a place of rest. Aseneth will thus become Joseph's wife and, together with him, ancestor of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who will give existence to the people of Israel. This aspect is not of small significance since it legitimises Aseneth, though not a Jew by birth, to be a full member of the community of Israel.

In conclusion, we can affirm that for Aseneth knowledge of the God of Israel comes about through her meeting with and love for Joseph from whom she will take the cue for her process of conversion to the God of Israel and admission into the community of believers. In the novel, however, this meeting does not seem to constitute in itself a paradigmatic element for all those non-Israelites who will come to the God of Israel. Rather, the novel seems to wish to place the stress on an element which probably had an important weight in the social reality of the time: coexistence, the confrontation and encounter between Jews and people of a different ethnic origin and religious commitment in a territory where the Jewish diaspora had to play a certain public role. Where this coexistence or encounter left room for a knowledge of and particular interest in the God of Israel, it was necessary to find new paradigm so that those with whom Israel came into contact could find acceptance in the bosom of the believing community.

d) Creation and Salvation: texts compared

As is clear from our analysis, although the texts examined are of different genres and from various periods, they present some elements in common. We shall be seeking to bring to light those points which seem important for our basic theme.

(1) First of all, we observe that these three texts have as their theme the relationship between YHWH, Israel and “the others”. We assume that this aspect must have affected the community of Israel which, at a certain moment in its history, particularly in the Hellenistic-Roman period, had to deal with other peoples and other cultures which in some ways must have been interested in their faith and their way of life. In relation to this, we observe that these texts, perhaps with the partial exclusion of *Joseph and Aseneth*, are not ‘manuals’ intended to lay down the ways and approaches of beginning to become a member of the believing community. Rather, it seems that these texts prefer to define the theological principles for motivating and sustaining the possibility of an eventual approach on the part of individuals and peoples, wherever these are interested in sharing certain aspects of the Jewish faith. In this way, although the book of Jonah is in some respects a fable, it intends precisely to recount how YHWH, on his own initiative, wishes to reach out to the Ninevites, that is, to a foreign people and, as emerges explicitly from the text, one strongly marked by wickedness and violence. It is to this people that Jonah’s God makes himself known by using a prophet to reveal their sin and the threat of imminent destruction because of it. However, the accusation will be revealed not as an instrument of death but of life because it will become the occasion of repentance for the Ninevites and submission to the God of Jonah. The unfolding of the main action, namely, the prophet’s reluctance and the accomplishment of his mission, involves another important moment in which the narrative focuses on the scene concerning the danger of the shipwreck surrounding the ship for Tarshish, a danger to which Jonah and the sailors are exposed. The latter too are foreigners but are distinguished immediately by their particularly devout and morally upright nature. Through Jonah, they come to knowledge of YHWH and, having experienced his power, submit to him, fearing him and offering him vows and sacrifices. In both episodes, which conclude with a similar outcome, that is, the submission and recognition of Jonah’s God by both groups as that God from whom all life depends, the text seems to be proposing two models of adhering to the God of Israel by non-Israelites: the sailors, who experience the power of YHWH who dominates the elements of the creation and alone is able to save them, fear him, binding themselves to him with vows and sacrifices; the Ninevites who believe Jonah’s message and so his God, do penance and change their wicked conduct radically. This change is matched by a change in God who decides not to implement his judgement of condemnation against them, thus revealing

himself as a Lord of mercy. This theme will be developed particularly in chapter 4 where it will be the object of incomprehension to Jonah. He is somewhat representative of a certain section of Israelites who have to manifest a certain amount of opposition towards the non-Israelites. This allows the highlighting of the questions and, at the same time, the theological solutions pertinent to the problem at issue.

Psalm 33 tackles the theme of the relationship between YHWH, Israel and “the others” under another form, namely, not through a narrative but, as has been seen, through a hymn which emphasises the cosmic activity of which YHWH is the protagonist. YHWH’s cosmic activity, which is revealed in the creation but also in his lordship over the whole of the creation, revolves chiefly around the theme of the רָצוֹן of YHWH. It is that of which the earth is full and constitutes for all those who trust in it the possibility of being saved by YHWH. In this way, recipients of YHWH’s רָצוֹן are not only the Israelites but also all those among the inhabitants of the world who trust in it. In this way, by advancing the issue of the relation between YHWH and the non-Israelites, Psalm 33 does not exclude *tout court* the people of Israel to whom verse 12b alludes but includes them as part of the whole of humanity which has its origin in him and which is called to praise him and to call on his mercy as a guarantee of salvation and protection in danger. In this connection, by dealing with the salvation and protection which YHWH reserves for all who fear him and trust in his רָצוֹן , Psalm 33 seems to tone down and even to abolish the borders of separation between Israel and “the others”. In this way, the psalm renders increasingly faint the line of demarcation which makes a clear and profound distinction between Israel and the rest of humanity. In fact, the text never mentions those categories well known to the religious tradition of Israel, such as the covenant or the Torah, which elsewhere constitute those inalienable presuppositions which regulate the relations between YHWH and his people. In this connection, as we have already observed several times, Israel is never mentioned explicitly. What regulates the relations between YHWH, the creation and humanity are, on the one hand, the fact that he has given life to everything and everyone, extending and instilling his mercy on all, on the other, fearing him and trusting in his רָצוֹן . In this text too, therefore, the creaturely condition and the divine רָצוֹן are starting points but not automatic guarantees of God’s salvation. Again, it is also the fruit of a deliberate relationship on the side of the individual, whether a member of the people of Israel or a non-Israelite, who in this way is called on to fear him and hope in his רָצוֹן . Finally, we can note that, nevertheless, the initiative is always entrusted to YHWH, the only one able to guarantee protection in time of need and salvation of life.

In *Joseph and Aseneth*, the question of the relationship between Israelites and non-Israelites is the principal theme of the whole of the first part of the novel. In this novel, which is inspired

by and amplifies the story of the patriarch Joseph who, as is told in Gen 41:45, takes as his wife “Aseneth”, an Egyptian daughter of “Potiphera, priest of On”, the details which mark membership of the people of Israel are clearly defined. Moreover, the text makes use of more definite categories: it places as the foundation of the narrative a series of characteristics which describe and differentiate the pious Israelite, represented by Joseph as a model of perfection, from a non-Israelite, represented in the highest degree by a young woman, Aseneth. The greatest difference which the text immediately highlights is precisely the fact that, by contrast with Joseph who worships the Most High God, creator of everything, Aseneth is a non-Israelite woman who worships the Egyptian gods and surrounds herself with a notable quantity of idols which represent her features. In this way, the text intends already to typologise and give a neat configuration to the two characters who represent, definitively, the people chosen by the God of Jacob and the non-Israelites. The distance between the two which, at the beginning, seems insolubly insurmountable, begins in a first phase to be chipped away by the prayer of blessing which Joseph pronounces over the maiden. Through it, he calls on YHWH and reveals the possibility and the desire that Aseneth too, through the intervention of the God of Jacob, can leave error and darkness and find the truth and light so as to be included among the chosen and the repose which only they enjoy. This prayer, therefore, admits the possibility that the God of Israel can perform a salvific intervention (a new life, an existence which will be recreated) on behalf of Aseneth who does not belong originally to Joseph’s people, and it opens the way for everything which will be narrated in what follows. There, the love of Aseneth for the young Joseph will lead the maiden to profound penitence and a radical change which will bring her to reject her idolatrous conduct and trust with all her strength in the God of Joseph alone and, especially, in his mercy. In this case, nevertheless, we have a text which, by locating its narrative environment in the patriarchal history of the people and telling in particular of the admission of a pagan into the bosom of the one who will later become the people of Israel, never mentions either the Torah or the covenant as categories that come between Joseph, his God and the maiden since, in the fictitious narrative, the events occur before the Exodus. These categories will also not be mentioned with reference to all those who, as non-Israelites or pagans, wish to be converted to Joseph’s God in Aseneth’s wake. Once again – like the book of Jonah and Psalm 33 – rather than wishing to dictate the conditions *tout court* to be attained for a valid way of adhering to the God of Joseph, *Joseph and Aseneth* intends to highlight two fundamental aspects: the possibility for an individual non-Israelite to embrace the faith of the God of the patriarchs, and, on the other hand, the fact that God accepts this adhering by implementing his mercy by virtue of that creative act which binds him from the beginning of the world to all his

creatures without distinction. This is the source of his salvation and the inclusion in the community of those who have the God of Jacob as their Lord, not only for Aseneth but also for all those who, following her example, adhere to him in faith. However, this is not detached from the active participation of the individual who, following Aseneth's example, must call on this God strenuously, repenting of the evil committed (especially idolatrous conduct) and calling on and trusting sincerely in his mercy.

(2) In all these texts, the God of Israel is presented as one who exercises power over the whole created universe and over all people. That emerges not only from the fact that he is the creator of everything but also from the fact that he exercises his lordship over them. This last aspect takes shape in two different ways: on the one hand, the God of Israel is the one who exercises an absolute and concrete dominion over all the cosmic elements and all the people on earth; on the other hand, it is he who "sees", "watches", "scrutinises" the actions which are performed on earth. In *Jonah*, this is highlighted at the end of chapter 3 where it says that "Elohim saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way" (*Jonah* 3:10). If the act of seeing serves here, on the one hand to stress God's observing of the change of deeds and wicked conduct of the Ninevites, it also serves to underline how the divine gaze does not focus solely on the external actions which they perform but that God is able also to go further to the point of observing the sincerity of such acts. What confirms this is that the consequence of God's seeing coincides also with a judgement which, in the case of the Ninevites, will even allow him to change his mind about the punishment announced by *Jonah* for the city. God's seeing is present also in *Psalm* 33 and, particularly, in verses 13–15. Here it is said that God looks down from heaven, the place of his dwelling, and observes all people, scrutinising the hearts which he himself has fashioned. Thus, the action of seeing is directed on all the people of the earth and their actions.

In *Psalm* 33 also, but in a still more explicit way, the act of God's seeing is not limited to the exterior aspect of the acts but watches over everyone and penetrates every reality to the point of reaching the human hearts which he himself has fashioned one by one. In *Psalm* 33, therefore, YHWH's seeing implies a dominion which he exercises from heaven, the place of his dwelling, over all people and their actions, and implies, inevitably, a judgement on them.

In the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*, the image of "seeing" as an event that implies a judgement is not attributed to God but to *Joseph* who, in the novel, as said several times, sometimes and to a certain degree manifests in his person the very presence of his God. In fact, the maiden's knowledge of him assumes the features of a divine revelation and will coincide with the actual process of her transformation from idolater to believer in the God of Jacob. At exactly the

beginning of this process, Aseneth manifests precisely the desire to hide herself from Joseph's eyes or, even better, to hide her shameful actions which had led her to utter offensive words against him. However, this turns out to be impossible because Joseph "sees every hiding place and no secret escapes him because of the great light that is in him" (*JosAsen* 6:6).

(3) The three texts take into consideration a salvific act by YHWH on behalf of non-Israelites. In all three texts, they are considered as creatures to whom God directs his special care which consists in a salvific act and also, in Psalm 33 and in *Joseph and Aseneth*, in a special protection for those who adhere to him in faith. From this point of view, all three texts record the same theological basics. The conceptual justification and support for extension of the salvific action of YHWH to those who do not belong to the people of Israel have as points of reference three theological axes present in the religious conception of Israel: a) God is the creator and ruler of everything that exists; b) the God of Israel is the only one who saves from death and guarantees life on earth; and c) the God of Israel is a merciful God.

a) The creation as the action of God from whom everything originates and who moves everything is an idea found in all three texts. In *Jonah*, it emerges from the fact that all the elements of nature have their origin in YHWH and obey his will. In this connection, we can mention the wind, the sea and the storm of chapter 1 as well as the worm, the plant and the wind of chapter 4. Psalm 33 also follows in this path by praising God the creator particularly in the first part. The verses of the psalm echo the theology of Genesis. God creates through his word, and everything begins to exist from it, like the heavens, the stars and the waters. The creation through his word and obedience to his every command constitute the reason why all the inhabitants of the world are called to fear him and to tremble before him. That also means that everything is the visible and concrete manifestation of the powerful presence of YHWH before whom every living being can only submit and recognise him as God. All the more so if one considers that he is not only the creator of the cosmos but also the one who has fashioned the heart of each of the inhabitants of the earth. In *Joseph and Aseneth*, one of the factors to which Aseneth appeals to find mercy in the eyes of Joseph's God is precisely the fact that it is he from whom everything originates and takes its life. It is exactly from this premise that Aseneth recognises herself as one of his creatures and, as such, finds the courage to address him. The particular nature of this novel lies in the fact that this concept is placed precisely on the lips of a young woman whose origins are not rooted in Judaism. By means of this element in the literary fiction, the text is thus suggesting that, beyond everything that could constitute a reason for Jewish separation (in this connection, see the description of the care with which Joseph preserves his status of cultic purity by avoiding any contacts with pagan girls just as with

Aseneth and her family), a pagan can recognise herself as being like all the other created beings and so, precisely by virtue of being one of his creatures, can also be pardoned and saved by Joseph's God.

b) The God of Jonah is a God who, as has been said, goes in search of Nineveh to announce its punishment. However, this announcement of disaster will create the opportunity for the faith of the city and the repenting of God who will change the punishment announced into a new dimension of life: believing in Jonah's message and so in his God, the Ninevites carry out a whole series of penitential practices and embark on a new way of living which manifest a profound and drastic transformation of the people who thus abandon the evil which had provoked the initial reaction of God. This gives rise to the repentance of God who does not carry out the promise of the evil which he had thought to do to them. In the story of Jonah, God does not reveal himself as the God who saves from death and destruction only in the case of the Ninevites, a foreign and wicked people, but also in the case of another category of non-Israelites, that is, the sailors who, obeying his order, submit to his command and, on being saved, offer him sacrifices and vows. In the book of Jonah, therefore, God takes the initiative so that non-Israelites too can be reached by his judgement and, in the final analysis, by his mercy. In Psalm 33, this aspect is evident right from the beginning. In fact, already at the beginning of the principal part of the psalm, we are told that "the whole earth is full of the קִדְוָה of God" (verse 5). The *motif* of קִדְוָה as principle of salvation is then reprised in the final part of the same section as principle of salvation for those who hope in it. These concepts are enshrined in a hymn which calls on all humanity to fear YHWH and to praise him for his wonderful works in creation as well as for his power in governing the cosmos and being a better guarantee of protection and salvation than any other power in the world. YHWH exercises this salvific power in a total and invincible way over everyone on the face of the earth and throughout all generations. Even if the individual is required to fear him and to hope in his קִדְוָה , it is YHWH himself who, placing his קִדְוָה as a reality that permeates the whole earth, has already created those conditions for it to be realised for every living being who inhabits it, whether or not they belong to the people of Israel. The psalm presents the latter, in fact, as part of a whole reality, that is, as part of the whole of humanity which dwells on the earth and has its origin in him. Like all the inhabitants of the world, together with all the creation, Israel is a sign of the creative presence of YHWH and recipient of that mercy with which he has filled everything. In *Joseph and Aseneth*, the salvific act of God on behalf of the pagan girl who converts to him is invoked by Joseph who in this way performs a kind of mediatory role in the novel between Aseneth and the God of Jacob. In fact, by pronouncing over her the prayer of blessing, Joseph invokes for

her an intervention of re-creation on the part of God who can draw the maiden from error to truth and from death to life and, finally, permit her to be included in the community of the chosen people. This dynamism, intercession of Joseph – transformation of Aseneth – admission of Aseneth among those whose names are written in heaven, is not caused by God in the literary fiction in an explicit or direct way, as, for example, in the story of Jonah. In *Joseph and Aseneth*, it is Joseph who takes the initiative and holds out to the reader the possibility that a non-Israelite girl can benefit from an intervention by the God of his fathers in such a way that she too can enjoy a special relationship with him and can be brought to a new life and salvation.

c) The idea of רַחֲמֵי , that principle which makes possible the salvation of a pagan who turns to the God of Israel, is presented in all three texts as a typical characteristic of the divine action towards all the beings of the earth. It is directed to all people by virtue of their origin in God who is the creator of everything that exists. In this connection, Psalm 33 is not slow in affirming that life on the earth is already a manifestation of this mercy (Ps 33:5). In all three texts, however, רַחֲמֵי becomes a salvific instrument which is efficacious for those who show themselves to have turned to God, hoping in him and in his רַחֲמֵי . That emerges from how the Ninevites react to Jonah's announcement of destruction. They believe in God and begin all the practices of self-abasement, renouncing their wicked conduct and violence in the precise hope that he can change his intention and so have mercy on them. This hope is also expressed by the sailors in the moment when, their lives at risk on account of the storm, they urge Jonah to address his God in the hope that he will take thought for them and not cause them to perish. Even if these two passages in Jonah do not mention God's רַחֲמֵי explicitly, they express a hope in his salvific intervention. Once this has been carried out, it is linked by Jonah precisely to the merciful nature of YHWH which Jonah expresses precisely by the formula of "grace" where, among other things, the expression רַחֲמֵי־רַב appears (Jonah 4:2). This formula, well known to the creed of Israel and cornerstone of the relation between it and its God, is here applied in a surprising way to describe God's behaviour towards the non-Israelites and, in this particular case, towards the Ninevites. Therefore, the change in God, who renounces the evil which he had thought to carry out against Nineveh on account of its wickedness, is an act of רַחֲמֵי . It is in God's kindness and in a possible change of his mind that both the sailors and the Ninevites hope. This hope does not remain solely on the level of intentions nor is it reduced to a sentimental attitude; rather, it is translated into concrete acts: obeying the divine will, the sailors fear God and submit to him; the Ninevites believe and change their behaviour. The need to hope in the divine רַחֲמֵי so that YHWH can guarantee protection and life emerges also in Psalm 33. In fact, by calling on all the inhabitants of the world to fear YHWH and hope in his רַחֲמֵי , the psalm is perhaps redefining,

in a less stereotypical and particular manner, those necessary preliminaries which allow all to enter into a salvific relationship with the God of Israel. Even if in verse 12b it seems not to refrain from mentioning implicitly the special relationship which characterised the link between YHWH and the people of Israel, Psalm 33 does not require the inhabitants of the world to observe the particular precepts which Israel was called to respect. On the contrary, by breathing a much more universal air, the Psalm includes Israel within a broader frame, shifting its boundaries of cult and identity towards a configuration which presents solid links with the whole of humanity without, however, renouncing the premises of its faith in the God of the Fathers. It is, therefore being called to re-express its faith in the merciful God with a language and categories which also permit those who wish to fear YHWH to understand him and to come to faith in him without having to go down the same path as the one reserved for Israel. In the psalm, יְהוָה , the inalienable characteristic of the God of Israel, also constitutes an instrument of YHWH's salvation even for the non-Israelites to the degree in which they wish to benefit from it. Hoping in and calling on YHWH's יְהוָה will be for all the inhabitants of the world, Israel included, a guarantee of protection and life for all generations and a reason for rejoicing in him. In *Joseph and Aseneth*, the mercy of Joseph's God is invoked by the maiden as a concrete possibility of salvation. Aseneth's words include the formula of grace from Exod 34:6 which, in her mouth, becomes a sort of profession which she employs to gain acceptance, protection and salvation from the God of Joseph. In the literary fiction, even if Aseneth comes from a religious background totally foreign to a strictly Jewish one, she expresses those preliminaries of faith which are precisely those of a *pietas* that is particularly developed and mature. In fact, in the God of Joseph, she recognises, on the one hand, a merciful God who does not draw back in the face of his creatures, and, on the other hand, a God capable of kindness and forgiveness.

2. Conversion: in what sense?

In the light of our reflection on the theology of our texts, we shall use this section to tackle more closely the theme of conversion as a point of dialogue and discussion with the studies which have previously wished, in certain cases, to give an answer concerning the role of the conversion of non-Israelites to the God of Israel in these texts. Although, as we have seen, our three texts deal with the theme of the relationship between Israel, its God and the nations so as to propose possible ways of salvation for the nations too, we cannot assume that they deal with the problem of the conversion of non-Israelites explicitly. Rather, the texts seem primarily to concentrate on theological principles which could, so to speak, open up a new path so that those who do not belong to the people of Israel by origin and tradition can also enjoy a favourable disposition of

God in their regard. In tackling this theme, therefore, our texts broaden the horizon of meaning and understanding, taking as central elements around which the respective stories turn and, in the case of the psalm, the themes of the hymn, not the particular history of Israel and all its implications which bind it in a privileged relationship to its God but, rather, those themes which associate it with the rest of humanity to which God is bound as creator and Lord of history.

Therefore, if exegetical reflection on the text of Jonah has, for some verses, led some authors to consider the attitude of the sailors and then of the Ninevites as a conversion, our analysis has led us to employ this category with great caution. In fact, if, on the one hand, the sailors end up offering vows and sacrifices to YHWH, which display a kind of permanent link with the God of Jonah, on the other hand, these practices, as presented by the text, do not provide any connection with a cultic action of the community of Israel. Furthermore, nothing is said of the inclusion of the sailors in it or in the people. Thus, of what kind of conversion could we be speaking in relation to the adhering of the sailors to YHWH? *Mutatis mutandis*, the same thing applies with regard to the Ninevites. They do not know the name of YHWH, only that of Elohim. On the one hand, they believe, practise the rites of penance and abandon their wicked conduct; on the other hand, the text remains open: no other information is provided concerning the sequel to the Ninevites' story. We ask, therefore, if adhering in faith to Elohim and their change of conduct will lead the Ninevites to deepen their link with God. In this text too, there is silence concerning the relations of any kind between this community of believers in Nineveh and the Israelites.

However, we bear in mind that the text in question tends to establish principles which make possible and theologically justifiable the adhering of foreign individuals and groups to the God of Israel by virtue of two aspects which govern not only the special relationship between Israel and its God but also the universal relationship between God and the cosmos, namely, that of the creation and of his lordship over the world, and that of his mercy. By means of these principles, the book of Jonah provides the hermeneutical keys with which to understand the relationship between YHWH and the two respective groups of non-Israelites. The text does not question that YHWH is the God who called Israel and wove a story of particular closeness with a single people to whom he made promises and with whom he established a special covenant, but, at the end of the book, he is presented as the one who has reserved his mercy for those also with whom, although not members of this people, he has woven, from the beginning, a relationship which has its *raison d'être* in the gift of life from its beginning and its extension in history. This is the message of chapter 4: in the story, Jonah represents Israel and its way of viewing its relationship with God. He is called on to contemplate in it the aspect of his mercy

in a more profound and universal way: God reserves his mercy not only for the people of Israel but also for all those who believe in him and also manifest the desire to submit to his will and change their behaviour. In this way, even if the text describes to a certain degree the practices which the Ninevites put in place in order to obtain God's pardon, in reality, in the story these serve to manifest the sincere repentance and the change which the Ninevites carry out by virtue of a deeper attitude concerning the faith with which they take seriously the message in which God manifests his presence and his will.

Psalm 33 presents its themes in a very different style from a narrative. It proceeds with verses which combine general theological truths, praise of God and prayer by the worshipping community. In this way, the psalm does not contain in itself any description of the process which goes from lack of knowledge to knowledge of YHWH on the part of non-Israelites which could be described with the concept of conversion. Rather, it has the aim of establishing general principles which set the relationship between YHWH and the whole of humanity within a hermeneutical and theological framework in which this relationship finds plausible points of reference from the point of view of the faith of Israel. In this sense, the psalm does not offer a terminology which aims at describing the phenomenon of the conversion of those non-Israelites who, as worshippers of other gods, turn to YHWH so much as it seeks to provide some theological principles which lie at the base of the inescapable link between the whole of humanity and YHWH. Creator of everything and Lord of history, he has infused the whole earth with his דְּבָרָא from the beginning. Working from these truths, the psalm puts forward guidelines which validate the membership of everyone in God's plan of salvation. However, benefiting from the protection and salvation of YHWH is not something automatic. In fact, the psalm calls everyone to an active and personal participation which consists in fearing YHWH and trusting in his דְּבָרָא . In this way, the psalm thus establishes the conditions from which these plans of salvation can be fulfilled for all those who wish to recognise in YHWH the God of creation and history by fearing him and hoping in him. In this way, they participate in that joy of the just and upright for whom the praise of God is beautiful (verse 1) and on whom is fulfilled that blessing announced in verse 12. In this way, the psalm does not present any neat separation or any kind of explicit exclusion of categories of people but employs expressions which embrace in God's designs the whole of humanity to which Israel also belongs. In this connection, the psalm says nothing about the contacts which those non-Israelites who adhere to YHWH will enjoy on the social and communitarian level with the people of Israel. Rather, it seems that Israel shares with the whole of the rest of humanity the call to fear YHWH and trust in his דְּבָרָא so as to benefit from his promise of salvation and protection.

In *Joseph and Aseneth*, a category which plays a strong role in the first part of the story is that of the adhering to the God of Joseph by the young woman who, from being a pagan, rejects all her idols in order to share Joseph's faith. In this process, the beginning of which coincides with Aseneth's knowledge of and love for Joseph, there is a description of some steps which see the girl's total abandonment of her idols, her repentance and her complete transformation from pagan to believer in the one God, the God of Joseph. In this description, which spells out the whole process of the maiden's change in great detail and which also dwells on the prayers and supplications which she addresses to the God of Joseph, we seem to grasp the novel's priority in highlighting, on the one hand, the process of Aseneth's transformation, and, on the other hand, a radical and profound change which involves her whole person and her relations with her family and people. However, even if the whole of the first part of the novel describes this process, not overlooking any action or any of the words uttered by Aseneth, it seems that *Joseph and Aseneth* is not aiming primarily at being a kind of *vademecum* establishing strict rules of behaviour for the process of the conversion of a non-Israelite to the God of Jacob. What we can certainly observe, however, is that there are some specific points which reflect some convictions which cannot be ignored by those who, like Aseneth, wish to embrace the faith of Joseph. First and foremost among these is the rejection of idolatry which, as has been said, is the greatest sin in the novel, the one which constitutes the true obstacle coming between a non-Israelite, a Jew and his God. Moreover, in the novel, all the penitential practices which Aseneth carries out have the aim of sealing the sincerity and genuineness of her desire for change and her real transformation. This process is described using categories well known to the faith of Israel. These lead to Aseneth's being chosen "City of Refuge" for all those who, like her, wish to embrace faith in the God of Jacob. The story certainly sets the information mentioned in Gen 45:41 in a novelistic frame. However, it does not fail to provide a vocabulary relating to the process of the conversion of non-Israelites to the God of Israel in a more mature way. This turns out to be less rough and ready in comparison with that in the book of Jonah and, still more, with that in Psalm 33.

However, Aseneth's conversion could be described as a conversion *ante litteram* since the process of her transformation from pagan to believer in the God of Joseph is set from the historical and cultic point of view in what we might call a "free" zone. That is, it concerns a model of conversion of an individual non-Israelite to the God of Israel when, from the historical point of view, Israel is not yet a nation nor are imposed on those who belong to it the duties dictated by the Law given by God to Moses. In fact, the story of Aseneth is located in the patriarchal period and, for the most part, the precepts, such as that of circumcision, would not

play any role because Aseneth is a woman. Thus, rather than wishing to establish precise rules and practices for those non-believers who wish to open themselves to faith in the God of Joseph, it fixes the conditions and theological principles which legitimise the conversion of a non-Israelite to the God of Israel: by virtue of being a creature of God who has received life from him and by virtue too of his mercy, which he is not slow to pour out on those who call on him and repent of their idolatrous conduct, Aseneth – like all those who come from the same condition of being a foreign woman and devoted to the worship of other gods – will be able to address the God of Joseph and obtain his salvation and protection. In the light of a sincere repentance and a profound change of conduct, God will not delay to recreate his creatures, giving them also a new life and a place of repose in heaven. It is thanks to this profound change in Aseneth and to the new life given her by God that she will become the wife of the patriarch Joseph and so will be, with him, the ancestor of future generations. This leads to the conclusion that, just like Aseneth, all those who, as foreigners, wish to become Jews can also in their turn be included fully in the community of believers in the God of Israel. However, by placing the story in the time of the patriarchs, the novel does not give any details about the practices of including converted foreigners in the believing community, in the light also of the different situation which will see the birth of Israel as a nation and the development of its particular history of relationship with YHWH.

3. Creation, mercy and salvation: further developments

a) *Pseudo-Philo*, “*On Jonah*”

The text “*On Jonah*” is a sort of homiletic compilation which explains and elaborates on the biblical text of the book of Jonah.¹ Coming from the Hellenistic-Jewish *milieu*, this compilation was linked to synagogue worship and probably, specifically, to the Day of Atonement which thus assumed a more universal tone because of the themes present in it. Although place of origin and date cannot be established with certainty, scholars hold that “*On Jonah*” very probably saw the light in Egyptian Alexandria and fix as a plausible period of composition a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem* which would be around the beginning of the II century B.C. and the I century A.D.²

¹ The text has reached us in Armenian since the Greek original has been lost. *On Jonah* appears among the writings which make up the Armenian *Corpus Philoneum*. Here, we refer to the French translation edited by F. SIEGERT and J. DE ROULET, *Pseudo-Philon. Prédications Synagogales*, 18–184.

² For further details concerning the date of composition, cf. *ibid.*, 34–36.

The work distances itself from being a phrase by phrase exegetical commentary on the biblical text. Rather, it has the character of a fictitious conversation in which the teaching chiefly comes from the main ideas adopted by the author. In this sense, it is interesting to note that this text emphasises some aspects which are only alluded to in the original text or are completely absent.

Among these, we note especially the fact that “On Jonah” points out on several occasions the exemplary character of Nineveh which is considered as “the origin of all cities” (§ 5) and for which God, the only saviour, has, like a doctor, provided a medicine for its cure by procuring “its gracious salvation by means of an announcement of death and disaster” (§ 7).

Right from the start, the texts make clear the guilt of Nineveh and, by contrast with the biblical original, describes its features. In fact, God accuses the Ninevites of being gravely guilty both as regards him and among themselves. Their gravest sin against God lies in the fact that they have not recognised all the benefits which he has done for them. Among these in particular is the gift of the land in which they live which is presented as the most verdant among all others. Thanks to all its favourable climatic conditions, God has allowed them to enjoy great fertility (§ 11). Thus, the accusation which God directs at the Ninevites concerns precisely the ingratitude which has led them not only to forget to thank him but even to lose the knowledge that he is their benefactor. In fact, although he has given them eyes to “recognise the craftsman of the world” through the creation, they are blind and their ears are closed to every good exhortation. Rather, they are skilful at offending his divinity (§ 14). If their guilt had consisted only in this, God would have excused them. However, their sins with one another are still greater (§ 15). These concern all men and women, whatever their age, who take refuge in the pleasures of the flesh, in robbery and in deceit. The message to Nineveh, which is again developed in detail in the words of the prophet Jonah, becomes the reason for change for the Ninevites who decide to believe his message and, in particular, to pray to his God as “Lord of the Universe” (§ 115). From here there springs a long prayer in which the Ninevites recognise themselves as having behaved towards God like beasts who, grazing on forage, do not recognise the one who is feeding them (§ 120). In the same way, the Ninevites too are being nourished by the fruits of the earth without remembering the one who has produced them. He has not only provided their food but has even given them life itself and preserved their city (§ 123). Although he is invisible, he has given people the eyes to see him and the elements, like the earth, the sky, the sun and the moon to recognise him in everything which “he has constructed with skill” (§ 126). In fact, the rays of the sun shine all over the world to reveal God, “the architect who soars in the inaccessible heights” (§ 129). The text gives a lengthy description of all the works created

by God which reveal him (§§ 121–134). In this connection, this compilation shows that although the Ninevites heard from Jonah all the other misdeeds with which they were stained, their admission of guilt concentrates on the fact that they were not able to recognise in God the architect who has arranged the whole creation as a visible sign of his existence and as the creator of the universe (§ 135). God's creation is closely linked with his love for people which the Ninevites have experienced. It is through this love itself that they wish at least to know him in order to be spared and saved (§ 136). The first act of gratitude to God, therefore, is that of repenting, proclaiming the fast and praying to him since “he who has sent the disaster, will undoubtedly allow himself to be moved to pity and will yield to his passionate love for humanity”, showing himself gentle with the one who prays (§ 138).

The text “On Jonah”, takes up the idea of God as creator, which, in the original biblical text, emerges in a more significant way only in the last chapter, and causes it to become the main feature and principal characteristic of the God of Jonah and, at the same time, the manifestation of his love for the whole of humanity. Once the Ninevites have repented for not having recognised him in the things created and so not having thanked him for all his gifts, it is in this that they trust in order to obtain pardon and salvation. Thus, in this text, the idea of God is also woven together with the characteristic of his being merciful. This aspect emerges still more clearly in God's warning to Jonah in which he urges him not to be jealous of his kindness towards the Ninevites (§ 185) and claims the power to change his sentence of death into a sentence of life so as “to make love triumph” (§ 186). God confirms this idea when he explains to Jonah about the withered plant over which the prophet is upset, saying: “Is then this dear to you, O prophet? It is the human race that is dear to me” (§ 198). The work concludes by confirming the idea of God's mercy which is poured out on those who repent: “Repentance deserves that the love of God for human beings be proclaimed” (§ 219).

b) Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, XX, §§ 34–48

This text deals with the so-called conversion of Helena, queen of Adiabene, and her son, Izates II, to Judaism. It is to be found in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XX, 17.34–48. Here are some important aspects in the context of these conclusions:

(1) At the beginning, a Jewish merchant, Ananias, teaches the ladies of the court to worship God according to the tradition of the Jews (§ 34: ἐδίδασκεν αὐτὰς τὸν θεὸν σέβειν, ὡς Ἰουδαίοις πατέρα ἦν). From this it is inferred that it is considered normal and possible for foreigners to worship (verb σέβω) God in the Jewish way. The text does not specify how these, anonymous, women worship God. It does not actually speak of sacrifices and probably refers to a form of

private worship of which the outlines cannot be identified. In other words, since the text does not contain any technical term, we cannot deduce what practices or Jewish rites were carried out in this worship. It is not even to be taken for granted that these women are to be counted among the so-called “God-fearers” or have an institutional link with the Jewish communities.³ Clearly, they are women who worship the God of the Jews from the outside but who do not belong to the *ethnos* of Israel.

(2) While in the case of the women the nature of their worship of God according to the Jewish tradition is not clear, in the case of Helena, queen of Adiabene, it is said that, instructed by another Jew, she “was brought over to their [= the Jewish] laws” (§ 35: τὴν Ἑλένην ὁμοίως ὑφ' ἐτέρου τινὸς Ἰουδαίου διδαχθεῖσαν εἰς τοὺς ἐκείνων μετακεκομίσθαι νόμους). This text too indicates a phenomenon analogous to that recorded in the previous paragraph: it is clear that, living on the outside and not belonging to the people of Israel either by birth or tradition, Helena agrees to observe the Jewish laws, perhaps the Sabbath and dietary laws.⁴ According to some scholars, this arrangement would indicate that Helena had converted to Judaism. In fact, by observing the Torah, Helena would have satisfied all the conditions necessary for becoming a Jewess.⁵ Other authors, however, dispute that this is an account of a true conversion.⁶

(3) Josephus devotes only a few lines to the religious behaviour of the women. More precise, however, is the description of the attitude of Izates and of the choices which he found himself having to make. In fact, Ananias tried to convince him too (§ 35: κάκεινον ὁμοίως συνανέπεισεν), with some success. Knowing that his mother favoured Jewish customs (called here τὰ ἔθνη), Izates decided not to wait any longer and to adopt them himself (§ 38: πυθόμενος δὲ πάνυ τοῖς Ἰουδαίων ἔθεσιν χαίρειν τὴν μητέρα τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἔσπευσε καὶ αὐτὸς εἰς ἐκεῖνα μεταθέσθαι). However, believing that he was not a Jew in the full sense, he was not content simply to embrace Jewish customs but was ready to have himself circumcised (§ 38: νομίζων τε μὴ ἂν εἶναι βεβαίως Ἰουδαῖος εἰ μὴ περιτέμνοιτο πράττειν ἦν ἔτοιμος). In this connection, in the verses that follow, the text records a debate on the necessity of this practice:

– Ananias shares the concerns of the king’s mother who had advised her son against having himself circumcised in case his subjects could criticise him for being a king who observed

³ For this interpretation, see M. MARCIAK, *Izates, Helena, and Monobazos of Adiabene*, 85–88.

⁴ It is clear that observance of such laws cannot be hidden from others; see D.R. SCHWARTZ, “God, Gentiles, and Jewish Law”, 269.

⁵ See e.g. L.H. FELDMAN, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, 157; M. MARCIAK, *Izates, Helena, and Monobazos of Adiabene*, 84.

⁶ See e.g. D.R. SCHWARTZ, “Doing Like Jews or Becoming as Jew?” 97.

foreign customs (ἔθνη) (§ 39). Ananias, therefore, suggests to Izates that he renounce circumcision, claiming that it is possible to worship God without being circumcised. In fact, Izates' decision to live according to the traditions of the Jews turns out to be more important for him than circumcision in itself (§ 41: δυνάμενον δ' αὐτὸν ἔφη καὶ χωρὶς τῆς περιτομῆς τὸ θεῖον σέβειν εἴ γε πάντως κέκρικε ζηλοῦν τὰ πάτρια τῶν Ἰουδαίων, τοῦτ' εἶναι κυριώτερον τοῦ περιτέμνεσθαι).

– Another Jew, however, Eleazar, convinces Izates that circumcision is a necessary observance according to the Law of Moses and that it must be not only be read but also practised (§ 44: οὐ γὰρ ἀναγινώσκειν σε δεῖ μόνον αὐτούς ἀλλὰ καὶ πρότερον τὰ προστασσόμενα ποιεῖν ὑπ' αὐτῶν). This argument convinces Izates who decides to have himself circumcised (§ 46).

(4) By contrast with Aseneth who, according to the literary fiction of *Joseph and Aseneth* cannot yet know the Torah, Queen Helena is faced with a precise choice: the observance of the Torah cannot be limited only to the (probably exclusive) worship of the God of Israel but also extends to obligations from which one cannot withdraw oneself. In the same way, Izates decides not only to adhere to the Torah in a theoretical way but to apply it in a tangible way by observing its precepts with the aim of becoming a Jew in the strict sense (εἶναι βεβαίως Ἰουδαῖος). In this connection, we can note that the episode recounted by Josephus reflects a stage in the Jewish religion which does not coincide with that in which the story of Aseneth's adhesion to the God of Israel is situated in the novel, that is, in the time of the patriarchs, a period when the Torah had not yet been given by God to his people.

(5) From this point of view, Josephus' account leaves one question open: if Izates had not opted for circumcision, what would have been his relationship with the Jewish people? According to Ananias, could Izates have worshipped the divinity (τὸ θεῖον σέβειν), that is, a single God, but without that necessarily being the God of Israel?⁷ If so, would Izates really have become a true Jew (Ἰουδαῖος)? What emerges from the text with certainty is that Eleazar is clear that Izates could not become a true Jew without being circumcised.⁸ However, Izates seems to have been interested in the Torah before committing himself to circumcision. It is not possible here to enter into the debate over the definition of “Jewish”: what are the conditions to which an individual non-Israelite male must submit in order to become a true Jew? It is necessary to stress another fact: Josephus' account reveals a “continuum” in the process of adhering to the God of Israel in which it is difficult to identify the various stages: having come into contact with the religion of Israel through some kind of instruction, the individual who

⁷ For this opinion, see D.R. SCHWARTZ, “God, Gentiles, and Jewish Law”, 270.

⁸ See also M. MARCIAK, *Izates, Helena, and Monobazos of Adiabene*, 91.

shows himself ready to worship the God of Israel, adopts the Torah and this process can lead to circumcision.⁹ In this connection, Josephus' account of the process of adhering to the God of Israel by the royal house of Adiabene allows the glimpse of a "grey area" for all those who have abandoned the "pagan" cults and worship the God of Israel in a certain sense by displaying a certain sympathy for Jewish customs. Such individuals, however, cannot be counted among the "Godfearers", still less among Jews in the strict sense.

c) Wisdom of Solomon 11:23–26

The subject of the mercy which God shows to his creation because he loves what he has created is developed in a late biblical text which does not deal explicitly with any kind of adhering of non-Israelites to the God of Israel: Wis 11:23–26. This paragraph forms part of the so-called "digression of God's power and mercy" (Wis 11:15–12:27) which is included in the second part of the book, the "Book of History" (Wis 11:2–19:22). In the context of this section, it is not necessary to enquire into the question of the function of this digression in the "Book of History".¹⁰ What is important for us here is the fact that these few verses seem to develop some fundamental ideas which we have been able to find, at least *in nuce*, in the three texts studied in the main chapters of this present work.

11:23	ἐλεεῖς δὲ πάντα ὅτι πάντα δύνασαι καὶ παρορᾷς ἁμαρτήματα ἀνθρώπων εἰς μετάνοιαν	But you are merciful to all, because you can do all things, and you overlook people's sins, so that they may repent.
11:24	ἀγαπᾷς γὰρ τὰ ὄντα πάντα καὶ οὐδὲν βδελύσσει ὧν ἐποίησας οὐδὲ γὰρ ἂν μισῶν τι κατεσκεύασας	For you love all things that exist, and you detest nothing that you have made, because, if you had hated something you would not have created it.
11:25	πῶς δὲ διέμεινεν ἄν τι εἰ μὴ σὺ ἠθέλησας ἢ τὸ μὴ κληθὲν ὑπὸ σοῦ διετηρήθη	How could anything have endured if you had not willed it, or [how] would it have been preserved if not called forth by you?
11:26	φείδῃ δὲ πάντων ὅτι σὰ ἐστὶν δέσποτα φιλόψυχε.	You spare all for they are yours, O Lord, lover of life.

In this text, the following *motifs* deserve our attention:

- The divine mercy extends to all human beings. In fact, verse 23 does not use the neuter from πάντα, "all things", but the masculine: πάντα "all people". The text does not restrict in any way

⁹ See M. MARCIAK, *Izates, Helena, and Monobazos of Adiabene*, 89.

¹⁰ For this problem, see e.g. J. VÍLCHEZ LÍNDEZ, *Sabiduría*, 317–318; L. MAZZINGHI, "Il cosmo nel libro della Sapienza", 392–393.

the number of those to whom the mercy of God is granted. In this connection, Wis 11:23 shares with Ps 33 the idea that God shows a favourable disposition to all humanity.

– By contrast with Ps 33, where it is clear that the eye of God is on those who fear him (verse 18), this text of the Wisdom of Solomon does not have any verb or substantive concerning any kind of adhering of men to God. Thus, it does not contain verbs like φοβέομαι, ἐλπίζω, σέβομαι or others forming part of the same lexical field. However, the text says that the mercy of God causes him not to “take account” of people’s sins, literally: “look sideways” (verb παροράω)¹¹, so as not to pass immediately to punishment but to give sinners the opportunity to convert. In a certain sense, Wis 11:23 confirms the divine disposition underlying the book of Jonah in which God waits for the change in the Ninevites so that they abandon their wicked conduct rather than pass immediately to their destruction. It is up to Jonah to ascertain, at the beginning of chapter 4 and at least implicitly, that the so-called “formula of grace”, which alludes to Exod 34:6, concerns the disposition of God who shows himself merciful not only to Israel but also to the non-Israelites.

– The motivation at the base of God’s merciful disposition consists in the fact that he is the creator of all human beings. As we have seen, this *motif* is explicit in Psalm 33 (and is still more evident in its Greek version) and is found also in *Joseph and Aseneth*. In the book of Jonah, this *motif* appears in the final part where there is an allusion to the fact that God created the Ninevites as well. In Wis 11:24, on the other hand, a link is made between the creation of human beings and all the other creatures, and the attitude of God towards the latter is wholly positive. In fact, God creates only what he loves, and he cannot hate anything he has created. In other words, Wis 11:24 is seeking to exclude all possible contradiction in God’s thought¹²: he creates in harmony with his mode of being, namely, according to his merciful love. In this connection, this text of the Wisdom of Solomon expresses explicitly a new idea with respect to our three texts. However, this profound love of God towards all his creatures can be ascribed to the *motif* of his ἠγάπη or his ἔλεος to which the other texts refer on several occasions.

– Finally, it is interesting to find in Wis 11:26 the verb φείδομαι which appears both at the end of the book of Jonah^{LXX}, in Jonah 4:10–11^{LXX}, and in the prayer of Aseneth (*Jos. Asen.* 12:3). In Jonah, as we have seen, God uses this verb to justify his decision not to destroy the Ninevites who have abandoned their wicked conduct since – this is presupposed – they are his creatures. In Aseneth’s prayer, on the other hand, the protagonist employs the imperative φείσσαι to express

¹¹ For the meaning of this verb in the LXX and the New Testament, see e.g. G. SCARPAT, *Libro della Sapienza*, II, 386–387.

¹² For this idea, see J. VÍLCHEZ LÍNDEZ, *Sabiduría*, 327.

her desire of being pardoned and not punished by the God of Joseph whom she is addressing for the first time. In the case of the book of Jonah, i.e. in its LXX version, God explains to Jonah his merciful attitude towards the Ninevites with the verb φείδομαι. It comes at the end of the final rhetorical question: God spares the 120,000 Ninevites and their animals because he has created them. Aseneth asks God to be “spared” because he is the creator of all living beings, the one who has given life also to her. In this way, these verses of the Wisdom of Solomon give expression to an idea which is a kind of common denominator of these two texts: God spares all people because all living beings come from him and so belong to him.

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Abbreviations

- BHQ* *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004ff.
- BHS* *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. Kurt Elliger, Wilhelm Rudolph, et al., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1967–1977, 5th edition 1997.
- BibAlex *La Bible d’Alexandrie*, Paris: Cerf, 1986ff.
- LXX.D-E* *Septuaginta Deutsch: Erläuterungen und Kommentare*, ed. M. KARRER, W. KRAUS, 2 vols., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2011.
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Création et salut – Modèles de rapport entre le Dieu d’Israël et les nations dans le Livre de Jonas, Psaume 33 (TM et LXX) et le roman Joseph et Aséneth

Résumé de la thèse de doctorat en Théologie catholique

École doctorale de Théologie et Sciences religieuses (EA 270)

Date de soutenance : 30 novembre 2017

Université de Strasbourg, Palais Universitaire, Salle Tauler

Membres du jury : M. Eberhard Bons (directeur de thèse), M. Hermann Spieckermann (Université de Göttingen, rapporteur), M. Martin Karrer (Kirchliche Hochschule Wuppertal-Bethel, rapporteur), M. Daniel Gerber (Université de Strasbourg), Mme Maria Armida Nicolaci (Faculté de Théologie de Palerme)

Introduction : le contexte scientifique de la thèse

Cette thèse s’inscrit dans le débat actuel relatif au monothéisme biblique et au pluralisme religieux. Ces dernières décennies, ce débat a été influencé par des auteurs comme Jan Assmann, égyptologue allemand, pour lequel le monothéisme d’origine vétérotestamentaire constitue une racine importante de l’intolérance et de la violence dont les trois religions monothéistes se seraient rendues coupables, à la différence des polythéismes anciens.¹ Cette hypothèse a provoqué de réactions multiples parmi les théologiens et les exégètes de la Bible. Le but de notre thèse n’est pas d’entrer dans le débat avec Jan Assmann² mais d’approfondir un sujet que cet auteur et les partisans de son approche négligent : qu’en est-il des tendances inclusives du monothéisme vétérotestamentaire qui permettraient de concevoir un rapport positif entre le Dieu d’Israël et les non-Israélites, c’est-à-dire, des personnes qui ne font pas partie du peuple avec lequel Dieu aurait un rapport privilégié ? À ce propos, il serait nécessaire

¹ Pour des détails, cf. p. ex. J. ASSMANN, *The Price of Monotheism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, chapitre 1.

² Cf. p. ex. E. ZENGER, „Der Mosaische Monotheismus im Spannungsfeld von Gewalttätigkeit und Gewaltverzicht. Eine Replik auf Jan Assmann“, in: P. WALTER (ed.), *Das Gewaltpotential des Monotheismus und der dreieine Gott* (QD 216), Freiburg/Basel/Wien 2005, pp. 39–73, spécialement pp. 42-43.

de s'interroger sur les présupposés théologiques qui permettent d'élaborer des idées susceptibles de justifier un rapport entre le Dieu d'Israël et les non-Israélites. En particulier, surgit la question de savoir quel est le rôle de l'idée de la création dans un tel débat.

Ces questions ont fait l'objet, au moins en partie, des recherches récentes relatives aux relations entre les juifs et les non-juifs à l'époque hellénistique et romaine. Très souvent les auteurs ont eu recours à des catégories comme « élection » et « particularisme », d'une part, et « conversion » et « universalisme », de l'autre, pour expliquer une certaine « ouverture » de la religion juive aux non-juifs. En outre, il convient de mentionner des concepts comme « prosélytes », « mission », « idolâtrie », qui pendant longtemps ont influencé le débat théologique. À cela s'ajoutent, enfin, des catégories modernes qui n'ont pas encore droit de cité dans les recherches exégétiques, p. ex. « righteous gentiles »³. Quoi qu'il en soit, surgissent les questions suivantes : dans quelle mesure toutes ces catégories anciennes et modernes permettent-elles de mieux comprendre les textes bibliques et non-canoniques en question ainsi que les débats sous-jacents ? Et dans quelle mesure les catégories mentionnées risqueraient-elles de plaquer sur le texte à étudier des notions qui leur sont étrangères ?

Plutôt que d'approfondir les recherches sur les différentes catégories de « sympathisants », qui auraient cherché le contact avec les communautés juives à l'époque hellénistique et romaine, notre thèse ne se veut pas une contribution historique mais notre but est d'étudier les principes théologiques permettant de concevoir des rapports positifs entre le Dieu d'Israël et des individus ou des peuples étrangers. En particulier, nous cherchons à analyser trois textes, dont deux textes bibliques – le Livre de Jonas et le Psaume 33 (Texte Massorétique et Septante) – et un texte de la littérature dite « péritestamentaire », le roman *Joseph et Aséneth*. Bien qu'il s'agisse de trois textes différents en ce qui concerne le genre littéraire, l'origine et la datation, ils ont en commun d'aborder, d'une manière ou d'une autre, le problème du rapport entre le Dieu d'Israël et les non-Israélites. Plus concrètement, chacun de ces trois textes présente le Dieu d'Israël comme un créateur universel qui, en tant créateur, a pitié de ses créatures.

La thèse, qui compte 293 pages dactylographiées, comporte une introduction, trois chapitres principaux, une conclusion et une bibliographie de 14 pages. Le premier chapitre porte sur le livre de Jonas, notamment le récit de la tempête (Jonas 1), le changement de conduite des Ninivites (Jonas 3) et le dialogue entre le prophète et Dieu (Jonas 4). Le deuxième chapitre est consacré à l'analyse du Psaume 33 (Texte massorétique et texte grec de la Septante). Le

³ Pour cette catégorie, qui n'est pas à confondre avec celle des « prosélytes », cf. p. ex. la monographie de V. HAARMANN, *JHWH-Verehrer der Völker. Die Hinwendung von Nichtisraeliten zum Gott Israels in alttestamentlichen Überlieferungen* (AThANT 91), Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich 2008, spécialement pp. 40-42.

troisième chapitre se focalise sur le roman « Joseph et Aséneth », en particulier sa première partie. Dans la conclusion, nous présentons d’abord les résultats principaux auxquels a abouti l’exégèse des textes analysés dans les trois chapitres de la thèse. Par la suite, nous mettons en relief les points communs entre ces trois textes, notamment les principes théologiques qu’ils élaborent afin de justifier un rapport positif entre le Dieu d’Israël et les non-Israélites. Enfin, nous montrons dans quelle mesure ces idées subissent des modifications dans trois textes de la littérature judéo-hellénistique : Pseudo-Philon, « Sur Jonas », le récit de la conversion de la reine d’Adiabène et de son fils (Flavius Josèphe, « Antiquités juives », §§ 34-48) et un paragraphe du livre de la Sagesse de Salomon, Sap 11,23-26.

Premier chapitre : le livre de Jonas

a) Introduction

Dans le premier chapitre (environ 115 pages) nous nous consacrons à plusieurs sujets négligés par la recherche ou interprétés de façon insatisfaisante⁴, surtout les vœux et les sacrifices offerts par les marins ainsi que leur crainte de Dieu (Jonas 1), la foi des Ninivites (Jonas 3), enfin le sujet de la miséricorde divine et son rapport avec celui de la création (Jonas 4). Ce faisant, nous cherchons à élaborer une lecture nouvelle du livre de Jonas qui prend en considération non seulement le contenu des deux récits qu’il comporte (chapitres 1 et 3), mais aussi le fait que ce livre représente un texte fictif à caractère pédagogique. Nous défendons, en particulier, l’hypothèse selon laquelle le livre de Jonas est une parabole dont le but est de justifier l’idée d’une relation positive entre le Dieu d’Israël et ceux qui ne font pas partie de ce peuple.

Avant d’entrer dans le vif du sujet, nous présentons un état de recherche qui porte sur plusieurs questions débattues dans l’exégèse récente, notamment la date de rédaction du livre de Jonas, le problème du genre littéraire d’un livre qui est classé parmi les prophètes mais qui représente un récit. Dans ce contexte, nous nous rangeons du côté des auteurs qui défendent une origine post-exilique du livre de Jonas, malgré l’information que fournit le premier verset en présentant Jonas comme le fils d’Amittai, personnage mentionné en 2 Rois 14. En ce qui

⁴ Pour l’état de la recherche, cf. p. ex. K. SPRONK, “Het boek Jona: Een overzicht van het recente onderzoek”, ID. (ed.), *Jona* (ACEBT 22), Maastricht: Shaker 2005, 1–22; C. LICHTERT. “Un siècle de recherche à propos de Jonas”, *RB* 112, 2005, 192–214. 330–354.

concerne le genre littéraire, nous optons pour un récit à caractère didactique (cf. les recherches récentes de Erik Eynikel⁵).

Notre exégèse des trois chapitres du livre de Jonas se veut une « close-reading » du Texte massorétique, tout en prenant en considération les variantes majeures contenues dans la Septante qui, grosso modo, ne diverge pas beaucoup du texte hébreu.⁶ Dans ce but, nous procédons à l'analyse du texte, en nous focalisant sur ses caractéristiques linguistiques, syntaxiques et narratives, y compris les lacunes d'information et les ruptures au niveau du contenu. Ce faisant, nous accordons une attention particulière aux passages qui traitent, d'une manière ou d'une autre, du rapport entre Dieu, Israël et les nations telles qu'elles sont présentées dans le livre. En revanche, notre exégèse n'a pas le but de fournir un commentaire exhaustif du livre de Jonas dans son ensemble⁷. À ce propos, nous ne nous consacrons pas au texte que les exégètes appellent le « Psaume de Jonas » (Jonas 2,1-10) parce que cette prière du prophète ne semble pas avoir des liens étroits avec les questions que nous étudions principalement. En plus, nous n'approfondissons pas non plus les quatre problématiques suivantes :

- la possible dépendance du livre de Jonas du livre de Jérémie, en particulier la passage Jérémie 18,7-8,
- les relations entre le livre de Jonas et les autres livres des Douze prophètes, en particulier le livre de Nahum,
- le débat autour les présumées couches littéraires du livre de Jonas,
- les phénomènes rhétoriques du livre analysés par différents auteurs récents.

⁵ Cf. p. ex. E. EYNIKEL, "Le genre littéraire du livre de Jonas", in: R. VAN DEN BRANDT, M. KOOPMAN-THURLINGS (eds.), *Bricoler la mémoire. La théologie et les arts face au déclin de la tradition*, Paris: Cerf, 2007, 233–246.

⁶ Pour une des divergences frappantes entre le Texte massorétique et la Septante, cf. l'article suivant : D. SCIALABBA, "The LXX translation of Jonah 1:6. Text-critical and exegetical considerations", in: S. KREUZER, M. MEISER, M. SIGISMUND in Verbindung mit M. KARRER und W. KRAUS, (eds.), *Die Septuaginta – Orte und Intentionen* (WUNT 1/361), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016, 645–654.

⁷ Cf. les commentaires récents du livre de Jonas, p. ex. J.M. SASSON, *Jonah. A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (AB), New York: Doubleday, 1990; P. WEIMAR, *Jona. Übersetzt und ausgelegt* (HThKAT), Freiburg: Herder, 2017. Pour les questions philologiques, cf. p. ex. A. NICCACCI, M. PAZZINI, R. TADIELLO, *Il Libro di Giona. Analisi del testo ebraico e del racconto* (SBFA 64), Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2004. Une autre monographie importante est celle de R. LUX, *Jona. Prophet zwischen 'Verweigerung' und 'Gehorsam'. Eine erzählanalytische Studie* (FRLANT 162), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994.

L'analyse exégétique proprement dite s'articule selon trois sous-chapitres consacrés respectivement aux trois chapitres du livre de Jonas à analyser. À chaque fois, nous citerons le texte hébreu qui est accompagné d'une traduction anglaise très littérale.

b) L'exégèse de Jonas 1

Dans le contexte de l'analyse de Jonas 1, il nous semble important d'analyser en détail plusieurs sujets :

- le fait que le Dieu d'Israël réagisse au mal commis par les Ninivites, c'est-à-dire d'un peuple étranger,
- la fuite de Jonas qui n'obéit pas à l'ordre divin de se rendre à Ninive,
- les attitudes religieuses des marins étrangers et de leur capitaine qui finissent par adresser leurs prières au Dieu de Jonas,
- la façon dont Jonas se présente aux marins étrangers et dont il leur parle de son Dieu,
- les attitudes des marins étrangers qui finissent par offrir des sacrifices et des vœux au Seigneur.

L'exégèse de Jonas 1 est beaucoup influencée par des commentaires et des monographies qui ont marqué la recherche depuis plusieurs décennies, p. ex. celui de Hans Walter Wolff⁸. Ces approches consistent à expliquer les attitudes des marins étrangers en recourant à des catégories comme « conversion » : les sacrifices et les vœux des marins sont-ils à identifier à une conversion au Dieu d'Israël ? Ce faisant, les marins sont-ils à considérer comme des vrais Israélites ?⁹ De plus, les marins vont-ils jusqu'à offrir des sacrifices au Dieu d'Israël dans le temple de Jérusalem ? Ou bien s'agit-il de réactions spontanées motivées par un certain opportunisme ? En d'autres termes, une fois sauvés, les marins offrent des sacrifices et des vœux au Dieu d'Israël, mais cela n'aurait aucune conséquence pour leur vie future dans laquelle ils continueraient à adorer leurs dieux d'autrefois. Bien entendu, le texte du livre de Jonas laisse en suspens ce genre de questions. C'est pour cela qu'il nous semble important de mettre en relief que les catégories traditionnelles comme « conversion » ne sont pas suffisantes pour donner une définition précise du cadre religieux dans lequel se situent les attitudes des marins.

⁸ H.W. WOLFF, *Obadiah and Jonah. A Commentary* (Continental Commentaries), Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986.

⁹ Cf. p. ex. les interprétations du livre par H. GESE, "Jona ben Amittai und das Jonabuch", ID., *Alttestamentliche Studien*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991; J. JEREMIAS, "Die Sicht der Völker im Jonabuch (Jona 1 und Jona 3)", in: M. WITTE (ed.), *Gott und Mensch im Dialog. Festschrift für Otto Kaiser zum 80. Geburtstag* (BZAW 345/I), Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2004, 555–567; P. SESSOLO, *La salvezza dei popoli nel libro di Giona. Studio sul particolarismo ed universalismo salvifico*, Roma: Urbaniana University Press, 1977.

De toute façon, les vœux impliquent un certain lien permanent avec le Dieu d'Israël¹⁰ – bien que cette « foi » des marins ne s'exprime pas dans les catégories propres à la foi du peuple d'Israël, p. ex. dans l'observance de la Torah ou dans le culte au temple de Jérusalem. En plus, il ne nous semble pas légitime de parler des marins en termes d' « Israélites » ou de « prosélytes » parce que ces deux termes ne s'avèrent pas adéquats. Évidemment, comme nous l'avons déjà dit, le texte du récit n'est pas suffisamment explicite pour mieux situer, d'une manière satisfaisante, les attitudes religieuses des marins dans un contexte religieux précis.

c) *L'exégèse de Jonas 3*

Le chapitre 3 se focalise sur l'agir des Ninivites qui, une fois que Jonas leur a annoncé la destruction, accomplissent des rites de deuil pour manifester leur repentir et pour obtenir le pardon de Dieu. Ce chapitre a fait l'objet de maintes analyses. Toutefois, il nous semble que les chercheurs n'ont pas accordé l'attention nécessaire à plusieurs éléments du récit :

- la différence entre, d'une part, les marins du chapitre 1 qui appartiennent chacun à un peuple différent et, d'autre part, les Ninivites qui constituent un peuple précis ;
- l'insistance mise sur la dimension du péché des Ninivites alors qu'un éventuel péché des marins n'est pas mentionné ;
- l'attitude de Jonas qui n'intervient pas, en tant que médiateur, en faveur des Ninivites ni ne leur donne des indications comment obtenir le pardon de Dieu ;
- la « foi » des Ninivites qui croient en Elohim (Jonas 3,5), c'est-à-dire que l'auteur du livre attribue aux Ninivites une attitude religieuse attribuée ailleurs aux Israélites ou aux protagonistes de l'histoire d'Israël (p. ex. Abraham en Genèse 15,5) ; dans ce contexte, il est important de distinguer nettement entre les deux verbes cités, « craindre » en Jonas 1,16 et « croire » en Jonas 3,5 : alors que le premier a la connotation de « soumission », « reconnaissance », le deuxième est utilisé dans des situations où une réaction est requise pour échapper à la destruction annoncée. Ainsi, les Ninivites sont capables de « croire en Dieu », sans avoir une vraie connaissance de ce Dieu ;

¹⁰ Pour l'interprétation des derniers versets de Jonas 1, les remarques d'A. MARX, *Les systèmes sacrificiels de l'Ancien Testament, Formes et fonctions du culte sacrificiel à Yhwh* (VTSup 105), Leiden: Brill, 2005, 147, nous semblent toujours pertinentes : “[...] c'est après que la tempête se soit apaisée que les marins offrent des sacrifices à Yhwh (Jon. i:16) : lorsqu'elle se déchaîne, ils prient (Jon. i 5-6). C'est au moment de leur délivrance, et non pendant qu'ils sont dans l'adversité, que les fidèles offrent des sacrifices, en action de grâce, associant ainsi Yhwh à leur joie.”

- les rites de deuil des Ninivites qui sont à comprendre comme des rites d'auto-humiliation (cf. les publications de Ernst Kutsch¹¹) ;

- le roi de Ninive qui joue le rôle de cheville ouvrière dans les rites d'auto-humiliation et dans le procès de changement d'attitude des Ninivites et qui exprime l'espoir d'échapper à l'anéantissement ;

- dans ce contexte, il faut souligner le fait que Dieu accepte les rites des Ninivites et qu'il renonce à accomplir la punition qui leur a été annoncée ; le texte emploie ici le verbe « voir » pour exprimer, soit le fait que Dieu regarde les actions accomplies par les Ninivites, soit le fait qu'il reconnaît la sincérité avec laquelle ceux-ci changent de conduite ;

- enfin, l'idée du « repentir » de Dieu qui n'a pas de connotation morale et qui ne se réduit pas non plus à l'idée de la « Selbstbeherrschung » (Jörg Jeremias¹²) mais qui désigne un changement radical dans la « pensée » de Dieu : plutôt que d'accomplir le jugement annoncé Dieu y renonce.

d) *L'exégèse du chapitre 4*

Le chapitre 4 comporte un dialogue entre Jonas et Dieu qui est à comprendre comme une clé de lecture de l'ensemble du livre. Encore une fois, il nous a fallu mettre en relief plusieurs aspects du texte négligés dans la recherche :

- l'usage du substantif ou adjectif « mal » qui constitue un des fils conducteurs du livre de Jonas : à la fin du livre on constate que le péché des Ninivites semble être pardonné alors que Jonas n'accepte pas l'agir miséricordieux de Dieu à l'égard de ceux-ci mais se met en colère ;

- la « formule de grâce » qui apparaît en Jonas 4,2¹³ : celle-ci n'est pas employée dans un contexte de médiation comme dans le livre de Joël (Jl 2,13) ni dans un contexte positif où les attitudes de YHWH seraient mises en relief, mais dans le but de manifester le mécontentement de Jonas ;

¹¹ E. KUTSCH, “‘Trauerbräuche’ und ‘Selbstminderungsriten’ im Alten Testament”, ID., *Kleine Schriften zum Alten Testament* (BZAW 168), Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1986, 78–95.

¹² Cf. Jörg JEREMIAS, *Die Reue Gottes. Aspekte alttestamentlicher Gottesvorstellung*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 3rd edition, 2002.

¹³ Cf. R. SCORALICK, *Gottes Güte und Gottes Zorn. Die Gottesprädikationen in Exodus 34, 6f und ihre intertextuellen Beziehungen zum Zwölfprophetenbuch* (HBS 33), Freiburg: Herder, 2002; E. SANZ GIMÉNEZ-RICO, “Si può usurpare a Dio la sua ira? Rilettura di Es 34,6-7 nel libro di Giona”, *Rassegna di Teologia* 58, 2017, 83–107.

- la formule de grâce apparaît dans un contexte qui porte sur le rapport entre la miséricorde divine et la création, Dieu manifestant sa miséricorde envers tous les êtres qu'il a créés, humains et animaux, Israélites et non-Israélites ;

- l'usage de deux terminologies différentes : d'une part, la « formule de grâce » dont la validité semble inclure non seulement les Israélites mais les étrangers aussi, d'autre part le verbe *hûs*, « avoir de la peine », « avoir pitié », employé à la fin du livre dans un raisonnement *a fortiori* en Jonas 4,10-11 ;

- l'usage ironique du verbe « connaître » en Jonas 4,2 (Jonas sait que Dieu est miséricordieux) et en Jonas 4,11 (les Ninivites ne savent pas distinguer leur droite de leur gauche).

e) Conclusions

Dans les conclusions du premier chapitre de la thèse, il a fallu synthétiser les résultats majeurs de nos analyses. Ces résultats concernent en particulier les points suivants :

- le problème théologique initial du livre et le but du texte,
 - le débat récent concernant la question de savoir si la destruction de Ninive est seulement remise à plus tard ou si Dieu y renonce complètement ; l'analyse du texte nous conduit à constater que la première hypothèse – Dieu reporte la destruction mais n'y renonce pas – manque de fondement ;

- les rapports entre les deux parties du livre, à savoir les chapitres 1 et 3-4 qui, pour nous, ne représentent pas deux récits « mal cousus », mais qui présentent plusieurs liens étroits entre eux et, de ce fait, sont deux récits complémentaires qui tous les deux abordent la question du rapport entre des non-Israélites et le Dieu d'Israël: d'une part, les marins qui sont présentés comme des hommes pieux, soucieux de ne pas commettre aucun crime (p.ex. celui de jeter Jonas dans la mer) et disposés à se soumettre à la volonté du Dieu de Jonas, d'autre part les Ninivites qui se sont rendus coupables d'une « grande faute » et qui reconnaissent le Dieu de Jonas en pratiquant les rites de deuil et en se détournant de leur mauvaise conduite. Dans les deux cas, Dieu accorde le salut à ceux qui l'invoquent et le reconnaissent;

- la fonction de la théologie de la création qui sous-tend le livre de Jonas : en dernière analyse, Dieu renonce à accomplir la punition annoncée aux Ninivites parce qu'il est leur créateur, conclusion que le lecteur peut tirer du dernier verset elliptique du livre qui compare le soin de Jonas pour le ricin et celui de Dieu pour une ville de 120.000 habitants et de leur bétail;

- le genre littéraire du livre de Jonas : selon nous, il s'agit d'un récit didactique dont le but est de montrer que Dieu manifeste sa miséricorde à tous ceux qu'il a créés, y compris les non-Israélites ; en plus, le livre décrit aux lecteurs la façon dont le non-Israélite peut réaliser la relation avec le Dieu créateur, sans pour autant partager avec Israël son histoire spécifique, l'observance de la Torah et de ses commandements, p. ex. la circoncision et les lois alimentaires ;

- les présupposés du salut : les non-Israélites sont invités à reconnaître d'une certaine façon ce Dieu ; pourtant, le livre de Jonas ne donne pas de réponses claires et nettes en ce qui concerne l'inclusion des non-Israélites dans le peuple de Dieu et leurs rapports particuliers avec celui-ci.

Le deuxième chapitre : le Psaume 33

a) Introduction

Le deuxième chapitre de la thèse est consacré au Psaume 33.¹⁴ Contrairement à la majorité des commentateurs qui, dans le sillage de la *Formgeschichte*, y voient un hymne se rapportant principalement à la relation entre Israël et son Dieu, nous proposons une lecture du psaume qui prend en compte le fait que le texte ne mentionne pas explicitement le peuple d'Israël et son histoire particulière avec Dieu. En fait, une analyse du texte à frais nouveaux montre que nous sommes en présence d'un psaume plutôt « universaliste » qui invite toute l'humanité, Israélites et non-Israélites, à craindre Dieu et à compter sur la fidélité qu'il accorde à tous ceux qui il a créés. Ainsi, dans le Psaume 33, les sujets de la création et de la miséricorde divine se trouvent étroitement liés entre eux, de façon à permettre de concevoir un rapport positif entre le Dieu d'Israël et les non-Israélites qui, encore une fois, est fondé sur l'idée de la création et non pas

¹⁴ Abstraction faite des commentaires bibliques, la bibliographie sur le Psaume 33 n'est pas du tout riche, cf. p.ex. les ouvrages suivants : S. GAHLER, *Gott der Schöpfung – Gott des Heils. Unter-suchungen zum anthologischen Psalm 33* (EHS 23/ 649), Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998; N. LOHFINK, "The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33", in: ID., E. ZENGER, *The God of Israel and the Nations. Studies in Isaiah and the Psalms*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000, 85–122; M. WITTE, „Das neue Lied – Beobachtungen zum Zeitverständnis von Psalm 33“, in: ZAW 114, 2002, 522–541, réimpression in ID., *Von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit. Weisheit und Geschichte in den Psalmen* (BThSt 146), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2014, 11–37; E. BONS, „YHWH und die Völker. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis zwischen dem Gott Israels und den Nichtisraeliten auf dem Hintergrund der Theorien Jan Assmanns“, in: S. GEHRIG, S. SEILER (eds.), *Gottes Wahrnehmungen. Helmut Utzschneider zum 60. Geburtstag*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009, 13–30; D. JACOBSON, "Psalm 33 and the Creation Rhetoric of a Torah Psalm", in: R.L. FOSTER, D.M. HOWARD JR. (eds.), "My words are lovely". *Studies in the Rhetoric of the Psalms*, New York, London: T&T. Clark, 2008, 107–120.

sur celle de l'élection. Ce rapport positif est confirmé par la Septante dont les variantes textuelles et les traductions libres contribuent à mettre en relief l'idée selon laquelle la miséricorde de Dieu est accordée à toutes ses créatures.

Après cette brève introduction, il nous convient de résumer notre analyse sur le Psaume 33 en 5 points.

b) L'exégèse traditionnelle du Psaume 33 – Ses points de départ, ses limites et les questions ouvertes

Au cours des 150 dernières années, le Psaume 33 a été interprété de différentes manières. Bien que toutes les approches désormais ne gagnent plus l'adhésion, il ne fait aucun doute que certaines d'entre elles ont permis de mettre en évidence plusieurs aspects qui auraient autrement pu être négligés. Parmi eux, par exemple, on peut mentionner celui qui place le Psaume 33 parmi les hymnes d'intronisation, mettant en relief un élément important du texte, à savoir l'invitation à chanter à YHWH en tant que Créateur et Seigneur de tout. À la suite de Gunkel, d'autres études ont tenté de déterminer le *Sitz im Leben* du psaume, proposant diverses situations ou occasions de la vie de la société d'Israël dans laquelle ce psaume aurait été prononcé. Quoique ces approches aient conduit à des résultats parfois très hypothétiques¹⁵, elles permettent toutefois d'identifier certains phénomènes liés au contenu et à la structure du psaume que l'exégèse du texte doit prendre en compte. En outre, pour la plupart des commentaires et des études concernés, le Psaume 33 aurait comme destinataire principal Israël seul. Une telle hypothèse, qui est tantôt formulée explicitement, tantôt exprimée entre les lignes, est le dénominateur commun de beaucoup d'interprétations. En ce sens, les Israélites seraient les « justes » et les hommes « droits » du verset 1, ceux qui sont également invités à acclamer YHWH et à chanter un « chant nouveau » pour célébrer Dieu comme Créateur et Seigneur de la Vie et - dans le cas d'une interprétation qui voit dans le verset 7 des allusions à l'Exode - celui qui les conduisit miraculeusement à travers la Mer Rouge. Dans la même ligne d'interprétation, Israël serait la seule nation « heureuse » à laquelle se référerait le macarisme au verset 12 « heureux le peuple dont le Seigneur est le Dieu, heureuse la nation qu'il s'est choisie pour patrimoine ». De plus, ce serait toujours le peuple élu qui serait averti de la vanité de la puissance humaine et militaire dans les versets 16-17. Enfin, dans cette manière de comprendre le psaume, les Israélites seraient toujours ceux qui espèrent dans la רַחֲמֵי divine et, par conséquent, ceux qui bénéficient de la protection et du salut de la part de YHWH. Cette

¹⁵ Voir p. ex. l'exégèse de J.M. VINCENT, "Recherches exégétiques sur le Psaume XXXIII", VT 28, 1978, 442-454.

manière de comprendre le Psaume 33 – qui présente de légères variantes en fonction des auteurs – est devenue l'*opinio communis*, à quelques exceptions près.¹⁶ Ceci est largement dû au préjugé de l'exégèse du siècle dernier¹⁷, selon laquelle la רָצוֹן que Dieu déverse sur la terre présuppose tout court la catégorie de l'alliance. Etant donné que Dieu n'a conclu l'alliance qu'avec Israël, c'est ce peuple-ci auquel se réfère le Psaume 33. Une conséquence inévitable de ce préjugé a eu comme conséquence que les chercheurs n'ont pas posé la question du rapport entre Israël, YHWH et les nations et, surtout, les implications du salut qui concernent ces dernières.

c) La dimension universelle de l'influence de YHWH sur la création et l'histoire

En effet, à partir de l'analyse menée dans notre recherche où nous avons cherché à développer une lecture nouvelle du Psaume 33, il est apparu que l'aspect universel de ce texte ne concerne pas l'éventuelle intronisation cosmique de YHWH¹⁸ mais que, plutôt, cet aspect universel est mieux compris et trouve son épaisseur adéquate s'il est interprété dans une autre perspective : à partir du message salvifique que le texte véhicule. Celui-ci s'adresse évidemment à tous les habitants de la terre qui, reconnaissant en YHWH le vrai donateur et protecteur de la vie, espèrent et confient en lui. Ceci est confirmé par le fait que le psaume présente tous les éléments dans une dimension universelle dans laquelle rien et personne ne sont exclus. Tous sont soumis à l'action puissante de Dieu qui est à l'origine de la création et qui exerce incessamment sa domination sur elle et sur l'histoire. Cet agir cosmique de YHWH émerge non seulement à travers les images utilisées, par exemple, celles liées aux éléments de la nature qui existent à partir de sa Parole et de son souffle, mais aussi du langage qui souligne le scénario universel dans lequel l'agir de YHWH se déroule. À cet égard, par exemple, nous rappelons des expressions qui se réfèrent à une dimension omniprésente de YHWH, p.ex. celle qui on trouve dans le verset 5 où il est dit que « toute la terre est remplie de la רָצוֹן de Dieu » ou au verset 8 où sont mentionnés « tous les habitants de la terre » qui sont invités à le reconnaître et donc à le craindre.

¹⁶ Cf. p. ex. les commentaires récents, p. ex. K. SEYBOLD, *Die Psalmen* (HAT), Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 1996, 137-138 ; T. LORENZIN, *I Salmi. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (I libri biblici. Primo Testamento), Milan : Paoline, 2001, 152 : « è un inno dei 'giusti', grati per la nuova rivelazione della bontà del Signore nel rinnovamento dell'alleanza » ; pour les exceptions, voir p. ex. N. LOHFINK, "The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33", *passim*.

¹⁷ Cf. N. GLUECK, *Hesed in the Bible*, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1967 (première édition allemande 1927: *Das Wort hesed im alttestamentlichen Sprachgebrauch als menschliche und göttliche gemeinschaftsgemäße Verhaltensweise*, Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1927).

¹⁸ Cf. à ce propos S. MOWINCKEL, *Psalm Studies. Volume 1*, History of Biblical Studies 2, Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014. 183

Ces expressions, qui se réfèrent avant tout à une dimension spatiale, s'entrelacent avec d'autres qui affirment la présence de Dieu sur un plan temporel sans limites. En effet, comme c'est le cas au verset 11, son plan « existe éternellement » et ses desseins de « génération en génération ». De plus, cette présence de Dieu atteint et surmonte toute forme de puissance humaine parce que sa portée dissipe les desseins des nations. En outre, le pouvoir de YHWH est le seul à garantir le salut de la vie, contrairement à ce que le roi, le héros et le cheval, images représentant la plus grande expression du pouvoir humain et militaire existant sur terre, pourraient assurer en cas de danger.

En ce sens, YHWH est présenté comme le seul qui, veillant sur tous les hommes de la terre, celui qui a façonné un à un leur cœur, peut garantir le salut et la protection à ceux d'entre eux qui le craignent et espèrent dans son יְהוָה . En fait, l'œil salvifique de Dieu se dirige vers cette catégorie précise. Il semblerait donc que le psalmiste utilise les images concernées en se focalisant de manière graduelle et progressive qui, du général au détail, définit de plus en plus les contours de l'action de Dieu sur la terre: d'une part il crée, observe et dirige tout sur celle-ci; de l'autre, il garantit sa protection et la délivrance de la mort à ceux qui le craignent et à ceux qui espèrent en sa miséricorde.

d) L'absence du concept d'alliance et l'importance du divin יְהוָה

Cette réalité – le salut offert par Dieu – constitue l'arrière-fond devant lequel la vie humaine se déroule. Tel est certainement le cas pour Israël mais il n'est pas le seul peuple à bénéficier du salut divin. En ce sens, le macarisme du verset 12¹⁹ trouve son cadre naturel dans un scénario unique où Israël et les nations sont les protagonistes d'une nouvelle relation d'appartenance étroite à YHWH. Celle-ci ne se fonderait plus sur l'alliance tout court comme dans les textes de l'Exode et du Deutéronome où elle est fondée sur le don de la terre promise de la part de Dieu et l'observance des préceptes de la Torah de la part d'Israël. Néanmoins, cette relation d'appartenance à YHWH affirmée par le Psaume 33 serait le résultat d'une extension à tous de cette catégorie qui appartient particulièrement au Deutéronome. Pourtant, le Psaume 33 présente une nouvelle façon de penser le contenu fondamental de l'alliance qui est celui de la révélation. Dans ce processus de relation, Dieu crée, veille sur les actions des habitants de la terre et sauve ceux qui espèrent dans son יְהוָה . Elle manifeste la présence de Dieu dans la réalité créée et à travers elle, tous les hommes peuvent adhérer au dessein divin en reconnaissant en

¹⁹ Pour une interprétation « universaliste » du macarisme du verset 12, voir aussi N. LOHFINK, "The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33", 112-113; E. BONS, « YHWH und die Völker. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis zwischen dem Gott Israels und den Nichtisraeliten auf dem Hintergrund der Theorien Jan Assmanns », 25.

YHWH le seul seigneur de la création et de l'histoire, le seul en qui ils confient pour leur vie. En ce sens, le Psaume 33 propose un modèle de salut qui dépasse les frontières d'Israël mais qui a des dimensions cosmiques. Ainsi, la « ligne de partage des eaux », qui sépare ceux qui bénéficieront de la רָצוֹן divine de ceux qui en seront exclus, n'est plus définie selon le modèle de l'alliance mais sur une autre : l'adhésion consciente à la foi en YHWH, celui qui se distingue par son saint nom. En d'autres termes : le salut de Dieu est offert à tous, en tous les temps. Ceci a de conséquences pour chaque individu, dans une dimension à la fois collective et personnelle.

e) Les message central du Psaume 33

À la lumière de notre exégèse du Psaume 33 nous pouvons affirmer que, bien qu'il présente une structure alphabétisante, il offre plusieurs indications permettant d'identifier un cadre herméneutique que la recherche exégétique traditionnelle risque de ne pas prendre en considération. Celui-ci est susceptible de conférer une configuration plus profonde et concrète aux divers sujets évoqués dans le psaume.

Dans notre thèse, nous cherchons à élaborer l'interprétation suivante : selon nous, l'élément fondamental de la théologie présentée par le Psaume 33 est celui de la רָצוֹן divine autour de laquelle s'articulent plusieurs axes thématiques. Nous pouvons mentionner cinq :

- YHWH est le créateur de toute la réalité existante.
- YHWH, Seigneur de la Terre, dirige toutes les actions qui s'y déroulent.
- Seul YHWH a le pouvoir de préserver la vie de la mort et de garantir la subsistance des humains.
- En vertu de sa puissance créatrice et salvatrice, toutes les nations sont appelées à reconnaître YHWH comme Dieu et à le craindre.
- Si l'action créatrice de Dieu s'adresse à tout et en particulier à tous les humains, son œuvre salvifique ne s'adresse qu'à ceux qui le craignent et posent toute leur espérance en sa רָצוֹן dont la terre est pleine.

f) Le Psaume 33 comme un « chant nouveau ».

L'auteur du Psaume 33 se sert du genre littéraire de l'hymne pour véhiculer des idées qui, bien que elles aient comme point de départ certaines croyances fondamentales qui existaient dans les traditions religieuses d'Israël, aboutissent à des conclusions complètement nouvelles: tous sont appelés à la louange de YHWH parce que tout vient de Lui et, en vertu de cela, son salut est offert à tous. En ce sens, si la רָצוֹן divine est présentée au départ comme une caractéristique de l'action créatrice de Dieu, il est aussi placé comme principe de son salut.

En d'autres termes, la רָצוֹן imprègne la relation qui lie YHWH à tout ce qu'il a créé et c'est elle qui devient l'instrument par lequel tous les habitants de la terre peuvent accéder au salut de leur שָׁלוֹם . C'est la réciprocité entre les deux partenaires sur lesquels se fonde ce nouveau mode de relation: d'une part, Dieu donne son רָצוֹן à tous en tant que créateur de tous les êtres vivants; de l'autre, tous ceux qui confieront en la רָצוֹן divine en bénéficieront, dans les circonstances les plus variées de la vie.

Faire confiance à YHWH dans ce sens devient une cause de louange pour ceux qui dans la dernière section du psaume manifestent leur foi en lui. En répondant à l'invitation à craindre YHWH qui est adressée à tous les habitants de la terre, ceux-ci sont aussi à identifier à ceux qui attendent sa רָצוֹן (voir la partie finale du psaume). En ce sens, ils coïncident avec la catégorie des « justes » et des hommes « droits » auxquels s'adressent les premiers versets du psaume. Pour eux, la louange à YHWH convient parce qu'ils partagent la joie du salut pour laquelle leurs cœurs, en croyant en Lui, exultent (voir le verset 21).

L'œuvre universelle de Dieu, telle qu'elle est présentée dans le Psaume 33, ne se situe donc pas seulement sur le plan de la création et par rapport à la domination que Dieu exerce sur la terre et sur l'histoire. C'est aussi une question de salut dont l'invitation s'adresse à tout le monde et non pas seulement à Israël. Cette vérité de la foi constitue dans le Psaume 33 l'objet du « chant nouveau » avec lequel les justes sont appelés à chanter à Dieu. À cet égard, ce psaume montre une nouvelle prise de conscience qu'Israël a développée *a posteriori* concernant sa relation avec YHWH et les autres nations. En d'autres termes, la communauté israélite, qui est le milieu d'origine dans lequel ce chant nouveau s'est formée, est aussi celle qui, avec tous les autres peuples, est appelée à proclamer sa foi dans la רָצוֹן divine avec une nouvelle conscience: elle est le « canal » du salut que YHWH prodige sur tous ceux qui, Israélites et non-Israélites, espèrent en sa רָצוֹן dont la terre entière est pleine.

Cette dimension universelle de la relation et du salut deviendra aussi la clé de lecture que le traducteur de la LXX donnera au texte grec. En effet, comme nous l'avons vu, il souligne à plusieurs reprises les éléments associant l'universalisme du salut de YHWH à l'idée selon laquelle il est aussi le créateur de tous, comme il est dit aux versets 8-9.

g) *La LXX renforce les motifs de la création et de la miséricorde*

Le Psaume 32^{LXX} est une traduction très littérale d'un texte hébreu non vocalisé²⁰ qui n'a pas dû s'écarter beaucoup de la forme textuelle transmise par le texte massorétique. Cependant, comme nous avons pu le constater, le traducteur apporte une série de modifications qui confèrent au psaume une physionomie différente de celle du texte hébreu.

En particulier, alors que dans le texte hébreu on pourrait voir une allusion à l'Exode, en particulier dans le verset 7²¹, il n'y a plus aucune référence à cet événement fondateur de l'histoire d'Israël dans le texte grec. En revanche, le texte de la LXX approfondit une idée clé, grâce à plusieurs remaniement légers : Dieu, créateur de tous les êtres humains, continue à agir dans l'histoire et la vie de ceux qui l'aiment et mettent leur espoir dans sa miséricorde (ἔλεος). En ce sens, le lien entre la création et le salut est beaucoup plus évident dans le texte grec que dans le texte hébreu. Ce profil différent est conféré au texte grec par l'utilisation d'une terminologie qui est plus évocatrice par rapport à certains passages des récits de la création. À cet égard, en particulier, on ne peut pas négliger le détail fourni au verset 9 duquel ressort clairement que tous les habitants de la terre – ceux qui sont invités à craindre Dieu et à espérer en sa bienveillance – ont été créés par Lui. En d'autres termes, le texte grec renforce considérablement l'idée selon laquelle le salut est offert par Dieu à tous ceux qui espèrent en Lui, car tous les habitants de la terre, Israélites et non-Israélites, sont l'œuvre de sa création. Une telle théologie évite toute distinction entre l'humanité, d'une part, et Israël, de l'autre. C'est-à-dire que la *conditio sine qua* non pour obtenir le salut de Dieu n'est plus l'observance de l'alliance qui s'inscrit dans la relation particulière entre Israël et YHWH. Au contraire, la condition pour obtenir le salut est de le craindre et de confier en Lui. En effet, YHWH est le seul duquel on peut obtenir le salut, car il est à l'origine de toute vie sur terre et le seul à être capable de la garantir. En relisant le texte, le traducteur en reformule probablement la théologie sous-jacente en réadaptant son contenu: de la miséricorde du Dieu d'Abraham « toute la terre est pleine » (verset 5). De cette manière, la miséricorde de Dieu ne joue pas seulement un rôle par rapport au peuple d'Israël mais elle inclut tous ceux qui mettent leur espoir en elle.

²⁰ Cf. déjà E. BONS, "Comment le Psaume 32^{LXX} parle-t-il de la création?", in: F. GARCIA MARTINEZ, M. VERVENNE (eds.), *Interpreting Translation. Studies on the LXX and Ezekiel in Honour of Johan Lust* (BETL 192), Leuven: Peeters, 2005, 55–64.

²¹ Pourtant, comme l'a montré N. LOHFINK, "The Covenant Formula in Psalm 33", 92, une telle interprétation ne s'impose pas.

Le troisième chapitre : le roman *Joseph et Aséneth*

Le troisième chapitre de la thèse se veut une interprétation détaillée de plusieurs passages de la première partie du roman *Joseph et Aséneth*. La contribution particulière de nos analyses à la recherche biblique consiste à élaborer une interprétation de la prière d'Aséneth (chapitres 12-13) à la lumière de son arrière-fond septantique. Dans notre exégèse nous cherchons à montrer que, d'une part, l'idolâtrie d'Aséneth est l'obstacle qui l'empêche d'entrer en contact avec le Dieu de Joseph et que, d'autre part, elle est capable de reconnaître et de regretter son ignorance relative à Joseph ainsi qu'à son Dieu. Dans sa prière, elle s'adresse au Dieu de Joseph en tant que créateur et Dieu miséricordieux à l'égard des toutes ses créatures. Ainsi, ce roman est un autre exemple de la littérature juive qui montre que les non-Israélites ne sont pas exclus de la miséricorde divine, bien qu'ils ne partagent pas avec Israël son histoire spécifique et le privilège de son élection.

a) Remarques préalables

Le roman *Joseph et Aséneth* est un texte peritéstamentaire qui ne figure pas parmi les livres traditionnellement attribués à la LXX mais qui fait partie de la littérature dite juive-hellénistique. En particulier, l'étude et l'analyse de ce texte ont nous permis de mieux comprendre, d'un côté, comment la relation entre la création et le salut et, par conséquent, le fait que Dieu soit le créateur de toute l'humanité sont perçus dans ce récit et, de l'autre, comment cet aspect est développée de manière narrative par un texte d'origine juive et datant de l'époque hellénistique ou romaine. En fait, les datations varient entre le I^{er} siècle avant J.-C. et les I^{er}-II^e siècles après J.-C.

Bien qu'il s'agisse d'un roman et que beaucoup de ses éléments narratifs appartiennent sans doute au genre de fiction plutôt qu'à un texte historique, cet ouvrage nous semble significatif car il traite de l'adhésion à la foi au Dieu d'Israël par un personnage qui non seulement vient du monde égyptien, mais qui même deviendra, avec le patriarche Joseph, l'un des ancêtres qui garantira la descendance à ce que deviendra plus tard le peuple d'Israël (voir Gen 41:50-52). Un autre aspect, que nous semble non moins important, concerne le processus de changement d'Aseneth qui permet d'entrevoir une voie d'ouverture et donc d'inclusion dans le salut préparé par le Dieu d'Israël pour ceux qui, tout comme Aseneth, en provenant d'une famille égyptienne, n'appartiennent pas à Israël et, étant la fille d'un prêtre égyptien, adorent comme lui et son peuple les dieux de l'Égypte.

Dans notre étude, toutefois, nous n'aborderons pas toutes les questions associées, par exemple, aux versions textuelles disponibles du texte et au genre littéraire du roman judéo-hellénistique, aux influences thématiques et structurelles possibles de la littérature grecque non juive et ses *topoi* littéraires, l'arrière-plan religieux grec et égyptien²², l'hypothèse de la présence de rites d'initiation²³, la vision de la femme sous-jacente au roman²⁴, enfin le rôle de l'amour et des motifs érotiques dans le texte²⁵. Pour ces questions, on fera référence à la fois, si nécessaire, aux études particulières déjà disponibles qui approfondissent l'un ou l'autre aspect.²⁶

b) Le problème de l'idolâtrie et de l'ignorance

L'analyse de la première partie du roman²⁷ montre que la *μετάνοια* d'Aseneth est le motif central des chapitres 1-22). Aseneth nous est présentée comme une païenne et en tant que telle elle adore les idoles dont sa chambre est pleine. Le modèle de païen qui se convertit au Dieu d'Israël est présenté de manière paradigmatique: Aséneth est une jeune femme très jolie et riche à la fois, la fille d'un conseiller du Pharaon qui est aussi prêtre qui rend un culte aux dieux égyptiens. La maison d'Aséneth et ses vêtements sont ornés des effigies et des noms de toutes les idoles égyptiennes auxquels elle était particulièrement dévouée au point d'apparaître comme l'épouse d'un d'entre eux. Le *μετάνοια* d'Aseneth s'exprime avant tout dans l'abandon radical des idoles. Son éloignement d'elles est total. D'une part, cet éloignement se manifeste dans un acte physique et visible : Aséneth les brise et les jette par la fenêtre, elle va même jusqu'à jeter

²² À ce propos voir, par ex., les deux monographies suivantes : D. SÄNGER, *Antikes Judentum und die Mysterien. Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Joseph und Aseneth* (WUNT II/5), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980, 88–190 ; R.S. KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph. A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 199, 155–190.

²³ Pour une analyse des rites d'initiation dans les différents groupes religieux juifs de l'ère hellénistique-romaine et des convergences possibles avec le procès de changement d'Aseneth, voir. R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life. Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth* (JSPSup 16), Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, 185–216.

²⁴ Cet aspect est traité en détail par A. STANDHARTINGER, *Das Frauenbild im Judentum der Hellenistischen Zeit. Ein Beitrag anhand von ‚Joseph und Aseneth‘* (AGJU 26), Leiden: Brill, 1995. À ce propos, voir aussi R.S. KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 195.

²⁵ À ce propos, voir R.S. KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 30.51.

²⁶ Pour un état de recherche, cf. R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life. Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth*, chapter 1 ; M. VOGEL, "Einführung", in: E. REINMUTH (ed.), *Joseph und Aseneth* (SAPERE XV), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2009, 3–31.

²⁷ Nous citons le texte d'après l'édition critique suivante : *Joseph und Aseneth. Kritisch herausgegeben von Christoph Burchard. Mit Unterstützung von Carsten Burfeind und Uta Barbara Fink*, Leiden: Brill, 2003.

les sacrifices de peur que ses chiens ne puissent en manger. De l'autre part, l'éloignement a une dimension intérieure : la prière d'Aséneth est adressée au Dieu d'Israël qu'elle reconnaît maintenant comme son seul refuge.

L'idolâtrie est aussi le péché dont Aséneth se repent devant Dieu parce que c'est celle-ci qui sépare un païen d'un juif et qui est, par conséquent, le véritable obstacle au mariage entre Joseph et Aséneth. En outre l'idolâtrie, ensemble au péché de l'orgueil, est le signe, dans *Joseph et Aséneth*, d'un manque de reconnaissance du Dieu unique. Ce manque est associé au sujet de l'ignorance (verbe ἀγνοέω et substantif ἄγνοια) qu'Aséneth reconnaît et cherche à dépasser. En fait, Aséneth passe d'un statut d'ignorance à un statut de connaissance, convaincu que les idoles qu'elle adora autrefois sont des dieux morts et muets, et son seul refuge est dans le Dieu d'Israël, le seul Seigneur de la vie. Dans *Joseph et Aséneth*, l'abandon des idoles et la reconnaissance de Dieu sont deux aspects du même processus dans lequel s'exprime l'évolution d'Aséneth qui, païenne et idolâtre, devient croyante. En conclusion, l'exemple d'Aséneth démontre que l'ignorance, qui est l'origine de l'idolâtrie et de la non-reconnaissance de Dieu Créateur, n'est pas un obstacle insurmontable mais qu'elle peut se transformer en connaissance.

Le changement d'Aséneth²⁸ a son origine dans la rencontre avec Joseph, un homme de haut rang social, le fils du patriarche Jacob, un homme pieux et juste qui n'a pas encore eu des rapports sexuels. La beauté de cet homme et la prière d'intercession qu'il prononce sur elle sont le point de départ de la μετάνοια d'Aséneth.

À cet égard, le changement d'Aseneth n'est pas le résultat d'une révélation mystique extraordinaire ou d'un appel divin particulier, mais le résultat d'une rencontre humaine avec une personne qui incarne profondément la foi qu'elle professe. Le procès de μετάνοια de la jeune fille est décrit en détail. Sa transformation implique que sa condition sociale change aussi : fille riche, Aséneth devient une « orpheline », à savoir au sens métaphorique : seule et abandonnée par tous. Cependant, loin de conduire à un retour au passé, cette situation encourage Aséneth à faire confiance au Dieu de Joseph en tant que « père des orphelins ». Avant de s'adresser directement à Dieu, Aséneth exprime la sincérité de sa μετάνοια à travers diverses pratiques de repentance comme les pleurs, le jeûne, le sac et les cendres dont elle se couvre, bref : des rituels d'auto-humiliation. Ils ne sont pas inutiles, mais ils la préparent à s'approcher du Dieu de Joseph dont Aséneth « a entendu parler » (*JosAs* 11:10). À cet égard, trois aspects méritent d'être mentionnés :

²⁸ Pour une étude détaillée du changement d'Aséneth, voir p. ex. R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life. Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth*, chapitre 4.

– Dans son monologue Aséneth rappelle la validité du *théologoumenon* d'Exode 34, 6, (« Le SEIGNEUR, le SEIGNEUR, Dieu miséricordieux et bienveillant, lent à la colère, plein de fidélité et de loyauté ») qu'elle invoque en référence à sa situation. Ceci la distingue de Jonas qui connaît un tel *théologoumenon* mais qui ne semble pas le considérer comme valide par rapport à Ninive (voir Jonas 4, 2-3). À cet égard, Aséneth fait un pas en avant en demandant à Dieu de pardonner ses péchés, en particulier celui de l'idolâtrie, parce qu'elle reconnaît le Dieu de Joseph comme un Dieu miséricordieux et compatissant envers toutes ses créatures.

– Dans la prière qu'Aséneth adresse à Dieu, elle le reconnaît comme le créateur et l'origine de sa propre vie. En ce sens, Aséneth adresse ses suppliques au Dieu de Joseph en conjuguant deux aspects: d'une part, elle s'adresse à Lui en tant que créateur de tout ce qui existe, d'autre part, ses paroles font écho à ce qui est dit de lui en Exode 34, 6, c'est-à-dire le fait qu'il est un Dieu miséricordieux. Tout cela supposerait qu'Aséneth ait déjà une connaissance de ce Dieu ainsi que de ses attributs. Cependant, Aséneth n'a jamais reçu une sorte de révélation personnelle et directe de la part de Dieu, ni ne peut connaître l'histoire particulière qu'il a tissée avec Israël ou avec n'importe quel être humain. Sa confiance, par conséquent, réside avant tout dans le fait que Dieu, en tant que créateur, ne peut qu'être miséricordieux envers les créatures qui se tournent vers lui.

– Aséneth ne parle pas de son processus d'adhésion au Dieu de Joseph en termes de « conversion », mais comme d'un processus qui l'amène à chercher et à « trouver refuge » en Lui. Par conséquent, le changement d'Aséneth s'exprime d'une part dans les rites de pénitence et dans l'abandon concret des idoles et, de l'autre, dans sa volonté de « se réfugiant auprès de Dieu ». Outre le substantif *καταφυγή*, Aséneth utilise plusieurs autres termes qui sont attestés dans le langage de la prière de la LXX comme, par exemple, *ἐλπίς* et qui se trouvent en particulier dans les Psaumes.²⁹ À cet égard, il convient de rappeler que nous sommes confrontés à un anachronisme. En effet, l'épouse du patriarche Joseph ne pouvait pas connaître un tel vocabulaire. En ce sens, le roman élabore une fiction littéraire qui présente Aséneth comme un Egyptienne qui possède déjà toutes les qualités et les conditions préalables qui l'approchent au Dieu d'Israël. Le vocabulaire qui apparaît dans le roman, c'est-à-dire qui est placé sur les lèvres d'Aséneth, est en fait celui qui est utilisé dans la communauté juive de langue grecque.

²⁹ Pour cette problématique, cf. les deux articles suivants: G. DELLING, "Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta in 'Joseph und Aseneth'", *JSJ* 9, 1978, 29–56, cité d'après ID., *Studien zum Frühjudentum. Gesammelte Aufsätze 1971–1987*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000, 232–256; E. BONS, „Psalter Terminology in *Joseph and Aseneth*”, in: W. KRAUS, S. KREUZER (eds.), *Die Septuaginta – Text, Wirkung, Rezeption* (WUNT I/325), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014, pp. 430–443, spécialement 436–443.

– En conclusion, nous pouvons dire que son statut de créature de Dieu est suffisant pour permettre à Aséneth de s’adresser à son Dieu et de faire appel à sa miséricorde même si elle, en tant qu’égyptienne, ne l’a jamais connu directement ou à travers l’histoire des événements prodigieux qu’il a faits pendant l’Exode, car cela serait incompatible avec la fiction littéraire du roman qui est situé à l’époque patriarcale. Enfin, l’aspect éthique est d’une certaine importance en *Joseph et Aséneth*, par rapport, par exemple, à la relation entre les deux sexes, mais cela ne semble pas être une *conditio sine qua non* pour établir le contact avec le Dieu créateur.³⁰

c) *La reconnaissance divine du μετάνοια d’Aséneth et le message de l’ange*

La μετάνοια d’Aséneth peut être accueillie par Dieu parce qu’elle est fille d’un seul Créateur et Père. En fait, les rituels de pénitence et les prières ne sont pas restés sans suite. Tout au contraire, le processus de transformation d’Aséneth est validé par l’apparition de l’ange qui a pour fonction de confirmer ce qui s’est déjà passé en elle avant son arrivée et d’en préciser la valeur. En particulier, à travers l’ange, Dieu confirme l’accueil d’Aséneth parmi ses enfants comme une garantie de salut qui consiste en une nouvelle existence déjà sur terre et, après la mort, en un avenir caractérisé par l’immortalité destiné à tous ceux qui croient au Dieu de Joseph. À cet égard, le dialogue de l’ange avec Aséneth montre que la μετάνοια d’Aséneth a un caractère tout à fait paradigmatique. Aséneth, devenant la *ville du refuge* pour toutes les nations qui adhéreront au Seigneur de la Vie, devient le modèle de chaque païen qui, suivant ses traces, sera capable d’obtenir pleinement le pardon et le salut du Dieu Créateur. En fin de compte, si la μετάνοια implique de passer de l’ignorance à la connaissance, beaucoup d’autres personnes comme Aséneth, et en suivant son exemple, auront accès à la connaissance du Dieu Créateur de tous qui est miséricordieux envers ceux qui se réfugient en lui.

Cependant, la question demeure sur les implications d’un tel attachement à Dieu. Est-ce que cela implique l’observance de la Torah en particulier? Ou faut-il penser à d’autres exigences éthiques?³¹ Le texte du roman ne donne pas une réponse claire et nette. On peut supposer que l’attachement au Dieu d’Israël concerne principalement le rejet de l’idolâtrie mais le texte ne semble pas aller plus loin. Il convient de rappeler que la μετάνοια d’Aséneth se déroule dans

³⁰ Pour cet aspect, voir aussi C. BURCHARD, “Joseph and Aseneth”, in: J.H. CHARLESWORTH (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, volume II, New York: Doubleday, 1985, 177–247, spécialement 193.

³¹ Pour cette problématique, cf. p. ex. l’article de K.-W. NIEBUHR, “Ethik und Tora. Zum Toraverständnis in Joseph und Aseneth“, in: E. REINMUTH (ed.), *Joseph und Aseneth: Eingeleitet, ediert, übersetzt und mit interpretierenden Essays versehen* (SAPERRE 15), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009, 187–202.

une atmosphère privé, concrètement : dans sa chambre, sans qu'elle assume un caractère public ou officiel. Ainsi, ceux qui suivent l'exemple d'Aséneth sont des individus qui abandonnent l'idolâtrie pour n'adorer le Dieu d'Israël que sous forme privée? Ce qui peut être dit avec certitude, c'est que l'un des messages du roman *Joseph et Aséneth* consiste à défendre l'idée que la *μετάνοια* d'un non-Israélite, bien que privé, est apparemment acceptée par le Dieu d'Israël parce qu'il est le créateur de tous et miséricordieux envers tous ceux qui l'invoquent.

d) La fiction littéraire du roman et son but

Selon une interprétation qui a trouvé un certain nombre d'adeptes dans les dernières décennies, le roman chercherait à répondre à la problématique suivante : Face à l'insertion problématique de néo-convertis d'origine païenne au sein de la communauté juive, la conversion d'Aséneth serait le prototype et le symbole d'une possibilité effective de changement radical pour tous ceux qui viennent de l'idolâtrie.³² Ainsi, à travers le roman, l'auteur, membre judéen d'une communauté juive de la diaspora grecque, aborderait la question de l'entrée des prosélytes dans sa communauté. En décrivant le processus de changement d'Aséneth, il aurait donc présenté les éléments nécessaires pour décrire un modèle authentique de conversion au judaïsme qui pourrait aider à surmonter les désaccords susceptibles de surgir au sein de la communauté juive de son temps au sujet de la possibilité pour un païen de devenir juif. En même temps, le roman présenterait quelques catégories qui auraient permis de confirmer ou non la dignité religieuse des individus qui se sont rapprochés au judaïsme car ils provenaient de milieux religieux et culturels extrêmement différents et n'avaient pas d'origine commune avec le peuple d'Israël.

Comment se situer par rapport à une telle hypothèse ? Il est difficile de la rejeter, mais il est aussi difficile de la prouver car nos connaissances concernant le contexte historique et social du roman sont très limitées. Étant donné que nous n'avons pas de connaissances précises sur l'auteur, la date et le milieu de composition du récit, il est difficile de formuler des hypothèses claires et nettes. Cependant, il semble assez clair que le roman n'a aucune intention missionnaire. Comme le montre le vocabulaire, influencé par le langage spécifique de la LXX, l'auteur s'adresse à un public juif et non pas à un public païen. En fait, il n'y a aucun appel à la conversion dans le texte. En outre, on ne trouve pas non plus des allusions à des pratiques typiques du judaïsme telles la circoncision, les ablutions et l'observance de la Torah. En ce qui concerne la *μετάνοια* lui-même, la perspective du roman semble s'intéresser à la description du

³² Voir par ex. D. MAGGIOROTTI, "Giuseppe e Aseneth", in: P. SACCHI (ed.), *Apocrifi dell'Antico Testamento*, vol. IV, Brescia: Paideia, 2000, 423–525, spécialement 472, note 5; R.D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life*, 97–117.

changement intérieur d'Aséneth, qui ne fait aucune mention explicite de la conversion, ni ne formule un à la conversion des autres. En effet, Aséneth n'est pas une missionnaire. Tout au plus, elle joue potentiellement un rôle de médiatrice dans le procès de conversion pour tous ceux qui choisiront de leur volonté spontanée d'adhérer au Dieu d'Israël en suivant son exemple.³³

Abstraction faite de ces considérations, nous devrions souligner quelques aspects qui sont souvent négligés : l'histoire d'Aséneth et de sa *μετάνοια* est placée dans une époque patriarcale. Selon l'historiographie du Pentecôte, Israël en tant que nation n'existe pas encore, mais le livre de la Genèse ne nous présente que l'histoire de quatre générations de patriarches. Encore moins, les protagonistes du roman ne peuvent avoir une connaissance de la Torah ou de l'histoire d'Israël après l'Exode. Cependant, cette fiction implique certaines conséquences : Aséneth a peu à partager avec les lecteurs présumés du roman parce que celui-ci reflète une perspective « pré-mosaïque ».³⁴ Cela signifie que la jeune fille ne peut ni connaître ni observer la Torah. De plus, en tant que femme, elle n'a pas besoin de remplir les obligations d'un homme qui se convertit au judaïsme, comme le précepte spécifique de la circoncision.

Ces aspects ne jouent aucun rôle dans le roman. En effet, Aséneth est présentée comme le modèle idéal d'une personne qui, presque *ex nihilo*, s'approche du Dieu d'Israël, dans sa conviction qu'en étant le créateur de tous les êtres humains, il est miséricordieux envers ceux qui se réfugient en lui. À cet égard, le *credo* d'Aséneth semble suffisant parce que Dieu accueille sa supplication et l'auteur du roman la présente comme un modèle pour tous ceux qui voudront suivre son exemple.

³³ Voir J.K. ZANGENBERG, "Josef und Asenet. Zur Pragmatik und Modellhaftigkeit der Konversion Asenets", in: E. BONIS (ed.), *Der eine Gott und die fremden Kulte. Exklusive und inklusive Tendenzen in den biblischen Gottesvorstellungen* (BThSt 102), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009, 95–120, spécialement 119: "Weder erhält Asenet den Auftrag zu konvertieren [...] noch äußert sie selbst einen solchen Appell an alle, die noch nicht konvertiert haben. Gewiss hat Asenets Weg positives Potential für andere ('Stadt', Patronin), doch eher in dem Sinn, dass nun andere, die ihr aus eigenem Antrieb folgen, wissen können, dass der Weg ein Ziel und Aussicht auf Erfolg hat. Auch wird Asenet am Ende nicht selbst zur Missionarin, sondern was thematisiert wird, ist die überstandene Gefahr, gewaltsam wieder von Josef getrennt zu werden."

³⁴ Pour cette idée, cf. *ibid.*, 118.

Comment alors définir tous ceux qui, en tant que non-Israélites, sont soucieux d'abandonner l'idolâtrie et d'adorer le Dieu d'Israël? Faut-il les considérer comme des "god-fearers", des "prosélytes", voire des "vrais Israélites"? Le roman ne donne aucune réponse à ces questions. Il ne fait que placer sur la bouche de l'ange le macarisme avec lequel il déclare « heureux » tous ceux qui adhèrent à Dieu dans la μετάνοια, en suivant l'exemple d'Aséneth : μακάριοι πάντες οἱ προσκείμενοι κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ ἐν μετανοίᾳ (*JosAs* 16:14).

Conclusions générales

Dans les textes analysés, le sujet de la création est le cadre théologique devant lequel l'action de Dieu s'explique et dans lequel tout ce qui existe réside dans sa relation avec lui.

a) *Création et salut: comparaison des textes*

Comme en témoigne l'analyse réalisée dans la présente étude, les textes examinés, quoique de genres et d'époque différents, présentent des éléments communs. Dans les paragraphes qui suivent, nous chercherons à mettre en évidence les points suivants qui revêtent un intérêt particulier pour notre sujet.

(1) Tout d'abord, nous pouvons constater que tous ces textes portent sur la relation entre YHWH, Israël et les « autres ». Nous supposons que cet aspect devrait toucher la communauté d'Israël qui, à un certain moment de son histoire, en particulier à l'époque hellénistique-romaine, a eu à se situer par rapport à d'autres peuples et d'autres cultures qui, d'une certaine manière, pouvaient s'intéresser à son mode de vie. En relation avec cela, nous trouvons que ces textes, excepté peut-être en partie le texte de *Joseph et Aséneth*, ne sont pas des « manuels » qui ont l'intention de définir des parcours et des approches pour commencer à faire partie de la communauté croyante. Il nous semble plutôt que ces textes visent davantage à définir des principes théologiques à la lumière desquels ils peuvent motiver et soutenir la possibilité d'un éventuel rapprochement de la part des individus et des peuples intéressés à partager, avec le peuple d'Israël, certains aspects de sa foi.

En ce sens, le *livre de Jonas*, un texte dont certains aspects semblent ressembler à un conte de fées, vise précisément à dire comment YHWH de sa propre initiative veut atteindre les Ninivites, à savoir un peuple étranger et, comme cela ressort explicitement du texte, fortement marqué par la mauvaise conduite et par la violence. Le Dieu de Jonas se fait connaître à ce peuple en lui manifestant par son prophète le péché dont il s'est souillé et la menace de destruction imminente qui le guette à cause de celui-ci. L'accusation, cependant, s'avérera ne

pas être un instrument de mort mais de vie, car elle deviendra une opportunité pour les Ninivites de se repentir et de se soumettre au Dieu de Jonas. L'action principale, à savoir la répugnance du prophète et l'accomplissement de sa mission, comporte un autre moment saillant dans lequel la scène se concentre sur le danger de naufrage du navire auquel Jonas et les marins sont exposés. Grâce à Jonas, ces derniers connaissent YHWH et, en faisant l'expérience de son pouvoir, se soumettent à lui, le craignent et lui offrent des vœux et des sacrifices. Dans les deux épisodes qui aboutissent à un résultat similaire, à savoir la reconnaissance et la soumission des deux groupes au Dieu de Jonas comme le seul Dieu dont dépend chaque vie, le texte semble proposer deux modèles d'adhésion au Dieu d'Israël pour les non-Israélites: les marins, qui font l'expérience du pouvoir de YHWH qui domine les éléments de la création et qui est le seul à les sauver, le craignent en se liant à Lui par des vœux et des sacrifices; les Ninivites, croyant au message de Jonas et par conséquent à son Dieu, font pénitence et changent radicalement leur mauvaise conduite. Un tel changement correspondra au changement de Dieu qui décidera de ne pas exécuter contre eux leur jugement de condamnation, se révélant comme un Dieu de miséricorde. Ce sujet sera en particulier développé au chapitre 4 où il fera également l'objet de malentendus de la part de Jonas, représentant en quelque sorte un courant spécifique en Israël qui avait dû montrer une certaine opposition envers les non-Israélites (cf. l'exégèse du livre par Rüdiger Lux). Cela permet de mettre en évidence les problèmes et, en même temps, les solutions théologiques inhérentes au problème en question.

Le *Psaume 33* aborde le thème de la relation entre YHWH, Israël et les « autres » sous une autre forme, c'est-à-dire non à travers le genre narratif mais, comme nous l'avons vu, à travers le genre hymnologique qui place l'accent sur l'agir cosmique dont YHWH est le protagoniste. L'action cosmique de YHWH, qui se déroule dans la création et aussi dans l'exercice de sa puissance qu'il opère sur toute la création, tourne autour du sujet de la קִיּוּן de YHWH.

En fait, c'est elle dont la terre est pleine, et c'est elle qui constitue pour tous ceux qui confient en elle la possibilité d'être sauvé par YHWH. En ce sens, les destinataires de la קִיּוּן de YHWH ne sont pas seulement les Israélites, mais aussi tous ceux qui parmi les peuples du monde espèrent en elle. De cette manière le Psaume 33, qui traite de la relation entre YHWH et les non-Israélites, n'exclut pas le peuple d'Israël à qui fait allusion le verset 12b, mais il l'insère comme faisant partie de toute l'humanité qui a origine en Lui et qui est appelé avec les autres à Lui chanter et à invoquer sa miséricorde comme garantie de salut et de protection. À cet égard le Psaume 33, traitant du salut et de la protection que YHWH réserve à tous ceux qui le craignent et qui font confiance en sa קִיּוּן , semble nuancer et même abolir la frontière de séparation entre Israël et les « autres ». De cette façon, le Psaume atténue la ligne de démarcation entre Israël et

le reste de l'humanité. En fait, le texte ne mentionne jamais les catégories de la tradition juridique d'Israël, telles que celles de l'alliance ou de la Torah, qui constituent ailleurs des présupposés intangibles qui régissent les relations entre YHWH et son peuple. À cet égard, comme nous l'avons déjà souligné à plusieurs reprises, Israël n'est jamais mentionné explicitement. Ce qui détermine la relation entre Lui, la création et l'humanité est, d'une part, le fait que YHWH a donné vie à tout et à tout homme et, de l'autre, le fait de Le craindre et de faire confiance à son יְהוָה . Même dans ce texte, donc, la condition de créature et la יְהוָה divine, en tant que postulats de départ, ne sont pas automatiquement la garantie du salut de la part de Dieu, mais le salut est toujours le fruit d'une relation voulue aussi par l'homme, qu'il soit Israélite ou un non-Israélite, qui dans ce sens est invité à craindre et à espérer dans la יְהוָה divine. On peut enfin noter que l'initiative est toujours confiée à YHWH, le seul à pouvoir garantir la protection en période de famine et la délivrance de la mort.

Dans le roman *Joseph et Aséneth*, la question de la relation entre Israélites et non-Israélites est le sujet principal de toute la première partie de l'ouvrage. Le point de départ narratif de ce texte est l'histoire du patriarche Joseph, qui, comme indiqué en Genèse 41:45, prend comme épouse Asenat, une jeune femme égyptienne fille de Potifera, prêtre d'On. Ainsi, les contours qui délimitent l'appartenance au peuple d'Israël sont bien définis. En outre, le texte s'exprime en utilisant des catégories plus définies, c'est-à-dire en établissant une série de caractéristiques qui définissent et différencient le pieux Israélite, représenté par Joseph comme modèle de perfection, et un non-Israélite représenté au plus haut degré par une jeune femme étrangère, Aséneth. La différence majeure que le texte signale immédiatement est qu'Aséneth, contrairement à Joseph, qui adore le Dieu Très Haut et Créateur de tous, est une païenne qui adore les dieux égyptiens et qui s'entoure d'une quantité considérable d'idoles. De cette façon, le texte a déjà l'intention de créer des modèles et de donner une configuration claire et nette aux deux personnages qui représentent, en fin de compte, respectivement, le peuple choisi par le Dieu de Jacob et les non-Israélites. Cette distance, qui au début semble insoluble et insurmontable, commence à être gommée dans la première phase par la prière de bénédiction que Joseph prononce sur la jeune femme. À travers cette prière, il invoque la bénédiction de YHWH et manifeste la possibilité et le désir qu'Aséneth aussi, grâce à l'intervention du Dieu de Jacob, puisse sortir de l'erreur et des ténèbres et trouver la vérité et la lumière pour être incluse parmi les élus et dans le repos dont seulement ceux-ci jouissent. Dans cette prière s'exprime l'idée selon laquelle le Dieu d'Israël pourrait effectuer une intervention salvifique (une nouvelle vie, une existence qui sera reproduite) à l'égard d'Aséneth, une jeune femme qui n'appartient pas au peuple de Joseph, et cela ouvre la voie à tout ce qui sera raconté par la suite.

En d'autres termes, les sentiments amoureux d'Aséneth pour Joseph conduiront la jeune fille à une profonde repentance et à un changement radical qui l'amènera à rejeter sa conduite idolâtre et à faire confiance de toute sa force au seul Dieu de Joseph et, en particulier, à sa miséricorde. Cependant, dans ce cas, nous avons affaire à un texte qui situe situant son cadre narratif dans l'histoire patriarcale du peuple, en racontant, en particulier, l'admission d'une païenne au sein de ce qui deviendra le peuple d'Israël. Par conséquent, le texte ne mentionne jamais la Torah ou l'alliance en tant que catégories qui créeraient des résistances entre Joseph, son Dieu et la jeune fille, parce que dans le récit fictif, les faits se déroulent avant l'événement de l'Exode. De telles catégories ne seront même pas mentionnées en référence à tous ceux qui, en tant que non-Israélites et païens, voudront se convertir au Dieu de Joseph en suivant l'exemple d'Aséneth. Encore une fois, le texte de *Joseph et Aséneth* – ainsi que le livre de Jonas et le Psaume 33 – semblent ne pas dicter des conditions à respecter pour rendre valable un parcours d'adhésion au Dieu de Joseph. Ils ont plutôt l'intention de mettre en relief deux aspects fondamentaux: la possibilité qu'un non-Israélite embrasse la foi du Dieu des patriarches et, en revanche, le fait que celui-ci accepte cette adhésion en mettant en œuvre sa miséricorde. Celle-ci a son origine dans l'acte créateur qui lie Dieu à tous les créatures, sans aucune distinction, dès les origines du monde. Par conséquent, le salut et l'inclusion dans la communauté de ceux qui ont le Dieu de Jacob comme leur Seigneur, sont offert non seulement à Aséneth, mais aussi à tous ceux qui, en suivant son exemple, se joindront à la foi en Lui. Cependant, ceci n'est pas déconnecté de la participation active de l'individu qui, en suivant l'exemple d'Aséneth, doit fortement invoquer ce Dieu, se repentir du mal commis (spécialement de la conduite idolâtre) et faire appel à sa miséricorde sincère et confiante.

(2) Dans tous les textes, le Dieu d'Israël est présenté comme celui qui exerce le pouvoir sur tout l'univers créé et sur tous les hommes. Cela émerge non seulement du fait qu'il est le créateur de tout mais aussi du fait qu'il exerce son pouvoir sur tout cela. Ce dernier aspect se traduit en deux manières d'agir particulières : d'une part, le Dieu d'Israël est celui qui exerce une domination absolue et concrète sur tous les éléments cosmiques et sur tous les hommes de la terre, de l'autre « il voit », « il regarde », « il scrute » les actions qui se déroulent sur terre. Dans le livre de Jonas, ceci est mis en lumière à la fin du chapitre 3 où il est dit que « Elohim a vu leurs actions, qu'ils s'étaient convertis de leur mauvaise conduite » (Jonas 3:10). L'acte de voir sert, d'une part, à souligner le constat de la part de Dieu du changement des œuvres et de conduite de la part des Israélites, de l'autre, il sert aussi à souligner que le regard divin ne s'arrête pas seulement aux actes extérieurs qui ils accomplissent, mais il est aussi capable d'aller au-delà d'eux pour connaître la sincérité avec laquelle tels actes sont mis en place. La

confirmation de ceci concerne le fait que la conséquence du voir de Dieu coïncide aussi avec un jugement qui, dans le cas des Ninive, lui permettra même de changer d'idée sur la punition annoncée par Jonas contre la ville. L'acte du voir de Dieu est également présent dans le Psaume 33 et en particulier dans les versets 13-15. Ici, il est dit que Dieu regarde du ciel, le lieu de sa demeure, et qu'il observe tous les hommes en scrutant les cœurs qu'il a lui-même façonnés. L'action du voir s'adresse alors à tous les hommes de la terre et à leurs actions. Même dans le Psaume 33, mais plus explicitement, l'acte du voir de Dieu ne se limite pas à l'aspect extérieur des actions, mais il veille sur tous les hommes et avec son regard il pénètre toute la réalité jusqu'au cœur des hommes qu'il a lui-même façonné un par un. Dans le Psaume 33, la vision de YHWH implique donc un domaine qu'Il exerce du ciel, le lieu de sa demeure, sur tous les hommes et toutes leurs actions, et implique inévitablement un jugement sur eux.

Dans le roman *Joseph et Aséneth*, l'image du « voir » comme un événement qui implique un jugement n'est pas attribuée à Dieu mais à Joseph, qui, comme on l'a dit à plusieurs reprises, dans le roman manifeste en une certaine mesure la présence même de Dieu. La connaissance de lui par la fille semble présenter les traits d'une révélation divine et coïncidera avec le processus de sa transformation d'idolâtre à croyante en le Dieu de Jacob. Tout au début de ce processus, Aséneth manifeste le désir de vouloir se cacher aux yeux de Joseph ou, mieux encore, de cacher ses actions mauvaises qui l'ont conduite à prononcer des mots offensifs contre lui, ce qui cependant est impossible parce que Joseph « voit chaque cachette et rien de ce qui est secret lui échappe à cause de la grande lumière qui est en lui » (*JosAs* 6:6).

(3) Les trois textes prennent en compte un acte salvifique accompli par YHWH par rapport à des non-Israélites. Ceux-ci sont considérés dans les trois textes comme des créatures auxquelles Dieu adresse son attention spéciale qui consiste en un acte salvifique et, dans le Psaume 33 et dans le roman *Joseph et Aséneth*, en une protection spéciale pour ceux qui adhèrent dans la foi en Lui. De ce point de vue, les trois textes ont les mêmes fondements théologiques. En fait, ce qui justifie et soutient du point de vue conceptuel l'action salvifique de YHWH, même sur ceux qui n'appartiennent pas au peuple d'Israël, est une triple conviction : a) Dieu est le créateur de tout et il exerce son pouvoir sur tout ce qui existe; b) le Dieu d'Israël est le seul qui sauve de la mort et qui garantit la vie sur terre; c) le Dieu d'Israël est un Dieu miséricordieux.

b) De quelle manière peut-on parler de conversion?

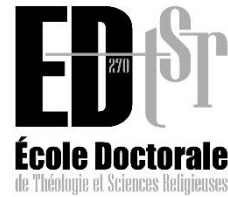
À la lumière de notre réflexion sur la théologie présente dans les textes étudiés dans notre thèse de doctorat, nous avons abordé la question de la conversion comme un point de dialogue et de discussion avec les études qui, dans certains cas, voulaient répondre à la question du rôle de la

conversion des non-Israélites au Dieu d'Israël dans ces textes. Certes, comme nous l'avons vu, ceux-ci traitent de la question de la relation entre Israël, son Dieu et les nations afin d'envisager des voies possibles de salut pour ces derniers. Mais rien ne nous permet de conclure qu'ils traitent du problème de la conversion des non-israélites d'une manière explicite. Les textes, en revanche, semblent se concentrer davantage sur des postulats théologiques qui pourraient ainsi ouvrir une nouvelle voie dans la réflexion d'Israël : ceux qui n'appartiennent pas par leur origine et en raison de leurs traditions au peuple d'Israël pourraient bénéficier d'une attitude favorable de la part Dieu à leur égard ? En traitant de cette question, les textes analysés élargissent l'horizon. En effet, en s'appuyant sur l'idée selon laquelle Dieu est le créateur universel et le seigneur de l'histoire, ces textes dépassent l'histoire d'Israël particulière d'Israël et toutes les implications pour lesquelles Israël entretient un rapport privilégiée avec son Dieu.

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Creation and Salvation

Models of relationship between the God of Israel and the Nations in the Book of Jonah, in Psalm 33 (MT and LXX) and in the Novel *Joseph and Aseneth*



Résumé

Cette thèse s'inscrit dans le débat actuel relatif au monothéisme biblique et au pluralisme religieux. Ces dernières décennies, ce débat a été influencé par des auteurs comme Jan Assmann pour lequel le monothéisme vétérotestamentaire constitue une racine importante de l'intolérance dont les trois religions monothéistes se seraient rendues coupables. Le but de notre thèse n'est pas d'entrer dans ce débat mais d'approfondir un sujet négligé par la recherche : qu'en est-il des tendances inclusives du monothéisme vétérotestamentaire? Cette thèse ne se veut pas une contribution historique mais son but est d'étudier les principes théologiques permettant de concevoir des rapports positifs entre le Dieu d'Israël et des individus ou des peuples étrangers. En particulier, nous cherchons à analyser trois textes, le Livre de Jonas, le Psaume 33 (TM et LXX) et le roman *Joseph et Aséneth*. Bien qu'il s'agisse de trois textes différents en ce qui concerne le genre littéraire, l'origine et la datation, ils ont en commun d'aborder le problème du rapport entre le Dieu d'Israël et les non-Israélites. Plus concrètement, chacun de ces trois textes présente le Dieu d'Israël comme un créateur universel qui, en tant créateur, a pitié de toutes ses créatures.

Mots clé : Bible hébraïque/Ancien Testament – Livre de Jonas – Psaume 33(32) – *Joseph et Aséneth* – conversion et salut – théologie de la création

Résumé en anglais

The starting point of this study is the current debate on monotheism and religious pluralism. In recent decades, this debate has been strongly influenced by some authors such as Jan Assmann for whom the monotheism originating in the Old Testament is the root of the intolerance and violence of the three monotheistic religions. Rather than participating at this debate, the intention of this study is to answer the following questions: what about inclusive tendencies in Old Testament monotheism? Thus, this thesis is aimed at looking into the theological principles motivating and supporting the possibility of an approach by individuals and peoples to the God of Israel. With this aim, our objective is to analyse three texts where the relationship between YHWH, Israel and the non-Israelites is examined: the book of Jonah, Psalm 33 (MT and LXX), and the novel, *Joseph and Aseneth*. Although these three texts are different concerning their genre, period and provenance, they have the following ideas in common: the relationship between the God of Israel and non-Israelites as well as the concept of God as an universal creator who has pity of all his creatures.

Key words: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament – Book of Jonah – Psalm 33(32) – The novel "Joseph and Aseneth" – conversion and salvation – theology of creation.