

JONAH, THE UNWILLING PROPHET

You won't find a better fisherman's yarn than the Bible's Book of Jonah. This was very skilfully written in the 8thcBC. It's most famous for its preposterous fisherman's story, involving Jonah praying while inside the belly of a sea monster.

This story was written with great wit and irony but with a very serious purpose, which will always be relevant. God's People had returned from exile in Babylon to find their home-land in ruins. Naturally, they turned in on themselves as they set about making a fresh start. Certainly, they had no love for the very people who had caused them so much suffering –the citizens of Nineveh.

This book was written to shake God's People out of turning in on themselves and against the very people who had held them in exile. It was meant to proclaim God's universal mercy and salvation. Jonah typified their attitude of having a monopoly on God's protection, which was thought to result from their being His Chosen People. Yet this reluctant prophet was God's unlikely chosen instrument to proclaim God's all-inclusive mercy, even to the Ninevites.

The story develops with great humour and irony. Jonah's name means 'peace,' but he is moody and disobedient. When God tells Jonah to go East to preach the Lord's condemnation of the hated pagan Ninevites Jonah wants nothing to do with them. So, he goes in the opposite direction and goes West, setting sail for Spain. Instead of getting up and being God's obedient Prophet, he escapes into sleep down in the hold of the ship.

Whereupon the Lord stirs up a storm which prompts the pagan sailors to pray to their gods. Since their prayers fail to calm the storm, they wake Jonah and beg him to pray to his God. The irony here is that pagans persuade a Jew to seek help from the Lord, when he should have encouraged them to turn to the Lord. This irony is re-enforced when Jonah admits that his disobedience is being punished by the storm. That's the closest he gets to admitting guilt, but not repenting.

When Jonah insists that the only way to calm the storm is for him to be thrown overboard, the sea becomes calm and the pagan sailors praise the Lord, offer Him a sacrifice and burn incense to Him. They are the ones who have been converted by this episode, not Jonah.

Now we come to the sea monster which was a sign of the Lord's compassion. He could have punished Jonah's disobedience by drowning him, but the Lord still wanted to use him to preach against Nineveh –to give the enemy of His People and Jonah a chance to repent.

Now we come to the sea monster, in Jewish mythology representing Sheol, the twilight existence of the dead. There in the monster's belly, he's able to pray, expressing his loyalty to God, which, so far, he has not shown. He begs for deliverance without repenting. The Lord hears his prayer and the sea monster disgorges the reluctant prophet onto dry land.

Jesus saw Jonah's time inside the sea monster as foreshadowing the interval between His death and resurrection, during which He descends to the realm of the dead. 2nd century Christian literature developed Christ's descent among the dead and sees Him as releasing those who had died before Him, starting with Adam and Eve, and leading them to the Kingdom of Heaven. To round off this excursus on Jonah and the sea monster, this was developed to great dramatic effect in travelling Medieval mystery plays.

PART 2

To return to the Book of Jonah. We left him disgorged from the sea monster. Realising he couldn't get the better of God, the prophet zealously denounces the evils of Nineveh and foretells its destruction. I can imagine the vengeful glint in his eyes as he does so!

Jonah then retires to await Nineveh's destruction. But to his anger and frustration the Ninevites take his threats seriously. The king orders all, including the animals, to fast and put on sackcloth and ashes. All must beg the God of the Jews to spare them. As Jonah eagerly awaits the destruction of Nineveh he complains to God about the heat. So, the Lord had pity on him and caused a plant to grow and shelter him. Since Jonah had taken God's kindness for granted, He caused a worm to destroy the plant. When that infuriated Jonah the Lord pointed out that He had as much right to show mercy to the pagans as the Jews. God had used Jonah to lead the Ninevites to repent so that He could save them, instead of destroying them. Like Jonah, we often

This wonderful little book is a powerful exhortation for us to put aside hostilities and vengeful thoughts of retaliation. Instead of limiting our horizons we must embrace God's universal mercy. Heeding the words of Jesus, we must be as 'Compassionate as our Heavenly Father is compassionate.' That's the only way to be at peace with God, each and ourselves. It offers hope to all who are prepared to repent and forgive. Otherwise we will end up, turned in on ourselves, embittered, and miserable as Jonah.

During my research into the Book of Jonah I discovered that this book is read during the Jewish feast of YOM KIPPOR in which the Jews repent for their sins and seek God's mercy. The choice of this book is surprising even for Jews, since it's the pagan Ninevite's who repent and seek God's mercy, not Jonah. That's to encourage Jews and non-Jews of every generation to be sufficiently open-minded to learn from the pagan Ninevites in being sorry for our sins and in seeking God's forgiveness.

Isidore O.P

A friend shrewdly pointed out that the Vatican Council expressed the openness of the Bk. Of Jonah, in the Decrees on the Church in the Modern world and especially 'Nostra Aetate.'



JONAH, THE UNWILLING PROPHET –SHORT VERSION

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