

## JONAS AND THE "WHALE"

The *Book of Jonas* belongs to the collection of the twelve minor prophets. Though most of these prophets are more or less unknown to the public at large the figure of Jonas is very familiar. Whether this is due to the story itself, which may strongly appeal to the imagination, or to the fact that the prophet's name and fate are mentioned by Christ Himself in the N.T., or to the use made of this book by unbelievers in the past (and present) to ridicule belief in the Bible, is uncertain. The fact is that Jonas and the "whale" (the text speaks only of a "great fish") are well known, and what is further told in this book about Jonas is almost forgotten. Thus attention was focused on this particular detail, it was singled out of the whole book, and interpreters lost sight of its meaning for the subsequent development of the story. In reaction to the opposite view the defenders of the Bible clung to the historical character of this detail, duly emphasising that the miraculous aspect of this event was not a sufficient reason to deny it, but unduly exaggerated the import of Christ's reference to this same detail as an assertion of its historicity. All this is reason enough for stressing the importance of this booklet.<sup>1</sup> Hence it forms a separate volume in the *Bible de Jérusalem* with an unusual proportion between the text of the book (8 pages) and its introduction (20 pages). The length of the introduction is a real recommendation for this publication, and the name of A. Feuillet is another. He is well known as a scripture-scholar through several of his publications dealing with the O. and N.T.<sup>2</sup> The present publication has been preceded by others of the same author on the same subject.<sup>3</sup> Nowadays more attention is paid to the use of literary forms in the Bible, and generally it is admitted that, as far as inspiration is concerned, it is an open question, whether the *Book of Jonas* is to be taken as fiction or non-fiction.<sup>1</sup> Yet if the Book is commonly reckoned as historical, one must have solid arguments to prove the contrary. In principle the whole question turns on the following: What did the inspired author intend to say by writing his book, in particular the *Book of Jonas*? Did he

<sup>1</sup> *Le Livre de Jonas*, trans. A. Feuillet, p.s.s. (Editions du Cerf, Paris 1951, pp. 34).

<sup>2</sup> How Feuillet's thorough knowledge of the O.T. enabled him, e.g. to explain a difficult passage of the N.T. can clearly be seen in the articles of A. Jones in *Scripture*, iv (1949-51), pp. 222 and 264.

<sup>3</sup> See his articles "Les sources du Livre de Jonas" and "Le sens du Livre de Jonas", in *Revue biblique*, lrv (1947), pp. 161-86 and 340-61; and on "Jonas" in Vigouroux's *Dict. bibl.*, Supplement, iv, 1104-38.

<sup>1</sup> See E. F. Sutcliffe, s.j., in *Cath. Comm. on Holy Scripture*, Edinburgh 1953, § 531e, and A. Jonas, *Unless a Man show Me*, London, 1951, p. 49.

mean to relate historical facts and draw a lesson from these, or did he, having it in mind to teach some particular point, invent the story for this purpose? One may stress also that some particular point which the author had in view, might have been meant first and foremost for his contemporaries. A solution is not easy to find, and one should proceed with great care. A thorough study of the original text of the book, of its contents, of its possible relation to other books of the Bible, of its background, and so on, is necessary. It is a pity that often an opinion is formed in accordance with and under the influence of the common idea, without even reading the book, let alone really studying its original text.

Feuillet emphasises already in the very beginning of the introduction the peculiar character of this book in comparison with the rest of the prophetic writings: it is not a collection of oracles, nor does it deal with the whole ministry of Jonas, but it relates a particular mission of this prophet to Niniveh. A prophet of the same name occurs in II Kings XIV.25, and it seems natural to suppose that he is the same as the main figure of the book in question. Hence it follows that the story must have taken place in the eighth century. Now the difficulties arise (p. 7)! Feuillet admits that the author of the book is unknown, and that it must have been written after the fall of Niniveh (612 B.C.). The most fitting time both for philological and theological reasons is the post-exilic time, especially the period of Esdras and Nehemias (fifth century; pp. 8-9). He maintains the unity of the book and dismisses the arguments in favour of a different author for chapt. II as insufficient (pp. 9-10).

The introduction reaches its climax with the question of the literary form. The different points of view are dealt with one by one. The most common opinion, at least amongst Catholics, is that the *Book of Jonas* is historical. Yet there is a new tendency. Scholars in general and some amongst the Catholics<sup>1</sup> hold now that this book is fiction of didactic character. A. Feuillet sides with them, emphasising that it is not unwillingness to accept miracles, but the peculiar character of the book itself, which brings him to this conclusion. All the indications taken together create a very great probability, not to say a certainty, for this view (p. 11). The arguments are the late composition of the book and its general appearance, the artificial character of the miraculous element and the accumulation of unlikely things. It is worth while to mention that amongst the last, one does not reckon the great fish, but the fact of the sudden appearance of a Hebrew

<sup>1</sup> Richard Simon (1712), Gigot (1906), Van Hoonacker (1908), Tobac (1921), Dennefeld (1924), Feuillet (1947). See A. Jones, *loc. cit.* D. Deden, S.C.J., in *De Kleine Profeten*, Roermond 1953, p. 180, mentions also Lesêtre and Condamin.

prophet of the eighth century in the heart of Niniveh as a preacher of God's justice, and the immediate conversion of the whole of this city. The latter, if taken as a historical fact, is a much greater miracle than that of Pentecost (p. 12).

The most serious objection against the given explanation is the witness of Christ. Yet one must admit that the details of the swallowing of Jonas by a great fish and of his deliverance are utilised by Christ as figures of His burial and of His resurrection, and the detail of the conversion of the Ninivites on the preaching of Jonas, as a sign to announce by contrast the condemnation of the unbelieving Jews. Now whether these details are fact or fiction, they keep, in any hypothesis, the meaning which Jesus gives to them (p. 13). The patristic tradition cannot be invoked, because this is not a question of faith or morals, but a purely exegetical one: the literary form of a book (p. 13). Feuillet, however, did not neglect the study of the Fathers, as pp. 13 and 25 sufficiently show. Thus the author comes to the conclusion that the whole book must be taken as pure fiction, with perhaps an allegorical element, but it comes much nearer to the character of a parable. He prefers to call it a didactic fiction (p. 15).

What was, however, the intention of the inspired author, and was he influenced by other inspired writings? Here Feuillet finds the clue for his explanation: Jonas is the book of a learned man, well acquainted with the previous writings; he utilised them constantly for a very special purpose (p. 18). He meant to give an explanation of the non-fulfilment of "the prophecies against the nations", pointing out that even when they have the strongest evidence of divine origin, and are expressed in an absolute way, they remain always conditional (p. 19). For this theological doctrine as well as for many of his expressions the inspired author is greatly indebted to Jeremias (*cf.* esp. Jer. xxxvi and Jon. iii). At the same time he intended to criticise that particularism of mind which found in the mere election of Israel sufficient ground to count on Jahweh, and which expected impatiently the destruction of the gentiles. There was something better to do than to complain about the continued existence of the enemy nations: one ought to convert oneself (pp. 20-1). Here again the author is dependent on Jeremias (*cf.* esp. Jer. xviii.7-8), but to inculcate his lesson deeply he makes an ironical use of Ezech. xxvii (the oracle against Tyre) and of 1 Kings xix, esp. vv.4, 9 (words of the prophet Elias). After all, the only uncongenial type in the whole story is Jonas himself (p. 20). The book teaches by contrast a broad universalism, and Feuillet gives it its proper place amongst the several types of universalism, expressed in the other books of the O.T. (p. 23). All this, the sources the author used and the doctrine he proposed, can be found explained in detail

on pp. 15-24 of the introduction. In the last paragraph Feuillet remarks that if one admits the given explanation of the miracle of the fish, namely, that it is in the mind of the author a sign that Jonas is a true prophet and that his mission comes from God, one can easily understand why Christ referred to it in connexion with His resurrection. For Christ's resurrection too was a sign authenticating His mission (p. 25).

These few notes may suffice to draw attention to a masterful piece of exegesis, presented in a very attractive way. One may ask whether this explanation will be accepted by other Catholic authors. Fr Jones <sup>1</sup> gives very impartially the arguments of the two opposite views (fact or fiction) and comes to the conclusion that the question is not yet solved. Granting the dependence of Jonas on Jeremias and Ezechiel, he still maintains the possibility of underlying historical facts of the eighth century. I would say, however, that although neither the didactic character of a book nor its dependence on previous writings form a sufficient argument to exclude fact, yet the satirical or ironical character of this book is certainly in favour of taking it as pure fiction. D. Deden s.c.j. <sup>2</sup> fully accepts the view of A. Feuillet, and Mgr E. J. Kissane <sup>3</sup> in his sympathetic review of the recently published *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* writes: "Some may think that the writers of the articles on Jonah, Tobias, Judith and Esther are somewhat over-reluctant to give up the strictly historical character of those Books".

W. M. VALK, S.C.J.

St Joseph's College,  
Malpas (Cheshire)

<sup>1</sup> See A. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-68, esp. 59-60. All those who are interested in the doctrine of inspiration and its application to some of the difficult questions of the O.T. should read this highly commendable book.

<sup>2</sup> See Deden, s.c.j., *op. cit.*, pp. 180-2.

<sup>3</sup> See *Irish Theological Quarterly*, xx (1953), pp. 210-11.