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THE STORY OF JONAH: AN EASTER STUDY

FIRST let us note our Lord's statement in Matt. xii. 40-1 and the context in which it is set. He is speaking of a very solemn subject—the one and only unforgivable sin (verse 32). He then makes another solemn announcement about the importance of the words we speak—"for by thy words thou shalt be justified". In this context He proceeds to assert: "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Some would interpret this as a reference to an allegory or myth, but His subsequent remarks make this interpretation untenable. Men in an allegory or myth cannot *rise* in the judgment with the men of that generation whom our Lord was then facing.

With our Lord's *imprimatur* on the story let us examine the Hebrew book in the Old Testament. Many interesting points emerge. We find a wonderful blending of what is extremely natural and reasonable, with several elements which are supernatural or evidence of Deity. The fact that Jonah slumbered (*rādam*) will be seen to be extremely natural. As 2 Kings xiv. 25 tells us, he lived in Gath-Hepher, a town up in the hills of "Galilee of the Gentiles"—the border country and the first to suffer from an invading host. He ran away to sea when commissioned to preach to his powerful northern neighbour in Nineveh. This flight involved a descent into the plain of Jezreel (Esdraelon)—an exhausting business coming downhill in a hurry—then climbing again over the Carmel range, down the other side and fifty miles down the coastal plain of Sharon to the dockside town of Joppa. No wonder he went down into the hold of the ship and slumbered and it needed the ship's captain to wake the slumberer—the verb of this last word is also used to describe the effects of God's anaesthetic when He operated on Adam to build Eve (Gen. ii. 21), and used, too, of Daniel after he had met the angel (Dan: viii. 18; x. 9). So Jonah is exhausted in running away from God's presence.

But God is sovereign and we read that He "flung" a wind on to the sea. The normal sailing period of fair weather in the Mediterranean is the summer, so this storm was unusual and terrifying in its force, supernatural. How natural, then, that the

sailors, always a superstitious folk, should call to their mascots, gods of luck, whether Poseidon, Neptune or Dagon (fish-god); and when their luck does not change, how natural to blame someone aboard and suggest casting lots to find who it is! How remarkable, though, nay, supernatural, that the lot should fall on the one man who had caused the storm!

In the Hebrew we can gather many details that do not appear on the surface of a translation. For instance the ship was a sailing ship and had a covered deck and was banked with oars. There are two words used for ship in the Hebrew: *'oniyyāh* and *sēphīnāh* (still used to-day in Arabic). The first is the common word, the second only occurring here, meaning "decked" or "covered in". It is also used by Haggai (i. 4) of the "panelled" houses the Jews dwelt in while the temple of the Lord lay waste. The word for shipmaster or captain is *rab ha-ḥōbēl*, i.e. "lord of the 'rope-men' (sailors)," which tells us the ship was a sailer. Another word used here for sailors or mariners is literally "salts" (*mallāḥīm*). There is a salty tang of reality about this story.

Now the next remarkable feature is that the awakened Jonah (whose father's name Amittai means "truthful") told the truth, diagnosed the trouble and sentenced himself to death! "Take me and throw me overboard." Though he was guilty, what a shadowing forth he provides of the Willing Victim and Divine Substitute who upheld the majesty of God's broken law!

Jonah had been disobedient, the Lord Jesus was perfectly obedient—but each willingly suffered to save others. Jonah had confessed; God could have allayed the storm and had Jonah put ashore; but no, a righteous God cannot wink at sin, and so the Holy Law of death for sin must be upheld. How natural for the sailors to refuse to act on Jonah's suggestion! They "dug" hard, we read, i.e. rowed hard, but in vain, "for the sea wrought and was tempestuous", and they were driven to the hateful task of throwing a man overboard—a man who believed in judgment rather than in mercy, even though it involved himself.

The next wondrous event is the end of the storm: those sailors who before had called on their gods now called on Jehovah; and with a new conviction of God's holy revelation that "the blood makes atonement for the soul", they sacrificed a sacrifice (note the Hebraic intensity) to Jehovah and—as faith

in God's sacrifice alone begets works of righteousness—" they vowed vows ".

Meanwhile Jonah was going down and down even to the "cuttings-off of the mountains" (ii. 26), to the depths where the weeds imprisoned his head and—as some scholars think—to his actual death, for we read "his soul (*nephesh*) fainted within him" and "out of the belly of she'ol" he cried. This evidence comes from his prayer in chapter ii. *She'ol*, the place of the departed in the centre of the earth, occurs sixty-five times in the Old Testament: thirty-one times it is translated "grave", thirty-one times it is translated "hell", and three times "pit". In the New Testament *Hades* is its equivalent. The Biblical cosmogony is very different from the modern evolutionary one. Whether his soul passed into She'ol or not, he must have had an awful experience three days and three nights in the hot slimy stomach of the big fish.

The word for fish is *dag*—Dagon means "fishy". In Matt. xii. 40 the word used is *κῆτος*, which Homer in the *Odyssey* uses for "sea-monster". Some whales have so narrow a throat that a man's arm could not pass down, others wide enough to swallow a boat (see *The Times*, 9th June 1928). The Lord prepared a great fish and Jonah was vomited from its belly, and when recommissioned to preach to Nineveh he obeyed. Here was a man back from the dead! A man with an experience! His preaching was so powerful it affected the king on his throne, and when there was universal repentance Jonah shows some of his old unregenerate nature and in his intense nationalism regrets that God has been merciful—all of which are traits so natural and true to life they stamp the story with unexpected reality. God deals very gently with him and teaches him this time by means of a gourd that "salvation belongs to Jehovah".

The book thus provides a harmonious anticipation of the truth of our Lord's bodily resurrection and the justice and mercy therein involved. Paul's word to Athens sums up the issues involved and adumbrated by Jonah: "He hath appointed a day in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained, whereof He hath given assurance to all men in that He hath raised Him from the dead."

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