

Jonah and Poincare

The book of Jonah has had a tragic history. The motive of it has been largely lost sight of and it has become the occasion for a war of words, as though it were written to prove that a fish was capable of swallowing a man whole and disgorging him again unhurt, or failing that, that God could make a fish for the occasion, without ancestry or descendants to give free transportation for a luckless seafarer cast out into the deep. Is it not true that the average man knows the book of Jonah more by facetious remarks cast in varied form about Jonah and the whale than from an acquaintance with the point of the story as intended by the writer? Whether the original whale—was it not a fish?—swallowed Jonah or not, beyond doubt, in a literary sense, the whale has swallowed Jonah, and the senseless battle between an unimaginative science and crass slave-to-the-letter theology, has sent the world in pursuit of the whale and its credentials, while Jonah seems lost inside, forgotten, and the message the author of the book would teach through him is ignored, if it is thought of as teaching any other message than that of the capacity of the throats and jaw bones of fish or whales.

To be candid, I feel sorry so much time has been spent on proving by research in the fish world, that there have been actually discovered time and again fish equal to the task, especially when that does not silence opposition. There is the unsilenceable objector whose religion is affronted by the suggestion that there ever was a duplicate of the fish of the story—that it was anything but a miracle fish. It were better to take the story as it stands, without refusing to learn the lesson of it till unanimity has been reached as to whether it is history or allegory. One thinks of hungry children entering first on a war of words as to the name of the dish in which free broth was handed them—Is it bowl, or plate, or basin? till worse than a war of words ensues and the broth is spilled and the name of the dish is still undecided. Better get the broth and banish hunger, and leave the naming of the dish meantime. Let us treat the book of Jonah in the same way.

Let us try and get the lesson its author felt impelled to teach through it, for manifestly his biggest interest was not in proving to an unbelieving world God's resourcefulness in rescuing runaway prophets. Till that is done we can afford to leave undecided the class of literature to which it belongs, beyond that it is didactic. When we have gotten the message we may find it so pregnant with application to our own day that the decision about the fish detail will lose interest in the presence of the challenge of its way of dealing with international complications, the offspring of an out-of-date patriotism.

The book bears the marks of a late date among the Old Testament writings. Over these we need not delay. It makes no profession of having been written by Jonah—only about him. Jonah himself is referred to in the Book of Kings as having lived in the days of the Kings of Israel previous to the Exile, when on the Northern frontiers the observant eye could see the menace of Assyria, the future conqueror of Israel, and its capital city Nineveh. The story of Jonah probably lived in written form, or as tradition, down to the days after the Exile, when it received the form in which it now survives.

The motive of the writer determined the form of the story as we have it. He would make the selection of what material he found to hand, to point the moral he had in mind, just as a preacher of today can retell the story of Abraham, David or Elijah in a variety of ways, all consistent with each other, but yet different because the motive is different in each. Without necessarily questioning the historicity of his hero, or his adventure, the author of our canonical book of Jonah saw in the history of his hero a parallel in individual experience to what had taken place in the large in the nation. Let us trace that parallel.

The nation of Israel was called to be a messenger to the nations of a higher type of religion and ethical life as epitomized in the promise to Abraham: "I will bless you and thou shalt be a blessing, and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Israel hoarded her blessing and failed to function. Like Jonah she ran away to enjoy herself and she was thrust out into exile as he into the great deep. But God rescued both and gave a second chance. The story tells Jonah's use of the second chance. The book shows up in its picture of Jonah what post-exilic Judah was doing with its second chance. The prophet of the later day who wrote the book of Jonah saw in his own nation's smug self-esteem, 'holier than thou' attitude and vindictive pride, the prophecy of national failure; and to that type of mind he sought to teach a lesson.

What better foil to their vindictive exclusiveness than the story of Jonah, the pre-exilic Israelite patriot, in the light of the nobler spirit of his God? If there ever was excuse for hate the nation that cowered before the menace of Nineveh had it, and an excuse to put the heathen city beyond the pale of God's interest. There dwelt the Assyrian that "came down like the wolf on the fold."

Yet to that Nineveh, Jonah's message is go and preach. True enough it is not a pleasant story he is to tell. It is destruction for wrong doing; but its motive is rescue, and Jonah knows it. He says so later on. But Jonah runs away. Why? Is it fear of Nineveh? One might find it in one's heart to excuse him for that; but it isn't. He tells toward the close of the book that he had a lurking suspicion that they might repent and God would give them a reprieve. And his righteous patriotism thinks such a reversal of justice intolerable.

However his effort to flee is a failure, and he accepts the commission the second time; but his temper has not changed. He feels still justified in righteous hate, God notwithstanding. Have you seen his frenzy of hate as depicted by G. F. Watts in his "Jonah"? What a preacher! "Gott Strafe England" in another age. He half hopes his prophecy will come true, and yet he is not sure, for his God has such an uncanny way of not measuring up to one's patriotic ideal as a destroyer.

The city repents and doom is like to be averted, but the preacher has a lingering hope that there is some imperfection in the repentance, and waits to see what will happen. He finds shelter from the blistering heat and the exhausting wind from the desert, under the shelter of a gourd. A sort of friendship grows up between himself and the plant. It is the only thing on the horizon that draws from him a kindly interest. The tender feeling almost relieves the ugliness of his present mood, just as the friendship for a cat or dog redeems a misanthrope from repulsiveness. But a disappointment comes. A grub eats into the shrub and it withers.

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