Jonah - Commentaries by James M. Freeman

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 611. Sailors' Superstitions

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Jonah 1:7. Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us.

1. On the subject of lots, see note on Proverbs 18:18 (#463).

2. It was a common opinion among sailors that the misconduct done by a person might bring disaster on the whole company. This notion still prevails, not only among heathen mariners, but to some extent among sailors belonging to Christian nations, many of whom have strangely superstitious ideas. Rosenmüller says, in illustration of this ancient opinion: “Thus, (according to Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods, 3:37,) the sailors considered Diagoras of Melos the cause of the storm which overtook them because he was an atheist, and hid betrayed the Eleusinian mysteries” (Morgenland, vol. 4, p. 39).

Manners and Customs of the Bible, 610. Calling on the Gods

Jonah 1:5. Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god.

As these sailors were probably Phenicians from different places, they worshiped different gods. Every man may have had his own special deity to whom he prayed when in trouble. Roberts found illustrations of this text on more than one occasion when in a storm at sea in a vessel with a heathen crew: “No sooner does danger appear than one begins to beat his head and cry aloud, ‘Siva, Siva!’ another beats his breast and piteously shrieks forth, ‘Vishnoo!’ and a third strikes his thigh and shouts out with all his might, ‘Varuna!’” (Oriental Illustrations, p. 513).