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A PATRISTIC COMMENTARY

JONAH
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OUR NEW JONAH

To most, Jonah is but a prophet who ran away from the Lord. This is something nobody could ignore, but there is another side to this situation, which should not be ignored. He was the only prophet, at that time, whom the Lord sent to witness to a pagan country, Nineveh, capital of Assyria. Jonah realized through prophecy that the salvation of the Gentiles would come only as a result of Israel's refusing the faith, and he could not accept such a mission, so he ran away from the service, not out of hatred for the Gentiles but out of fear for his own. He might have realized through prophecy's shadow what St. Paul proclaimed about Israel: "...through their fall...salvation has come to the Gentiles... their fall is riches for the world" Rom. 11:11-12.

Jonah saw Israel as a gourd which shaded him for a while with the law and prophecies, but it withered with the worm of ungratefulness, lack of faith, and treason to the Savior, the Messiah, and that, "...displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry" [4:1]. His love for Israel, which protected him, was the reason for his running away from serving the Gentiles and the secret of his great sorrow. Amazingly, God who examines the hearts, transformed this escape - despite what it holds of disobedience - to a Divine order, into a mission and salvation for a different group of Gentiles, i.e. the sailors and the captain who "feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" [1: 16]; after Jonah was thrown in the water and was swallowed by the whale. This became a symbolic act for the salvation of the Gentiles after Christ, the new Jonah, was laid in the tomb.

May the Holy Spirit of our God carry us to our true Jonah so that we may see Him give Himself for us, to be thrown in the tempestuous sea of our lives, taking away its troubles, carrying us with Him, not in the whale, but in His holy tomb to be buried with Him every day and also to rise with Him partaking in His Divine glory.

JONAH

JONAH

1. The word “Jonah” in Hebrew means “dove” and in St. Jerome’s opinion, it also means “suffering.” Therefore, this Book is considered the one in which the Holy Spirit appears in the shape of a Dove (the Baptism of Christ), through the suffering Messiah, Who entered into the tomb as in the whale’s belly and arose to raise us with Him, granting us His Holy Spirit to work within us. St. Jerome says: [Jonah depicts the Resurrection of our Lord by passing three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, to grant us the initial zeal to achieve the descent of the Holy Spirit within us.]

2. Jonah, the son of Amittai, prophesied during the days of Jeroboam II, king of Samaria (2 Kings 14:25). He lived in GathHepher of Nazareth. He had prophesied that God would restore the boundaries of Samaria from the “...entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Araba and to the Bay of Akabah in the South.” His prophecy for Israel was to save her from the oppression of Aram (Syria).

3. He was a prophet in Israel (the Northern Kingdom) around the year 825-784 BC. He was a contemporary of the prophet Amos. He wrote his prophecy after his return from Nineveh.

4. It was known in the Jewish tradition that Jonah was the son of the widow, whom Elijah the prophet rose from the dead at Zarephath of Sidon (1 Kings 17:10-24). Some think that this is a valid tradition, because it is only fitting that such a prophet who loved Israel be sent to Gentile Nineveh to witness to them to repent, being himself a Gentile on his mother ‘s side¹.

NINEVEH

The capital of the Assyrian Empire, which was renovated by King Sennacherib to become his capital city (2 Kings 19:36).

To some, the present city of Mosul is situated on half of old Nineveh² and most scholars say that Nineveh was built on the east bank of the River Tigris at the mouth of Rafeed, 27 miles away from where Tigris and Zab meet³. The Hebrews called the whole area around the meeting of Tigris and Zab “Nineveh” (Gen.10: 1 1-12; Jon 1:2; 3:3).

The people of Nineveh, who were originally Babylonians (Gen. 10:11), worshiped the goddess Ashtaroth. The city was known for its wealth, greatness and beauty and the Assyrian kings used to take their spoils of war there and considered the rest of the world enslaved to it.

The prophet Nahum called Nineveh ‘the city of destruction’ filled with lies and abduction, moreover the prophet Zephaniah foretold of its destruction. Its kings were known for their great cruelty, their pastime was to cut off the noses of their captives of war, to drain their eyes and cut off their hands and ears; then display them to be ridiculed by the people.

During the seventh century B, the Empire of Assyria started to collapse and disintegrate and in the year 625 B Nabopolassar, the Babylonian, decided to be independent of Nineveh. In the year 612 B he allied with his neighbors, the people of Madai, stormed Nineveh and destroyed it. At that time it was easy because the Tigris had flooded the city and the water covered its streets and squares, consequently the city became a legend.

NINEVEH AND THE CHURCH OF THE GENTILES

Two Books in the Old Testament are addressed to the Gentiles. The Book of Obadiah concerns the people of Edom where the symbolic announcement of the destruction of the old bloody person (Edomites) together with raising of the new spiritual man (Zion) is shown. The Book of Jonah is about the people of Nineveh and symbolically presents the acceptance of the Gentiles for the faith and their announcing their repentance and return to God.

While the Jews were resisting the prophets and persecuting them, the people of Nineveh accepted the preaching of Jonah and announced their true repentance. St. Jerome saw this as a symbol for the rejection of Christ by the Jews, our Lord about Whom their prophets had prophesied, while the Gentiles accepted the faith just by hearing about Him. Christ Himself said, ‘The men of Nineveh will rise in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here’ (Matt. 12:41).

St. Jerome says: [the Jews became under the judgment while the world accepted faith. Nineveh practiced repentance while Israel perished in its lack of appreciation and withered away. They have the books but we have the Lord of the books; they have the prophets but we have the thought of the prophets. The letter kills them but we are vivified by the Spirit; theirs is the shackled Barabas and ours is the free Christ, the Son of God].

This reasoning was not only evident in Nineveh’s repentance but also in the faith of the mariners and their captain who feared God, offered sacrifices and made vows, i.e. the acceptance of the Lord by the Gentiles and their worshiping and serving Him.

CHARACTERISTICS

This book reveals the different facets of God’s love for humanity. He announces that He is the God of all; He cares for both Jews and Gentiles and wishes for the salvation of all. In love He reveals the weakness of His prophet, not to slander him but to give hope to any weak soul; and in His love He brings out the good sides even of the Gentiles. He sheds light on the wisdom and gentleness of the captain and the sailors that they deserved to enjoy faith. God in His love uses even inanimate creatures to fulfill His aim concerning man:

- He sent the strong winds.
- He prepared the whale to swallow Jonah.
- He sent a worm to eat the gourd and damage it.
- He sent hot strong easterly winds to beat on Jonah’s head.

These might all seem tough measures but they brought about the reconciliation of God with people and announced His love for them.

THE BOOK OF JONAH A CRITICAL APPROACH

1- AUTHORSHIP

In his book ‘The Old Testament Introduction,’ Raven summarizes the most important objections to the fact that Jonah is the author of this Book⁴.

First: Nothing in the Book says that Jonah wrote it. The introduction is very similar to many other Books like Hosea, Joel, Micha, Zephaniah, Haggai and Zechariah.

Second: The Book contained Aramaic words and expressions that were used in a more recent era than Jonah’s; e.g. “God of Heaven” [1:9] an expression which was used by Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel and not by people before captivity.

The response to that is that the usage of expressions after captivity only and not in books written before captivity does not necessarily mean that they were not known. As for the expression “God of Heaven” in particular, it did not appear in any of the Books before captivity except in Jonah, because the conversation was aimed at the pagan people such as the sailors and the king of Nineveh [3:7] and it was a suitable phrase to use with them. Using the Aramaic words there does not mean that they were not used earlier. It is very probable that they were quoted from the old Hebrew language even though they were not used in the Holy Writings before captivity.

Third: Some see that the writer was from a later era backing that by the fact that he did not know the king’s name.

The response to that is that even though the prophecy touches the lives of the people of Nineveh, it really aimed to show Israel the love of God for the Gentiles, His longing for their repentance and salvation, so there was no need to mention the king’s name.

Fourth: Jonah’s poetic prayer (Ch.2) was influenced by the Psalms, i.e., written after the Psalms, e.g.:

Verse 3 from Psalm 42:7;

Verse 5 from Psalm 69:10;

Verse 9 from Psalm 50:14.

The response to that according to Raven is that this was not a proof that they were written later because by the same token it could be said that the Psalms were influenced by Jonah’s prayer.

2-A SYMBOLIC BOOK

Some critics allege that this book presents mere symbolism and has no reality in it. To them, Jonah represents the insubordinate Israel and the whale that swallowed him is Babylon, which enslaved Israel. The belly of the whale is captivity and whatever salvation followed that symbolizes the redeeming work of God and freeing the people from captivity. They back their views with the following data:

- a. The Book came among the prophetic and not the historic Books.
- b. The repentance of the people of Nineveh was surprisingly fast and collective and the king’s decision was unexpected and that defies reality.
- c. It is incomprehensible that a person could survive in a whale’s belly for three days and three nights, offer a prayer of thanksgiving inside the whale, and come out alive.
- d. The events in this Book represented symbolic thinking announced in other Books: Nebuchadnezzar was likened to a dragon who swallows us: “Nebuchadnezzar the king of

Babylon has devoured me, he has crushed me; he has made me an empty vessel, he has swallowed me up like a monster; he has filled his stomach with my delicacies, he has spit me out... I will punish Bel in Babylon, and I will bring out of his mouth what he has swallowed; and the nations shall not stream to him any more. Yes, the wall of Babylon shall fall. My people, go out of the midst of her! And let everyone deliver himself from the fierce anger of the Lord” (Jer. 51:34, 44, 45). Besides the time of captivity was represented by three days: “After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight.” (Hops 6:2).

Scholars respond to the aforementioned objections, emphasizing that this Book, filled with symbolism as it is, tells a true life story and they back their view as follows:

a. The falling of the Book among the prophetic Books rather than the historic ones does not negate the historical reality of the Book. It was placed there because the writer was a prophet and because the incident had its prophetic side. Jonah’s praise also proved to be a beautiful prophetic verse, which announced the redeeming work of our Lord God.

b. The objection to the unexpected rapid repentance of the king and his people is unacceptable. It is rather a feeble protest. The appearance of an alien prophet who had been thrown out by a whale after spending three days in his belly “fired up” the whole town and it was frightening to all. Jesus Christ spoke of the people of Nineveh, that their repentance would condemn the people of Israel, and He announced that the children of that age were wiser than the children of the Kingdom.

c. The symbols in Jeremiah and Hosea, which resemble the story of Jonah, i.e., likening the king of Babylon to a dragon and the three days of captivity, did not necessarily mean that the Book of Jonah is mere symbolism. It is rather more favorable to say that the two prophets obtained symbolism backing to this Book.

d. As to the feasibility of the survival of a person inside the belly of a whale for three days and his offering thanks in there, that was, also objected to during the time of St. Jerome thus he defends that by saying, [Are these people believers or unbelievers? If they have the faith then they should believe what is told to them, how was it feasible for three young men to be thrown in the fire and the fire did not touch their clothes or make them smell of smoke? (Jer. 3:29) How did the waters separate and the sea become dry land and it firmed a wall on each side so that the people would cross? (Exod. 14:22-29). How could a hungry lion refrain from touching his victim (Daniel) who was thrown with him in his den?]

These are all faith-influenced arguments: scientifically, Dr. Youssef Riad, a professor in the Faculty of Science, Alexandria University, did an interesting research in which he clarified the possibility of this happening⁵. Dr. Riad said that the Hebrew word ‘Dog’ which was translated “whale” recurred in the Old Testament 119 times and each time it was translated “fish,” and the Greek word in the New Testament “Kitos” means a monster from the deep” So both Testaments agree that it was a huge fish or a sea monster. He gave several factual examples of people and animals that had been swallowed by different species of fish, especially the “Rh inodon typicus” without having their skeletons broken or greatly injured. For example, a marine in the British fleet fell into the sea while he was fishing and a fish of this species swallowed him and swam away. When the surrounding ships found it 48 hours later, they shot it with a canon and pulled it in order to take the soldier’s body out for burial. To their amazement they found him unconscious and they saved him and called him “Jonah of the 20th century’.

e. The scholars did not stop at just responding to the objections; they also came up with the following seasonings:

First: Our Lord Jesus Christ referred to the story of Jonah as a reality and He also

mentioned the repentance of the people of Nineveh (Matt. 12:39-40; Luke 11:29-30) but none of the Jews objected and said that it was a symbolic story.

Second: The tone of the Book is a simple, historic one and is not a symbolic poetic Book. It only includes one chapter, which is poetic, which tells of Jonah's prayer in the belly of the whale. Besides the book mentions Jonah and his father as two real persons whose place of birth was well known (2 Kings 14:25) also mentions well-known places such as Joppa [Yafaj], Tarshish and Nineveh; these names are not symbolic.

Third: If the Book of Jonah was just a parable and not a true story written by someone other than Jonah, it would not have strongly criticized the prophet's way of thinking. The Book is out to show the writer as a repentant prophet who personally and with divine inspiration writes his confession, divulging his deepest thoughts as though, with St. Peter, he offers tears of repentance and with St. Mark, the Evangelist, lists his own faults more than the other Evangelists did. At the same time he sheds light on the goodness of the Gentile sailors and an amazing readiness in the pagan king and all his people to accept the overwhelming love of God to all humanity. For, while the Gentile sailors appear as men of prayers (1:5) crying out to their gods before putting into practice their nautical experience, e.g., throwing the baggage overboard, Jonah showed himself as the only person on board who was fast asleep and God aroused him through the words of the Gentiles.

This broad evangelical way of thinking which opened the doors of hope before the Gentiles and treated matters objectively could not have been possible for a Jewish writer to accept or to portray so candidly and clearly. It must have been someone like Jonah who had encountered death in the whale's belly and was in touch with God who raises the dead regardless of their nationality.

Fourth: Historically, Winckler compared the religious reformations of Adadnirari 111(812-783 B.C.) to those of Amnphis IV of Egypt and concluded that the former was the king whom Jonah found in Nineveh when he got there and from whom he found a royal readiness to accept his teachings⁶.

ITS STRUCTURE

- 1- Jonah in the raging sea. Chapter 1
- 2- Jonah in the belly of the whale. Chapter 2.
- 3- Jonah in Nineveh. Chapter 3.
- 4- Jonah in the east of the city. Chapter 4.

CHAPTER ONE

JONAH IN THE RAGING SEA

On the one hand Jonah fled from the service to Joppa to sail to Tarshish in insubordination to God, a fact that enraged the sea with a strong tempest, which did not subside until Jonah was thrown overboard, on the other hand Jonah represents the Lord Jesus, the bearer of our sins, who threw Himself in the raging sea of our lives to grant us amazing peace through the sacrifice of reconciliation.

1- Jonah's calling.	1-2
2- His fleeing to Tarshish	3
3- Jonah and the strong gales.	4-7
4- Jonah and the sailors.	8-12
5- Jonah in the whale's belly.	13-17

1- JONAH'S CALLING

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me” [1,2].

In the Septuagint it is said “the cry of its wickedness come up to me.”

It was a unique calling. For the first time a prophet was called to a pagan nation, not to condemn it but to call it to repentance so that the anger of God would not descend upon it. Any prophet could not accept such a mission, not out of hatred of the Gentiles, but out of love for his own people. As aforementioned the salvation of the Gentiles is realized through the falling of the Jews, and the faith of the world through the ungratefulness of the Jews (Rom. 11:11). However, although Jonah, with his human level of thinking, could not accept the calling and he fled, yet God, who knows the purity of Jonah's heart, used his fleeing to bring about his Divine goals for the Gentiles.

The Septuagint version “the cry of their wickedness has come up before me,” so if a sacred life is shown in its completeness in the Lord Jesus who, “...will not cry out, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets” (Matt. 12:19) on the contrary an evil life which cries out in God's ears and which produces noise which is not acceptable in heaven, shows the loss of inner peace. Evil Cain murdered his brother, Abel, and he kept quiet about it, but the fingerprints of his evil cried out through his brother's flowing blood. The Lord said to Cain, “...the voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10). It was also said of the evils of Sodom and Gomorrah: “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great...” (Gen 18:20).

Jonah (lit. = dove) was called to be a missionary in the great city Nineveh whose cry of evil rose up to heaven, as though God wanted to destroy the cries of evil with the meekness of a dove, treat the inflamed wounds with soft oil and put out the fire with water.

If the world had become a noise and bitter cries of oppression then it is in need of the Church or the true believer who has “dove's eyes” (Song of Songs 1:15; 4:1), the eyes of Christ the Lord who said, “Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29). To have

the eyes of the Holy Spirit, the true dove, so that with meekness we inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5) for Christ, the Lord, so that his kingdom would become filled with joy and peace.

If the evildoers are earthly not heavenly because of their love for earthly things, and because of their obsession with fleeting pleasures, we then carry within us the genuine Jonah, to win them over with the meekness of His Holy Spirit and change them from earthly to heavenly beings. St. John Climacos says, [The Lord finds contentment in meek hearts while the disturbed spirit is the throne of the devil. The meek shall inherit the earth, or as a matter of fact, shall manipulate it, while the evildoers shall be thrown out from their land⁷.]

If the great city Nineveh represents the body whose evil cries of lust rise up before the Lord, then no one else would be able to relieve the body of these cries but our True Jonah who fills the spirit and sanctifies the body also.

2- JONAH'S ESCAPE TO TARSHISH

“But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” [3].

Why did Jonah want to “Flee ... from the presence of the Lord” instead of going to Nineveh?

1. St. Jerome notes that Jonah could not get himself to go to Nineveh and bring salvation to them at the expense of his people Israel; so he disobeyed God not out of hatred in his heart but rather out of jealousy for his people, as though he was emulating Moses, the zealous prophet, when he said, “...if you will forgive their sin..., but if not, I pray, blot me out of your book which you have written” (Exod. 32:31-32). Moses resisted the lord but he earned God’s mercy for his people and God did not erase his name from his book. In the same spirit, St. Paul, the Apostle, said, “For I could wish that I myself accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites? (Rom. 9:3-4). He wished that he would deprive himself so that his brethren would live in Christ, counting his death a gain. For this love, he did not die but was rewarded the life he wished for his people. In the same manner, Jonah feared that his preaching the Assyrians, the enemies of Israel, would be the cause of the damnation of Israel so he fled to Tarshish, i.e., in the opposite direction. Some say that Tarshish is Tartessus, in south Spain near Gibraltar⁸, or Carthage in north West Africa.

2. St. Jerome notes that Tarshish literally means sea or a meditation on joy; and Joppa⁹ in Canaanite language literally means “beauty.” Jonah, instead of conforming with God’s instructions to bring salvation to Nineveh, preferred to descend to the beauty of his human thinking and humane wisdom, i.e. the sea of this world or happy meditations without a real struggle and actually carrying the Cross. This behavior represents that of a person who would rather follow his own instincts rather than follow the difficult commandment of God.

3. The prophet Jonah, who knew that God is...”the God of heaven, who made the dry land...” [9] And he witnessed to that, by depending on his human thinking outside the faith resorted to fleeing from God. St John Chrysostom says, [It is true that he (Jonah) fled from the

seashore but he did not escape God's wrath. He escaped from land to bring on himself the tempest at sea¹⁰.] He should have fled to God rather than away from God, because in Him alone does the believer find peace and safety.

3- JONAH AND THE GREAT TEMPEST

Jonah fled away to the sea from the Maker of the sea Himself, hence God recalled him in a language that is more appropriate to a fugitive and that is the language of consecutive hardships:

“But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up” [4]. God then talked to him through strong winds, a great tempest and a ship off balance, events which suited Jonah and which unveiled what was within him of disobedient strong winds, a great tempest of inner unrest and the off balance vessel of his heart.

St. Jerome says, [Jonah's fleeing represents the status of man in general, because in his disdain to obey the commandment of the Lord, he fled from His presence and gave himself to the world whose tempestuous nature caused his drowning. Then he was obliged to meditate on God and returned to the one he fled from. The ship was in danger and the waves were high because of the gale, because when God is angry nothing is safe.]

The aliens heard God's voice despite the fact that they did not know Him, while Jonah's ears were oblivious to it. “Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep” [4,5]. The sailors were pagans, and their knowledge of God was distorted, yet when God spoke in a language of crisis and hardships, they were filled with fear and did nothing before each of them cried to his god, so God was first and foremost for them despite their ignorance of Him.

St. Jerome says: [they thought that the ship with its usual cargo is heavy, not realizing that the weight was because of the fugitive prophet. The mariners were filled with fear and each prayed to his god because they did not know the truth but they were not ignorant of Divine Providence. Through their false beliefs, they realized something and understood some spiritual depth, but with Israel neither abundance nor pain could have led them to knowing God. Thus Joshua often wept for the people but the people's eyes were dry.]

The pagans were crying to their gods and throwing baggage overboard, everyone doing his best and praying; yet Jonah, who realized that he was the cause for this disturbance went down into the ship to go into deep slumber as though he did not want to face the waves of God's anger, or like someone who took a sedative to escape his painful reality.

Although Jonah's sleep represents some kind of laxity, yet he gives us a glimpse of a good prophetic facet, for he represented a humanity, which finds comfort in God in the midst of the turbulent waves of this world. When Herod planned to put St. Peter to death, St. Peter “was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison” Acts 12:6. On the other hand, Jonah represented our Lord Jesus Who fell asleep on the Cross as in the ship to raise the new Eve from His wounded side, to enjoy a real peace in Him. He also fell asleep on the Cross-to be buried in the belly of the whale, to rise again, granting us the might of resurrection. St. Jerome says, [While others were in danger, he

slept at peace and arose. At His request and by the mystery of His suffering, salvation was realized to those who aroused Him¹¹.]

The sailors and their captain acted very wisely in meekness and kindness. It is said, “So the captain came to him, and said to him, What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish. And they said to one another, “Come let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah” [6-7].

The captain showed meekness in his conversation with Jonah who was fast asleep at a time when everybody else was crying, praying and throwing baggage overboard. He talked to him quietly without hurting his feelings, urged him kindly to pray, a feature not often found in the faithful themselves and sometimes not either in the leaders, because they lose their own peace when they reprimand, and lose their calmness when they try to rectify others.

God Who had talked to the prophet either through a vision or a declaration to work in Nineveh, came back to talk to him through the turbulent nature moreover when he turned a deaf ear God talked to him through the pagans telling him. “What do you mean, our God will consider us, so that we may not perish [6]; as though He is telling him, why are you asleep in your heart, the God you are escaping from, He Himself can save us the Gentiles from destruction. If you really love your people and your nation, hear our pleading and do not undermine our faith because if we do not yet know the God you worship, with faith we will accept Him and we will not perish!

Strangely enough, the sailors cast the lot and it fell on Jonah thus they knew that he was the reason for God’s anger...St. Jerome says that if God led them through the lot, He really talked to them through their thoughts, so this does not condone using lottery or lots. God guided Balaam by means of a donkey (Num. 22:28) to show him that the mute animal comprehended that which the humans in their evil did not. In the same manner, God spoke to the Wisemen through the star, and He allowed Caiaphas to prophesy unknowingly when he said that one has to die for all the people. At any rate, if Jonah in his love for his people undermined the salvation of the Gentiles, God showed him through the lot that He does not disdain Gentiles but rather talks to them in their own language. He reveals to them the truth even through their practices, the lot conveyed to hidden Divine reproach to Jonah who thought lightly of the salvation of the Gentiles.

4- JONAH AND THE SAILORS

Then they said to him, Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your country? And of what people are you? And he said to them. I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” [8-9].

In the midst of the strong currents, the gales and the immediate danger, one would have expected the sailors to lose their peace and tranquility, but they proved that they were wise; for when they realized that there was a secret in Jonah’s life they started to quiz him about it, seeking the actual truth. Their questions were a mild reprimand used by God to straighten Jonah’s ways, for while they were asking him, Jonah should have been reviewing his deeds. St.

Jerome says, [the goal of casting lots was to pressure him into a voluntary confession of the reason of this gale and God's anger, i.e., to confess of his disobedience and fleeing from God, the Maker of the sea and land.

The questions were fruitful, for he said: "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, Who made the sea and the dry land" [9]. And as St. Jerome says: [He did not say I am a Hebrew, referring to his origin from one of the tribes of Israel, but meaning "I am a traveler like my father Abraham," as though he said, "I am weak and a nomad like the rest of my fathers," and as it is said in the Psalm: "When they went from one nation to another, From one kingdom to another people... and I fear God of heaven and not the gods whom you seek, who cannot grant salvation, I implore God of heaven, Maker of sea and land, the sea I fled to and the land I fled from!"]

Jonah confessed his sin and thus the sailors came to know rightfully the Awesome God, for it was said, "Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them" [10]. They realized that he was a blessed man running away from a Holy God, so they questioned him without judging him but as St. Jerome said, to understand the reason for his action.

After enjoying their knowledge of God they asked Jonah:

"What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?. For the sea was growing more tempestuous." [11].

St. Jerome says, [As though they were saying that Jonah told them that he caused the wind, the waves and the turbulence at sea, i.e., he told them of the cause and they expected him to tell them of the cure too. "The sea is rising against us and we know that we are the target of anger because we took you in, we erred because we hosted you, so what should we do to avert God's anger against us? What should we do with you? Do we kill you? But you are a believer. Do we keep you? But you are a defector from God! We can do nothing but to obey your orders. Command the sea to calmness because its turbulence testifies to God's anger... we cannot put things off on the face of the Maker's vengeance!"]

And Jonah said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me" [12].

Jonah gave them the solution, which was to throw him into the raging sea. The gale would calm down because originally that gale was the result of his disobedience, and it would not calm down unless he was thrown in repentance. On the other hand Jonah was a representative of Christ, bearer of the sins of the world. It was necessary for Christ to be thrown on the Cross and laid in the tomb so that the believers in Him would enjoy the reconciliation with the Father and enter into His eternal peace.

St. John Chrysostom says, [Jonah expected to run away by means of the vessel, but behold, the vessel was his tethers [12].] He thought that he could flee from the Lord of the sea by means of the ship, and he was caught in the midst of the raging water inside the ship to be

surrounded with oppression and to lead him to repentance. God used the very means, which Jonah thought were his escape from God to hold him and bring him back to God. St. John Chrysostom put it beautifully when he said: [There was no need for many days or continuous advice but simply that all things should lead him to repentance (i.e., God used all means for his salvation). God did not lead him directly from the ship to the city but the sailors handed him to the sea, from the sea to the whale, from the whale to God and from God to the people of Nineveh, and thus was the errant guided to know that there was no escaping from the Hand of God¹³.]

St. Jerome comments on Jonah's words to the sailors, saying: [This gale is searching for me, threaten you with drowning so that you would apprehend me and be saved through my death. I truly believe that this gale is on my account, and the waves command you to throw me in the sea so that you would find calmness. We should note here that the fugitive does not keep his problem as a secret or denies it after he confesses his fleeing from God, but wholeheartedly accepts the punishment. He wants to die so that he would not cause anyone's destruction].

Another of St. Jerome's beautiful comments on Jonah's words as a prophecy of the works of Jesus Christ, our true Jonah, Who accepted death to save the whole nation, says; [Our Jonah, says: Truly I know that I am the reason for this gale and when the winds saw that I was going to sea with you to Tarshish (lit, means to 'joyous meditation'), leading you to glory, so that where I am you would be also with the Father, and this causes anger. The world cries and nature is in turmoil. Death wants to swallow me and kill you at the same time, not knowing that I am only bait, for with my death it dies! Take me, then, and throw me in the sea].

5- JONAH IN THE WHALE'S BELLY

"Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, "We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased You" [13-14].

This Book projected, in simple terms, the good in those Gentiles. They did not start by throwing their luggage overboard or by putting into practice their nautical experience except after everyone cried to his god; so they put their gods ahead of their nautical experience, something which a lot of believers neglect to do. Again, when the lot fell on Jonah, they did not hurt his feelings or insult him despite the losses they suffered on his account. Even when he confessed and advised them to throw him in the sea, they tried to save him in any possible way. However when they utterly failed to do so, and realized that it was the will of God to throw him overboard, they were in awe and fear of God's anger, and asked Him not to allow them to perish for the life of that man. Were not these actions filled with love, wisdom and gentleness enough to needle the fugitive Jonah, whom God called for the salvation of the Gentiles in Nineveh? God gave him a sample of the Gentiles who surpassed the believers themselves. Should the Gentiles be compared to the Jews who had the law and the prophets and who saw the wonderful works of Christ and the witness of heaven, earth, sea and all creation even the Gentile Pilate who washed his hands before them and yet they cried out saying: "His blood is on us and on our children", would they not surpass them?

St. Jerome comments on the behavior of the sailors, saying:

[They wanted to pull the oars and beat nature so that they would not expose God's prophet... they thought they could save the ship from danger and they did not take into consideration that Jonah had to suffer.)

[Great is the faith of the sailors, they themselves were in danger. yet they were praying for someone else's life. They knew perfectly well that a spiritual death is by far worse than natural death for they said, "Do not charge us with innocent blood." They made God their witness so that He would not charge them for what was beyond them, as if they were telling God: "We do not want to kill Your prophet, but he announced Your anger and the gale emphasized Your will, O Lord, which we will undertake."]

[While the Gentiles did not desire Christ's death, confirming it was innocent blood (Matt. 17:25) the Jews said. 'His blood be on us and on our children,' thus when they lift their hands up to heaven their requests will not be answered because their hands are covered with blood.]

"So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging" [15].

St. Jerome says: [It was not said that they "caught him" or "pounced on him" but "picked him up" as though in respect and reverence, and threw him in the sea, giving himself into their hands without resistance, then the sea ceased from its raging because it found what it was looking for. When we follow a mirage, we pursue it with all our might and once we catch up with the prize we stop. Thus was the sea raging without Jonah, so when its depth received him whom it yearned for, it rejoiced, feasted and calmed down in happiness].

St. John Chrysostom sees in throwing Jonah overboard a symbolism of throwing out sin from the ship of our life so that we retrieve the true peace, which was taken away from us by our sins. He says: [The city was disturbed because of the sins of the people of Nineveh, and the ship was disturbed because of the disobedience of the prophet; so when the sailors threw Jonah to the depths, the ship was secured. Let us also throw away our sins so that our city would be in perfect peace¹⁴.]

St. Jerome sees that throwing Jonah overboard represents the suffering of the Lord Jesus, which snatched away the raging from our sea, and saved the ship from danger. Through the suffering of the Lord Jesus, the world was filled with amazing inner peace.

"Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" [16].

When Jonah was thrown into the sea, i.e., Christ suffered unto death, He saved us from old idol worship, granting us His great fear, and offering His unique redeeming sacrifice and fulfilling our vows to God, i.e., completely dedicate our lives to Him.

St. Jerome says: [When Jonah, the fugitive, died in the sea, salvation came to the ship, which was rocked by the winds, and the idol worshipers were saved.] He also says: [Before the Lord's suffering, they prayed to their gods out of fear (1:10), but later after (His) suffering they feared Him, i.e., worshiped and glorified Him... They feared Him greatly with all their soul, all their heart and all their thoughts (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37), consequently they offered a sacrifice,

that could not have been actually done, because there were no sacrifices at sea; but the sacrifice to the Lord is an honest spirit. As it is written: “Offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High” Ps 50:14.

Thus, by throwing Jonah in the sea or by the suffering of the Lord, the spirit of Divine fear descended on us thus we became eligible to offer a holy sacrifice and pay our vows to Him.

“Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” [17].

Events did not just happen without Divine providence; for God sent strong winds which caused great gales announcing God’s anger against disobedience. He sent a big fish by the ship to swallow Jonah and thus supply him with a safe sleeping place rather than death, and to show him God’s care for him. St. Jerome says: [The Lord showed His anger when Jonah was in the ship, and showed His joy when he entered unto death], explaining that there he represented Christ the Lord Who trampled death by His death. Truly Jonah appeared as a victim of death who was swallowed by Hades, that could not stomach him for more than three days and three nights, but spat him out from its depth so that the prophet would say, “O death, I will be your plagues! O grave, I will be your destruction” Hosea 13:14.

Christ emphasized that what happened to Jonah inside the whale was a symbol of what happened to Him: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly in the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” Matt. 12:40.

How is the time of burial of the Lord Jesus calculated?

First: St. Jerome says that the Jews consider a part of the day as a whole day and thus the repose of Christ is calculated from Friday to Sunday despite the fact that He died on the Cross on Friday at the end of the day and arose at dawn on Sunday. St. John Chrysostom says that if the Lord had waited till the end of the day on Sunday to rise from the dead, the soldiers would have been off duty by then and the Jews would have believed that the soldiers left their posts; but He arose while they were guarding the tomb.

Second: St. Jerome also presents another argument, which was supported by some, that the darkness, which came over the land when Christ was on the Cross, was a different, unique kind of night.

Third: Others consider the time of burial started when the Lord gave His Body to His disciples at the Last Supper, as though He was buried inside human earth in order to raise it up with Him; a heaven for Himself with His resurrection on the dawn of Sunday.

At any rate, the Lord was buried for three days and rose again. This is the reality which the disciples witnessed and which God validated with many evidences, so that we may live it as the mystery of our daily resurrection and our victory over death and Hades.

Jonah was used as a living proof of the resurrection of the body at the end of time by his

encountering death and emerging from it¹⁵.

CHAPTER TWO

JONAH INSIDE THE WHALE

Inside the whale, Jonah entered into death to discover the mystery of Christ's resurrection which is victory over death, and he gave us the most beautiful song of praise which expressed Christ's redeeming work during the moments of His death on the Cross and His burial. Thus the Church sings that hymn at the beginning of the 12th hour of Good Friday following the chanting of Jeremiah's Lamentations. So if the Lamentations express what bitterness our sins have done to the Lord, then Jonah's hymn lifts up the partition to reveal God's victory over Hades and His redeeming deed, which lifts the believers to the Holies in an unspeakable glorious joy.

- 1 - Jonah's prayer from the fish's belly. I
- 2 - Between Hades and Heaven. 2-7
- 3 - Jonah, the Psalmist. 8-9
- 4 - The living Jonah. 10

1- JONAH'S PRAYER FROM THE FISH'S BELLY

Who can express the hardship, which Jonah experienced? In the belly of the whale Jonah was enclosed as in a tomb; his egotistic thoughts, his might and his capabilities all died; he did not know what to do; he could not comprehend what could befall him. When the whale surfaced, Jonah could breathe in some fresh air and see a glimmer of light, then the whale would dive in and Jonah would find himself again in complete darkness; the whale would open its mouth and Jonah would be drowned in salty waters, then the whale would spit out the water and Jonah could breathe. Thus Jonah lived for a few days, and but for the grace of God and His care for him, every second of these days would resemble a heavy mountain that would break his spirit and he would have yearned for death.

At any rate, in his tribulation, Jonah became one with the buried Lord through symbol and shadow. He rose in heart and mind beyond the whale to higher places, to God, praying as though he were in the heavenly holies: "Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly" [1].

Previously he called the Lord "God of heaven" (1:9), but in oppression he called God "the Lord, his God" [1] thus the Lord is attributed to Jonah as his God. He is the Lord of the oppressed and the sufferers as though He leaves His heaven and descends to help Jonah in his oppression. In other words, He transforms Jonah's life to a heaven inhabited by the Lord His God. Our Lord, the Lord of Jonah is the Lord of every bitter spirit. St. John Chrysostom says: [We should not be obsessed with a certain place but we should think more of the Lord of the place. Jonah was in the whale's belly and God heard his prayer. Pray, wherever you are, pray, do not demand a place to pray in, because your spirit is a temple¹⁶.]

If the Church feels that a building is necessary as an icon of heaven, it is so that we carry heavenly trends in us, so we look up to internal spiritual building, and our eyes would be lifted up to the Holies which are implanted within us by the Holy Spirit, especially in times of

affliction and pain.

Affliction is Golgotha where we are crucified with our Lord Jesus, so that by Him we may attain His glory and be with Him and in Him in the bosom of the Heavenly Father in the Holy Spirit.

2- BETWEEN HADES AND HEAVEN

“I cried out the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice” [2].

When Jonah was thrown in the salty water, he entered the belly of the whale, not to meet death but to witness through the shadows of death the Lord Jesus Himself thrown to affliction with us and for us. Thus when He adjures with His blameless life, the Father answers Him and He lifts us up with Him above all affliction. He descended to our lowly stays, He Who is without sin, so that we become in Him a source of happiness to the Father; He hears us in our affliction and raises us to Him. St. Jerome says: [God descended, He was humbled for us so that we may ascend in safety and in confidence¹⁷.]

Jonah called on God in his affliction and was rewarded by an immediate response because he saw himself arising not only from the whale’s belly but from the depth of Hades with the Crucified Jesus Christ! At this point Jonah uses the past tense, “He answered me... You heard my voice” [2]. A manner of speaking which shows true enjoyment through symbolism and a confident manner, which has no doubt.

Jeremiah, the Prophet, experienced the same feelings and comprehended the same concepts when he was thrown in the den: “I called on Your name, O Lord, from the lowest pit. You have heard my voice: Do not hide Your ear from my sighing from my cry for help” Lam. 3:55-56.

“For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me” [3].

Jonah realized that it was really God Who threw him into the sea and not the sailors; but amazingly enough when he did descend to the depth, he did not find himself pressured under the water with all its perils, but rather he found himself surrounded by the holy river irrigating it and blessing it with a multitude of spiritual fruits. This about which the psalmist says: ‘There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God’ Ps.46: 4. However in the midst of the bitter hardship ‘in the multitude of my anxieties within me, Your comforts delight’ Ps. 94:19. Sweet river waters replace the bitter salty water, and instead of the weight of the water upon me I am surrounded with joy and happiness.

The “heart of the sea” to which Jonah was thrown, to its bitter depths, is but the depth of the bitter Cross in which Christ entered as a redeeming sacrifice for the whole world. Through it He erupts the sweet waters of Baptism, granting life, thus a river surrounded Him, i.e. surrounded His Church which is His Body, the river of Baptism, or the river Jordan. This scene enraptured the hearts of the prophets. Ezekiel says of the Church of the New Covenant, or the new Temple: ‘Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and there was water, flowing from under the right side of the temple, south of the altar... and it was a river that I could not

cross; for the water was too deep, water in which one must swim, a river that could not be crossed...when it reaches the sea, its waters are healed. And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live...along the bank of the river, on this side and that, will grow all kinds of trees used for food; their leaves will not wither, and their fruit will not fail. They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine” Ezek 47¹⁸.

Our sins cast Christ, out of His love for us, into the heart of the sea, to carry unto Himself, through the Cross, the Divine anger; exchanging the salty sea water for sweet river water. Thus granting us through the very same Cross, the flowing river of His Holy Spirit, which quenches the thirst in our souls, and makes it fruitful and grants it healing. Thus did the Cross depict two complete pictures: The one of the rage of God on sin which cost the Lord His life and that of God’s overwhelming love which ruptured fountains of abundant grace.

St. Jerome says: [The Lord, our Saviour, was depicted in the Psalm, “I sink in deep mire, there is no standing; I have come into deep waters where the floods overflow me” Ps. 69:3. Besides it was told of Him in another psalm: “But You have cast off and abhorred, You have been furious with Your anointed. You have renounced the covenant of Your servant; You have profaned his crown by casting it to the ground. You have broken down all his hedges...” Ps.89: 38-40. Despite Christ’s being in the salty water, being tempted in everything, yet it was not salty (bitter) for Him because He was surrounded by a river, as it was said, ‘There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God...’ Ps. 46:4.

St. Ambrose tells us about this river which surrounds us, seeing that it is the Holy Spirit who waters heavenly Jerusalem and who flowed over the Church with the Crucified Jesus Christ. [The Spirit is the abundant, great river, which is continuously flowing. Heavenly Jerusalem is not watered with an earthly river but rather with the Holy Spirit¹⁹]. Through the Cross we have been blessed with the river of the New Covenant instead of a well from the Old. St. Ambrose says: [The previous Covenant was a deep well from which water was drawn with great effort, it was not completely full; and then it was written: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets, I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” Matt. 5:17. However the New Covenant is not just a river, but, “...out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” John 7:38, rivers of knowledge, meditation and spirituality²⁰.]

Thus, when the Lord sits with us by the well as He did with the Samaritan woman at noon, i.e., at the moments of the Cross, He erupts in us His waters like living joyous rivers.

The Prophet Jonah continues his praise as though said by Christ, saying: ‘all Your billows and Your waves passed over me’ [3]. St. Jerome comments on this phrase, saying: [Let us look into how these billows and waves passed over the Savior..., because there is no one who could bear all these trials, but He Who was tried in all things... all the hardships and tribulations which disturbed human race and which broke up ships, passed over Him...He endured the tempest and all disturbances so that others would experience the calm.]

If the waves refer to God’s sentences, as St. Cyril of Alexandria says, then our Lord took over all the sentences that God passed on us upon Himself. All the sentences fell upon Him to be

executed in His Body, as the Psalmist said: “Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; all Your waves and billows have gone over me” Ps. 42:7. Thus the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to be paying all the debts like an exile from the eyes of the Father, while, in reality, He is the Intercessor Who lifts His people to the Heavenly Holies. Jonah then continues his soliloquy saying: “Then I said, “I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple” [4].

It is a vivid picture of the Cross: on the one hand, the Savior appears like as exile, crying: “My God, My God, why You forsaken Me?” Matt.27: 46 and on the other, He carries humanity in His Body so that it would be glorified with Him. As St. Jerome says:

[The Lord took your place as an outcast... so that He would lift humanity to be where He will be (John 17:2). He practices His work as the great High Priest, He enters the Heavenly Holy Temple carrying His Church to the very heavens, as the Apostle says: “For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the truth, but into heaven itself, to appear in the presence of God for us.” Heb. 9:24. So while He is as outcast because of us, He carries us within Him so that we may earn God’s favor and joy.

Jonah was not a priest who had access to the Holies, or a High Priest who could enjoy seeing the Holy of Holies once a year. However in the depth of the sea, as an outcast, he was deemed a symbol of the Lord Jesus Christ Who was an outcast and meanwhile entering His Heavenly Holies. As St. Jerome says [In the sea depths he beholds the Temple of the Lord, and in prophetic spirit, he found himself there meditating in other things.]

“The waters encompassed me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me,...yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God” [5-6].

The Lord Jesus descended into Hades and became like one engulfed in water even to the soul; but the waters could not swallow Him. On the contrary, He set free those who were swallowed and drowned by the waters. He descended to the depth to surface with those who had drowned; and as the Apostle says, “Now this, He ascended - what does it mean but that He also first descended in the lower parts of the earth? He Who descended is also the One Who ascended far above all the Heavens, that He may fill all things” Ephes. 4:9-10.

St. Augustine²¹ sees in the waters that engulfed the Lord Jesus to the soul, an expression of what happened at the Cross. Everybody rose against Christ like sea waves and in His humility He submitted willingly for our sake. He says, “I have come into deep waters where the floods overflow me” Ps. 69:2. He did not resist the strong words nor the harsh treatment, but in patience He dealt with it “and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the Cross” Phil. 2:8.

The Savior who walked on the sea (Matt. 14:26) lowered Himself into the water to be temporarily engulfed in it and surrounded by it; so that He would carry the believers on the water, with the Cross as their vessel, and takes them safely to heavenly Jerusalem.

Again he says: “When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple” [7]. Jonah lost all hope in salvation through human means because he became trapped in the whale’s belly. No salvation but by God, hence he says,

“I remembered the Lord” as though he sings with the Psalmist, “My father and my mother have forsaken me and the Lord has embraced me” Ps. 27:10. As St. Jerome paraphrases. it, [I found myself imprisoned inside the whale and all my hope was in the Lord.]

This expression corresponds with our suffering Jonah (Jesus) who cried in the flesh: “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death...O My Father, if it is possible, let the cup pass from Me” Matt. 26:38-39.

This hardship, which the Lord endured for our sake, was solely for Him to practice His priestly work through the sacrifice of atonement and ask the Father on our behalf, “and my prayer went up to You, into Your Holy Temple.” As St. Jerome says: [He is like a priest who begs for the liberation of His people in Him.]

3- JONAH, THE PSALMIST

“Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy. But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord.” [8-9].

There appeared at the foot of the Cross those who regarded falsehoods, those who followed the falsehoods of the Pharisees and thus deprived themselves from the Lord Himself, Who is their Grace. They denied Christ, their Savior, and became like a satanic song whose message is but lies and blasphemy. On the other hand, Jesus Christ who was persecuted gave Himself as a song of praise and a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Father.

If Jonah offered a sacrifice of praise inside the whale, it was but a symbol of Christ, the Lord, who found those around Him unite against Him. However, in love He paid his vow to the Father by paying His life for many, including those who persecuted Him.

Through Christ Jesus, the Victim, our lives are transformed into a harp in the hands of the Holy Spirit, to play a symphony of praise and thanksgiving to the Father, not merely by word but by all our actions. If Jonah became a hymnist in the belly of the whale, it was only to announce what Christ does in us through His suffering. He creates in us a grateful nature, which affects our whole being in place of ungratefulness, which mars our lives.

4- THE LIVING JONAH

‘So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah into dry land’ [10].

St. John Chrysostom sees that God taught Jonah several consecutive lessons about having pity on people. The whale had swallowed him, then threw him out without any harm, so should not he have compassion on his fellow humans even if they were Gentiles? [The waves welcomed him without suffocating him, and the whale caught him and he did not perish..., so it would have been only normal for him to be gentle and merciful, not to be more cruel than a wild animal, or the ignorant sailors or the strong waves²² .]

St. Jerome sees that the expression, “threw out” represents the victorious life emanating from a place of death. Thus it was impossible for the depth of Hades to hold down Our Jonah or for corruption to affect him. The Psalmist says: “For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor

will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption” Ps. 16:10.

He arose from the dead as a forerunner for us, i.e. to rise up with Him. St. Jerome says:
[He Who died to free the bonded of their shackles of death, is able to lead many to life.]

CHAPTER THREE

JONAH IN NINEVEH

Jonah, as though arising from the tomb, proceeded to the Gentile people of Nineveh, so that they could enjoy the work of God.

1. Jonah's calling to the service. 1-4
2. Nineveh's faith and repentance. 5-9
3. Nineveh enjoys God's mercy. 10

1- JONAH'S CALLING TO THE SERVICE

When Jonah was given a second chance to live, having once undergone death, God recalled him to service so that the Gentiles may enjoy life as well. Strangely enough, God did not reproach Jonah at all or hurt his feelings in any way for his running away from his first mission. The Bible says: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you. So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" [1-4].

He describes Nineveh as, "a great city, a three-day journey," literally it means that it was a vast city and a person can cover it in three days, or roam its streets for three days; spiritually, as the capital of Assyria, Nineveh delivered itself to the devil, worshipping idols, but God still looks out for it as His great city voluntarily usurped by the enemy. God does not disdain His creation, especially human beings even if they deviated from His way. He still anticipates their salvation and their return to Him as His great city inhabited by the Holy Trinity.

In our study of the Book of Joshua, we found that the number three represents faith in the Holy Trinity and the resurrection on the third day²³. The secret of the greatness of man lies in becoming a great city of God, or as the Bible calls him, the "City of Truth" Zech. 8:3, the kingdom of the Holy Trinity, which by his life witnesses for the resurrection of the Lord.

Jonah responded to the calling and entered the city, "the first day's walk" to call for repentance. This represents the appearance of One Hypostasis of the Holy Trinity: God the Word, who was incarnated and suffered, thus became one of us as if He was in our city, moreover we received the works of the Holy Trinity and attained salvation through Him.

Jonah preached that in forty days Nineveh would be overthrown; and in the Septuagint it is said that after three days the city of Nineveh would be overthrown. The figure forty represents our earthly life that is why the Lord Jesus fasted forty days so that we might fast all the days of our lives. Nineveh would be overthrown in 40 days; consequently heaven and earth vanish so that we may enjoy the new heaven and earth. Since the figure three represents the resurrection with the Lord Jesus, then it is imperative that the old Nineveh be destroyed so that the new one would rise in Him.

2- NINEVEH'S FAITH AND REPENTANCE

‘So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth; from the greatest to the least of them’ [5].

St. Jerome says, [Nineveh believed but Israel resisted, unbelieving; the uncircumcised believed, yet the people of circumcision continued in their disbelief.]

Nineveh's faith was accompanied by action. They showed a practical repentance whose tools were fasting and sackcloth; and as St. Jerome says: [Fasting and sackcloth are the weapons of faith, helper of sinners. Fasting first and then the sackcloth; the first represents the invisible and the latter the visible. One is always before the Lord; the other temporary for people's eyes]. It is appropriate that our repentance starts with unannounced fasting and private practical life, hence followed with visible works.

St. Jerome says: [Repentance links sackcloth with fasting, so that the empty stomach and mourning attire extensively to supplicate God in prayer.]

Unanimously, they truly repented before God; they all wore sackcloth ‘from the greatest to the least of them.’ They were led into that parade of repentance, the king and the royalty in advance; all participated in it, even the animals. This took place despite the fact that Jonah did not give them any glimmer of hope, nor did he talk to them about God's love and mercy, nor did he teach them anything about repentance. Hence Nineveh became a living, beautiful example of true repentance.

Who was that king who wore the sackcloth except the human will which bows down before God to announce its submission to Him, and its acceptance to become poor for His sake, Him Who was wealthy and impoverished Himself to make it prosperous. Repentance begins with inner change in a person's will, which is in effect our inner king or ruler. The king changed his royal garb for sackcloth and sat in ashes. Our human will should shed the self-made clothes and confess its nakedness and egotistical poverty, so that God would clothe it with His royal heavenly will and grant it the new Adam who takes after His image. God would raise the soul from the dump it is in, to sit among heavenly hosts that she may have a place in God's bosom. The nobles' repentance represents sanctifying our talents and abilities to work on behalf of the Kingdom of God. The animals represent the body with its capabilities, which formerly followed darkness in an animal-like manner. In other words, repentance affects a human being as a whole: his soul and body his will and power his feelings and his actions.

We should realize that what attracted God's heart towards them was not their fasting in itself, or the sackcloth, but the repentant heart aided by fasting and sackcloth. St. John Chrysostom says: [The people of Nineveh fasted and acquired God's love, while the Jews fasted and gained nothing, on the contrary they were blamed (Isa. 58:3,7; 1 Cor. 9:26). Thus tasting, for those who do not know how to fast, is dangerous. We should learn the rules of this exercise so that we do not run in vain or beat the air, or lest we, in our sadness, wrestle with shadows. Fasting is like medicine; it would prove useless if it were used carelessly as a result of the inexperience of its user²⁴ .]

What attracts our attention in Nineveh's repentance is the joyful hope. Jonah's words

were few and stern but Nineveh's people did not lose their hope in the merciful God. St. John Chrysostom says: [God's message as told by Jonah was clear. He did not say anything about their being accepted if they repented, but they still announced their repentance, saying, "who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish" [9]. If the ignorant Gentiles could comprehend this, how much more should we, who enjoyed tutorship concerning divine teachings and witnessed a number of these examples throughout history and in our present experience, realize²⁵?!]

3- NINEVEH ENJOYS MERCY

"Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it" [10].

Apparent in this text is the following:

First: Repentance does not need any length of time; all it needs is a change of heart. The people of Nineveh managed to obtain God's mercy through true return to God rather than over a long period of time. It behooves us then to spend all our days in continuous repentance yearning to achieve the measure of the stature the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). However this expectation should not take away from us the realization of God's mercy, which is ever waiting for everyone's repentance to embrace them instantly.

St. John Chrysostom says: [Where the fear of God is, there is no need for longevity or fate, on the contrary, if there is no fear of God, time is meaningless... If we threw a rusty container in the furnace of the fear of God, it would be purified in no time at all²⁶.]

Second: The word "evil" in this context denotes hardships or tribulations permitted by God to discipline human beings or to make an example of them before others. From the human point of view, it is evil, but in essence it is not. Tertullian says, [The Greeks use the word "evil" to mean hardships and the ensuing harm²⁷.] This was reinforced by Father Theodore²⁸.

Third: Formerly, some people were stumbled by the Biblical expression "God relented"; does God then change His mind? God uses this human expression to bring it closer to our minds. God does not relent, meaning changing His mind; it is humanity, which changes its position towards God and then the sentence changes accordingly. When people challenge God, they fall under discipline, and when they cease to do evil and return to God they find Him there with His arms spread open to welcome them. This is what is meant by relenting. When God passes a sentence for disciplinary measures, He does not insist on its fulfillment but rather He announces the sentence so that people would stop their evil and He would forgive them.

St. John Chrysostom says: [In the days of Jonah, if God had not threatened destruction, they would not have been spared from destruction. If God had not threatened us with hell, we would have all fallen in it²⁹.] He adds: [A threat of danger results in escaping that same danger... a threat of death brings on life. The sentence was nullified after it was announced, and this contradicts what happens with earthly judges, who, when they pass a sentence it becomes a 'fait accompli'; but to God it is the opposite: the sentence is passed to be nullified³⁰.]

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THE EAST SIDE OF THE CITY

God blessed Nineveh with His mercies and He also lifted Jonah from his dejection; He even holds a conversation with him in the east of the city so that his soul would find peace.

1. Jonah in his dejection. 1-4
2. On the east side of the city. 5
3. Jonah under the gourd. 6-8
4. God's closing conversation. 9-11

1- JONAH IN HIS DEJECTION

“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the Lord, and said, ‘Ah Lord, was not this what I said when I was still, in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!’ Then the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” [1-4].

St. John Chrysostom says: [Truly, the Prophet was embarrassed that what he foretold did not come true, but God is not embarrassed because all He really wants is the salvation of humanity and the good of His servant³¹.]

St. Jerome sees that Jonah's distress and complaints are based on his trust in God's mercy and compassion, because there was no way he would introduce Him to the people of Nineveh as a cruel God, but he preferred to die rather than see God's mercies encompass the Gentiles while the Jews perish. He quotes the Prophet saying, [I am the only Prophet who would announce to his own people their destruction through the salvation of others.]

Throughout these feelings which were filled with love towards his own people, yet seemed to carry cruelty towards the Gentiles, he asked God to take his life because he saw that death was better than life; Jonah repeated the same request when the gourd (Israel) withered. At any rate, this request or desire contained a prophetic aspect, because like Christ, or as a symbol of Him, Jonah requested to die for his people, hoping that salvation of humanity be realized by the death on the Cross, not by getting off it or avoiding it. So it is not surprising when we read that Christ told His disciples: “with fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” Luke 22:15. Since He is the slaughtered Lamb of the Passover thus He desired to hand over His life by His own hands, to grant His believers His Body and Blood which were given and shed for the salvation of the world.

Jonah desired to die, but in bitterness, for the destruction of his people which was announced through the salvation of the Gentiles. However our Jonah came purposely for that hour, gladly approaching pain, despising the shame (Heb. 12:2), to save all humanity.

2- ON THE EAST SIDE OF THE CITY

“So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city” [5].

Jonah left the city on great distress; he was filled with anger and sat on the east side of the city to see what God would do to it. Jonah there could either represent the Jewish way of thinking, or the older son who stood outside the house, in pain, to see his younger brother return to their father’s house (Luke 13:25-31). While the house was filled with joy and happiness, the elder son, in egotistical righteousness, stood outside, harshly blaming his father. With active faith and love the prodigal city of Nineveh usurped the mercies of God. Jonah rushed outside the city to build a shelter for himself, i.e. his egotistical righteousness, assuming that he was better than the others, anticipating God’s anger against them.

3- JONAH AND THE GOURD

‘And the Lord God prepared a gourd and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. But as morning dawned the next day God prepared, a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the beat on Jonah head so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, it is better for me to die than to live” [6-8].

What was God’s intention for preparing this gourd and then providing a worm to destroy it?

First: Undoubtedly, the gourd is the Jewish people of whom God said: “You have had pity on the gourd for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night” [10].

Jonah was very grateful for the gourd” [6]...he who vehemently loved his people... the gourd for which he had not labored ...he had not planted it nor reared it nor watched over it. However God did raise Israel and took care of him, freed him from slavery to Pharaoh, gave him the law, brought him to the Promised Land, gave him the Prophets and did not let him in need for anything. God reproached him, saying. “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge please, between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done to it?” Is. 5:3-4.

It would have been better for Jonah, who represents a small part of one of the branches of the gourd, not to be miserable and angry because He who raised the gourd, chose it and tended it, is He Himself who sent him to Nineveh so that God would tend it through him.

God said of the gourd, “Which came up in a night and perished in a night” [10]. It was a product of a night, God did not call it of “light” or “day” but of “night” because it refused its Savior, the Sun of Righteousness, and preferred darkness to the light. St. John, the Evangelist, says: ‘That was the True Light, which gives light to every man who comes into the world... He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” John 1:9, 11-12.

Second: God raised the gourd for Jonah to draw him away from his man-made shelter, as though he pulls people away from their self-righteousness that they would enjoy protection provided by God, their Maker and Protector. It was necessary for that little tree to wither so that it would be replaced by the Holy Cross (tree) under which the Church finds shelter and enjoys the joys of the Bible, saying, “I sat down in his shade with great delight, and his fruit was sweet

to my taste Songs 2:3.

When Jonah went to the east of the city, prophetically, awaiting the dawn of the Sun of Righteousness (Mal 4:2) which shined above all the Gentiles, not only over Israel, he was very glad to see the gourd; as did Israel enjoy the Law and the Prophets to lead them to their Savior. At the same time, he could not accept Israel's fall to pave the way for faith to the Gentiles, and hence his resentment towards the withered plant. He wanted to live in a world of symbolism and in the shade of prophecies as a refuge, not realizing that it is the way to fulfill the yearning of the Gentiles.

The Law, according to St. Paul the Apostle, should lead us to Christ, but the Jews insisted on the letter of the Law and the formalities of worship denying the tree of the living Cross.

Let our souls look towards the east to see the Lord's rising; let the letter of the Law (the gourd) wither, so that we may enjoy the Holy Spirit and accept within us the desire of the Gentiles as the secret of our enlightenment, joy and satisfaction.

Third: Formerly, God spoke to Jonah through the elements: the wild gale, the rocking ship, the Gentile sailors, the draw and the whale; then God spoke to him through the feeble gourd, the easterly wind, and the destructive worm. God converses, at different stages, in a different manner, according to what the person would react and comprehend most. So when Jonah was rebellious in his heart and decided to run away, God spoke to him in a language full of fierceness, which was equivalent to a fierce heart. He spoke to him through a gale, to show him the storm within him; the Gentile sailors, to show him that he had deviated from the spirit of faith; the rocking ship which was shifted around by the winds, to find his heart which he almost lost in the midst of the sea of this world; and the whale, to realize the chasm which drew him, the depths which swallowed him and the prison which he set up for himself... Then, when Jonah came out weak, exhausted and unable to resist, God talked to him through the weak gourd and the corruptive worm, to realize that he was but a weak gourd that could be destroyed by the worm of ungratefulness and resistance.

In short, we can say that God speaks to us in the language, which would help us discover our most obscure inner self.

Fourth: St. Hippolytus of Rome sees that the hot easterly winds which God prepared, symbolize the antichrist who is allowed by God to come from the east, to resist the Church before the second coming.

4- GOD'S CLOSING CONVERSATION

A beautiful conclusion of God's conversation with Jonah was:

"You have had pity on the gourd for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and also much livestock?" [10-11].

This sums up God's love for His creation, His Hand made.

Nineveh, as St. Jerome says, the great city, is the Church which embraces the twelve spiritual tribes, which returns to infancy in its innocence and simplicity.

NOTES

Introduction:

- (1) Biblical Illustrator: The Minor Prophets, V.I. Jonah IV
- (2) J. Mckenzie: Dict. of Bible, p. 618.
- (3) The New Westminster Dict. of Bible, p.669.
- (4) Raven: O. T. Introduction. pp. 224-225.
- (5) St. George's Church, Sporting Alex., Egypt: The prophet Jonah and the whale. The Holy Bible and modern science: 3.
- (6) Winckler: History of Babylonia and Assyria, p.232.

Chapter 1:

- (7) Step 24:7-8.
- (8) Herod. 4;152.
- (9) Joppa: an old city on the Mediterranean Sea, 35 miles north—west of Jerusalem.
- (10) Conc. Stat. 5:18.
- (11) PL 26:25 In Matt I.
- (12) Gonc. Stat 6:14.
- (13) Ibid 5:19.
- (14) Ibid 5:18.
- (15) Tert. On Resurrection of the Flesh 58.

Chapter 2:

- (16) PG 63, Eclogue on Prayer.
- (17) On Ps. Horn 41.
- (18) The Author: Ezekiel, 1981, p. 47 (in Arabic).
- (19) Of the Holy Spirit. 1:16.
- (20) Ep 113:77.
- (21) Ser. on the N.T. 35:7.
- (22) Conc. Stat. 5:18

Chapter 3:

- (23) The Author: Joshua, 1982, p. 46-47 (in Arabic).
- (24) Conc. Stat. 3:8.
- (25) Letter to Theodore.
- (26) Conc. Stat. 20:21.
- (27) Adv. Marc 2:24.
- (28) Cassian: Conf 6:6.
- (29) In I Tim. Ham: 15: Conc. Stat. 5:16.
- (30) Conc. Stat. 5.16.

Chapter 4:

- (31) Conc. Stat. 5:18.

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