

Jonah 1:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them.

Analysis

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them. The sailors' response reveals extraordinary compassion—instead of immediately throwing Jonah overboard, they "rowed hard" (vayachteru ha'anashim, וַיָּחֶתֶר הָאָנָשִׁים) to save both him and themselves. The verb chatar (חָתַר) means to row vigorously or dig—suggesting exhausting, desperate effort against impossible conditions.

This compassionate resistance to executing even a guilty man stands in stark moral contrast to Jonah's callous willingness to let 120,000 Ninevites perish (4:11). These pagan sailors display more mercy than God's prophet—a deliberate irony driving home the book's central message about divine compassion transcending ethnic boundaries. They row "to bring it to the land" (lehashiv el-hayabbashah, לְהַשִּׁיב אֶל-הַבָּשָׁה), attempting to reach shore where Jonah could disembark safely.

"But they could not" (velo yakholu) because "the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them" (ki hayam holek vesover aleyhem, קַיְמָה וָלֶךְ וְסָעֵר עַלְيָהֶם). The construction holek vesover (הַלֶּךְ וְסָעֵר—"going and storming") indicates progressive intensification—the storm was escalating, not subsiding. The preposition al (against) personifies the sea as actively opposing their efforts. This demonstrates that human effort cannot thwart God's purposes. The sailors learned what Jonah should have known: you cannot outrow, outrun, or outwit the Almighty.

Their compassionate attempt failed because God had appointed another means of deliverance—the great fish.

Historical Context

Ancient maritime practice valued preserving life even of guilty parties when possible. Mediterranean sailors were experienced oarsmen, but wooden vessels had limited capacity against severe storms. Their willingness to exhaust themselves rowing against divine tempest shows remarkable moral character—these polytheistic pagans demonstrate covenant love (*hesed*) toward a Hebrew prophet who showed none toward Gentiles. The scene anticipates Christ's teaching that faith and righteousness sometimes appear more genuinely in unexpected people (Matthew 8:10, 21:31-32).

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How do the pagan sailors' compassionate efforts expose Jonah's (and our) hard-heartedness toward enemies?
2. What does this passage teach about the futility of resisting God's sovereign purposes?
3. In what ways do unbelievers sometimes display greater moral character than professing believers?

Interlinear Text

וְلֹא	בָּבֶשׂ	ה	אֵל	לְבָשׂ	יָבֵן	הָאָנָשׁ	יָמִם	וְלֹא
rowed hard	Nevertheless the men		to bring			H413	it to the land	H3808
H2864	H582		H7725				H3004	

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 21:30 (Parallel theme): There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD.

Job 34:29 (Parallel theme): When he giveth quietness, who then can make trouble? and when he hideth his face, who then can behold him? whether it be done against a nation, or against a man only:

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