

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

THE MEANING OF תַּפְצֹחַ IN JONAH 1:14

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It is beneficial to investigate the meaning of תַּצְנֶנֶה, although it is the only occurrence of that word in the book of Jonah, because it tells us something about the nature of God.<sup>1</sup> In Jonah 1:14, the word's meaning communicates how the Lord dealt with Jonah and the seamen in the midst of Jonah's disobedience. In order to better understand this word, this paper will explore what תַּצְנֶנֶה means by considering Hebrew usages, Greek interpretation, and contextual-grammatical clues. By the end, this paper will prove that תַּצְנֶנֶה in Jonah 1:14 should be interpreted with a sense of divine *will* rather than pleasure or delight.

### *Old Testament Usage*

Broadly speaking, the lemma תַּצְנֶנֶה is used seventy-nine times in the Masoretic text. This word is used often in Psalms (20 occurrences), Isaiah (12), and Esther (7), but is spread across 23 different Old Testament books. With so many uses in the Old Testament, we can be fairly confident that this word was frequently used in Hebrew, but we need to avoid the conclusion that each used the word in the same way. The definition clearly depends upon context.

The ESV translation interprets the root of this word in a variety of ways, including to delight, to please, to desire, to pleasure, to wish, to will, to favor, and to purpose. Clearly, these definitions are related to each other, but each has a slightly different nuance. Most often, 43 out of 79 times, תַּצְנֶנֶה is translated in terms of "delight." Secondly, the word is also frequently translated as "please" or "desire" – 10 and 8 occurrences, respectively. Keeping this range of meaning in mind can be helpful because even if *every* nuance is not intended, it seems possible that several of these nuances could coexist in an author's mind.

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<sup>1</sup> This word should not be confused with תַּצְנֶנֶה, a derivation of our word in question, which can mean hang, sway, or bend down. In addition, according to the *BHS*, there is no textual problem in Jonah 1:14, so we can be confident that the given text is reliable.

Within this range of meaning, when Yahweh is the subject, *נָפַץ* is used in two primary ways. A few times, such as in Isaiah 42:21, the word is used to describe God being “pleased to do a thing.” More commonly, such as in Numbers 14:8 and 1 Kings 10:9, the word describes delight or delighting in something.<sup>2</sup> Of course, when the Lord is “pleased” or “delighted,” it means that a person or situation is in accordance with His will.

It is interesting to note that, of the 79 instances of *נָפַץ*, the Qal second-person masculine (Qal 2ms) is only used 5 times: Deuteronomy 21:14, Jonah 1:14, Psalm 40:7, Psalm 42:12, and Psalm 51:8. Because these passages make up a smaller field of usages, the 2nd-person verbal forms are relevant for this study. Significantly, all five cases of the Qal 2ms speak of the will of a sovereign or an overseer being pleased. The passages in Jonah and Psalms directly address the Lord, while Deuteronomy 21:14 addresses husbands who are overseeing their wives. Each case of the Qal 2ms involves a person being pleased, or not pleased, with a particular situation or person.

All five uses of the Qal 2ms are used in a similar fashion. These five cases show that *נָפַץ* can (1) address a person of authority or (2) refer to the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of an authority’s will. In our contemporary context, one might use this kind of verb when addressing a supervisor at work, a government official, or a divine being. “Pleased” or “desired” is not meant in a physical or material sense, but in regards to being satisfied with the decision or outcome. While one would not want to push the significance of the Qal 2ms too far, it seems clear that *נָפַץ* can communicate a sense of “satisfied will.”

Supporting this interpretation, when the entire phrase is considered, it appears that *נָפַץ* was sometimes used in a legal sense. Similar phrases in Isaiah 66:10 and Ecclesiastes 8:3 show

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Brown et al., *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (electronic ed.; Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), 342-43.

how this term could be used to refer to God or an earthly king. As in the Jonah 1:14 passage, the term *רָצַח* could be used in a way to denote the “unlimited power of the supreme authority which enables him to do ‘whatever he pleases.’”<sup>3</sup> Of course, this sense of “pleased” does not refer to a vague sense of self-gratification, but refers to what is *willed*.

### *Beyond the Masoretic Text*

Similar words can be found in Middle Hebrew, Phoenician, Syrian, Arabic, and Old South Arabian. Outside of Scripture, we can see that the root of this word described a range of things including “to desire,” “to try to get,” and “to keep, to take care.”<sup>4</sup> While it is difficult to know how one language influenced another, it seems quite possible that this root communicated an idea related to the *will* or of *satisfying the will*.

More significantly, around 132 BC, the Septuagint (LXX) provided a definition of *רָצַח* in Jonah 1:14<sup>5</sup> According to these Jewish translators, the Greek equivalent was ἐβούλου. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to do a word study of this Greek word, its lemma, βούλομαι, can be succinctly defined as “want, persist in, insist on, command.”<sup>6</sup> As it has been noted by Kittel, βούλεσθαι is the usual rendering of *רָצַח*. It is often used for “the royal will...and especially the divine resolve and will. This shows that it is not thought of as merely the desire of the heart or wish of the soul.”<sup>7</sup> By considering how Greek-speaking Jews understood *רָצַח*, the

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<sup>3</sup> Harvitz, Avi. *Vetus Testamentum* XXXII, 3(1982), 257.

<sup>4</sup> Koehler, Ludwig et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.; Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1999), 339-40.

<sup>5</sup> Negev, Avraham. *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land* (3rd ed.; New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Balz, Horst Robert and Gerhard Schneider, vol. 1, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990-), 225.

<sup>7</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. ed. Gerhard Kittel et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-,) 630-31.

LXX helps us understand that תַּפְצֹחַ probably communicates *will* rather than emotion in Jonah 1:14.

#### תַּפְצֹחַ in Jonah 1:14

There are several translations of תַּפְצֹחַ in Jonah 1:14. Many translations, including the NET and TNIV, opt for “as you pleased.” The New Living Translation has “for your own good reasons,” but while that captures the sense of the divine will, it lacks the recognition of divine sovereignty and the fulfillment of His will. KJV captures the aspect of divine sovereignty by using “thee,” but like the ESV, the phrase “as it pleased you” changes the subject of the verb to “it” and redefines the Lord as a direct object.<sup>8</sup> However, rather than these, the phrase “just as you willed, you did” is the best way to translate בְּאֲשֶׁר תַּפְצֹחַ עָשִׂיתָ.

Regarding the sense of “sovereign will” that is implied by תַּפְצֹחַ, it is clear that the sailors recognized the Lord’s power to do as He pleased. The phrase as a whole proves this to be the case. Compared to two other prayers in Psalm 115 and Psalm 135, when the phrase בְּאֲשֶׁר תַּפְצֹחַ עָשִׂיתָ is used in Scripture, it appears that God’s never-ending sovereignty is in view.<sup>9</sup>

Historically, the expression could have “used at any time that a Hebrew wanted to compare God’s limitless freedom of action to the pagan gods’ more restrictive movements.”<sup>10</sup> (136) This emphasis upon God’s ability to exercise his will fits well within the context of Jonah 1 and the book as a whole.

Additionally, in all of Hebrew Scripture, it is rare that אֲשֶׁר precedes הִפְךָ. For that reason, Isaiah 55:11 can assist us when considering how to translate our word in question. By

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<sup>8</sup> Compare Jonah 1:14 to 1 Kings 21:6 to see the difference. The verb in Jonah 1:14 is second person, while in 1 Kings 21:6, it is third person: אֶם-הִפְךָ אֶתָּה. This should be reflected in our translation.

<sup>9</sup> Sasson, Jack M. *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretations*. The Anchor Bible. Vol. 24B. (London: Yale University Press, 1990), 136.

<sup>10</sup> Sasson, 136.

examining this pattern of speech, Isaiah 55:11 can be a “case study” that illustrates the various ways to translate our word in question. The options include:

- ESV: “I purpose”
- NLT: “I want”
- NET: “I intend”
- TNIV: “I desire”
- KJV: “I please”

Significantly, both in Isaiah 55:11 and Jonah 1:14, “willingness” is in view.<sup>11</sup> In these passages, **הִפָּצַח** speaks of the Lord’s will. In light of that, “as you willed” seems to be a better translation than “as you pleased” or “as you desired.” These latter translations can mislead us from the straightforwardness that the sailors intended. Likewise, the author who recorded these words wanted **כַּאֲשֶׁר הִפָּצַח עֲשִׂיתָ** to be easily understood: as the Lord willed to do, so He did.

In conclusion, it is clear that **הִפָּצַח** has been interpreted in various ways. Some of the options include “as you will,” “as you please,” and “as you desire,” but the latter two terms are too fuzzy and lack the emphasis upon a completed, divine will. Although there are multiple reasons for preferring “as you willed,” this view is most strongly supported by Isaiah 55:11 and the LXX. Therefore, when translating Jonah 1:14, in light of the evidence above, it is better to translate **הִפָּצַח** in terms of willingness rather than pleasure or desire.

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<sup>11</sup> Koehler, Ludwig, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.; Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1999), 340.

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