6. Jew or Hebrew?

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Jewish law rejects the notion of invoking divine intervention in chance, with the purpose of divination. This practice, technically known as “cleromancy” is considered a form of idolatry. In Yona’s story, however, God “changes the laws of the game”; intervenes in the casting of the lots, or “dices”, that the sailors threw to find the culprit, and assigns the blame to Yona. The prophet now has no escape. His has been dis-covered by HaShem. Now he realizes once again that the mission he has to carry out, saving Nineveh, is time sensitive.
Verse 8: *The [sailors] said to Yona: – Tell us why this tragedy is happening to us. What is your occupation? Where you come from? What is your country? What land are you from?*
The sailors overwhelmed Yona with questions. And now, for the first time in the book, we listen directly to the prophet’s voice.
Verse 9: *Yona said to them, “I am a Hebrew. And I worship (lit. fear) HaShem, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.*
I AM A HEBREW, OR AN ISRAELITE
Some biblical commentators explain that Yona’s response, “I am a Hebrew,” answers all the questions at once. Let’s see.
In those times, we Jews dedicated ourselves to work the land (the great international traders were the Phoenicians!). A Jew would usually dedicate himself to farming and spend a large part of the rest of his day to serving God (praying, studying Torah, doing acts of kindness). We could reread this verse, with the additional implied answer, in this way: “Who are you? What’s your occupation? “- the sailors asked Yona- “I am a Hebrew, and my main occupation is to worship HaShem… “.
“I am Hebrew” also answers the questions “where do you come from”, “what is your land” and “where are you from”. The answer to these the questions is one single word: “Israel”, which is also implicit in “I am Hebrew”, since up to 722 a.e.c. all Jews of the world lived exclusively in Israel.
Now: Why does Yona say: “I am a Hebrew” and does not say “I am a Jew”?
At that time, 8th century before the common era, the Jewish

people were divided into the Kingdom of Israel (the 10 tribes) and the Kingdom of Yehuda (Judea), which included Jerusalem, the Bet haMiqdash, etc. The inhabitants of Yehuda (or Judea) were later known as Yehudim, or Jews, as seen in the book of Esther. But Yona belongs to the Kingdom of Israel.

Some commentators explain that "Hebrew" was the word (the patronymic) that non-Jews used to refer to Jews, as opposed to "Israelite", Am Israel, bene berit, etc. which is how "we" refer to ourselves. Now, the Torah mentions the word "Hebrew" several times, mainly when the Egyptians refer to some member of the children of Israel (Yosef, Moshe, the midwives, etc.). It is fascinating to notice in this context that in the Amarna documents, the letters from Amenhotep IV (1350-1330 BCE) which is, so far, the oldest non-biblical reference to Am Israel, the Egyptians refer to us as "Hebrews" (habiru or habriu).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTISEMITISM

Fast-forward, one of the first symptoms of the final separation between the first Christians and the people of Israel is when the former begin to refer to the Jews as "Hebrews" (as "Epistle to the Hebrews). Although later and for 17-18 centuries the church deliberately referred to us as "Jews", because of the similarity between "Jew" an "Juda", the greatest 'traitor' who betrayed Yeshu (also a Jew!), and the word "judío"=Jew. The association in unmissable: "Judios" like "Juda" are traitors. And this is why in some parts of Spain—like Melilla, the birthplace of my wife— Jews called themselves "Hebrews." But I think that, unlike Yona, Melilla's Jews did that to protect themselves and try to minimize the allergic and demonizing connotation that the term "Judio" inspired (inspires?) in the minds of Spanish-speakers who were exposed for 15 uninterrupted centuries of systemic anti-Semitism. In this context it is worth remembering that Spanish dictionaries for centuries defined the word "Jew" as "stingy" and "usurer", and "judiada" (acting Jewish) as an act of "betrayal". Although in modern times the Royal Spanish Academy still has it, with a slight "euphemization" (see here): "judiada" Mala pasada o acción que perjudica a alguien. (judiada—acting Jewish— Bad acting or action that harms someone).

After this long digression, let's go back to Yona.

The prophet of Israel introduces himself to the sailors using

the patronymic that non-Jews used to identify the Israelites: “I am a Hebrew!”