

The Problem of the Book of Jonah

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I. The Miraculous Event

Many people consider that the problem of the book of Jonah consists chiefly in the miraculousness of its contents. How could a man be swallowed by a whale and vomited out alive upon the dry land after three days and nights? How could an entire heathen city like Nineveh, including their king, become repentant upon the preaching of a Hebrew prophet? How could a gourd come up in a night, and perish in a night?

Indeed, there has repeatedly been discussion on these points, in particular with respect to the whale story. On the one hand this has been adduced by sceptical impiety as conclusive proof of the untrustworthiness of the Bible. People have scoffed at it as being absolutely ridiculous. The whale has such a narrow gullet that only a small fish like a herring is able to pass through, and how could a full-grown man make his passage?

On the other hand a series of arguments has been advanced to maintain the full credibility of the narrative. First of all we may justifiably point out that the Bible does not speak of a whale. The book of Jonah merely mentions 'a great fish' (Jonah i, 17), and although the English version in Matthew xii, 40 uses the word 'whale,' the Greek original has κῆτος, which is a general word meaning a huge sea-monster. Now it cannot be doubted that there are several enormous sea-creatures which may be able to swallow a full-grown man easily enough. Moreover it may be observed that the narrowness of throat applies only to the true whale which is at home in the Arctic seas but is not found in the Mediterranean. There is another species of the same order, the sperm whale or cachalot, which is actually found in the Mediterranean and which could doubtless swallow a man. Ambrose John Wilson in the

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Princeton Theological Review of 1927 mentions a case analogous to that of Jonah. A member of the crew of a whaling ship in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands was swallowed by a large sperm whale which had been harpooned, his boat being upset by a lash of its tail. The whale was killed and dissected and on the third day the missing sailor was found inside the stomach of the animal, doubled up and unconscious. A bath of sea water soon revived him, but the skin of his face, neck and hands, exposed as it had been to the action of the gastric juice, was bleached to a deadly whiteness and never recovered its natural appearance; otherwise his health was not affected by this terrible ordeal.¹ In another American periodical, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, G. Macloskie, of Princeton University, has taken the trouble to demonstrate how even the true whale may be able to rescue a man from drowning. He points out that, as the whale is an air-breathing animal, it has to expel from its mouth cavity all superfluous water immediately after having received its food. Now if any other air-breathing creature should get mixed with its food and be carried by the influx of water between the monster's jaws, the intruder would be transferred from the water in which it was drowning into the air supply of

¹ A. J. Wilson, 'The Sign of the Prophet Jonah,' *Princeton Theological Review*, vol. xxv. p. 636.

the whale itself. It could not enter the whale's stomach because of the narrow inlet, but it might reach the great laryngeal pouch, which starts from below and in front of the larynx and runs down the front of the neck on to the chest. It has thick, elastic walls, and a cavity quite large enough to receive a human body, and to supply it with air for breathing.²

The repentance of Nineveh is sometimes considered to be an even greater improbability, especially as this wonderful event seems to have left no trace whatever in profane history.³ In this connection, others have called attention to the religious reform of the

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king, Adad-Nirari III, which must have taken place about 800 B.C., in the time of the prophet Jonah, the son of Amittai, who predicted the victories gained by Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel (783-743 B.C.). Now we certainly must not overstate the significance of this reform. Its tendency was to concentrate the entire Assyrian cult upon the worship of the god Nebo.⁴ But this has been regarded by some scholars as a kind of monotheistic trend,⁵ and it is easy to understand how such a reform can be connected with the mission of Jonah. For the conversion of Nineveh may have been no more than superficial. Yet the Lord is merciful and compassionate, ready to postpone His judgment even on account of such an external conversion, as can be seen from the case of Ahab. 'Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me I will not bring the evil in his days; but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house' (I Kings xxi, 29).

II. The Real Problem

However, in considering the problem of the book of Jonah, it is not the miraculousness of its contents that I intend to discuss. The main problem, indeed I venture to say the real problem of the book, is a different one. In examining the vast literature on the book of Jonah we observe how widespread is the idea that the aim of the author was not to give an account of historical events, but to present a fiction with a moral tendency.

Oesterley and Robinson in their *Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament*, find two 'opposing standpoints' expressed in 'convincing contrast' in the book. 'The writer sets forth Jonah as the type of the narrow-minded, exclusive Jew, who not only despises all non-Jews, but conceives of the Almighty as the God of the Jews only, and as a God who has no care for the rest of His creation. The author himself, on the other hand, not only makes

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² G. Macloskie, 'How to Test the Story of Jonah.' *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. lxxii, pp. 336f.

³ Cf. A. Feuillet, 'Les Sources du Livre de jonas,' *Revue Biblique*, 1947, p. 161. In referring to the accumulation of improbabilities which he finds in the book he says: 'dont la plus forte n'est pas, comme on le croit souvent, le séjour de Jonas dans le ventre du poisson, mais bien plutôt la conversion subite d'une immense et puissante cité palenne au monothéisme du petit peuple d'Israël, sans que cet événement prodigieux ait laissé la moindre trace soit dans la Bible, soit dans les annales assyriennes.'

⁴ As the Nebo statue from Calah shows. Cf. Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament*, pp. 307 f. The inscription closes with the words 'Let every later prince trust in Nebo, trust not in any other god.'

⁵ E.g. Hugo Winckler, *Keilinschriftliches Textbuch zum A. T.* (Leipzig 1909), p. 28; Alfred Jeremias, *Monotheistische Strömungen Innerhalb der Babylonischen Religion* (Leipzig, 1904), pp. 28 f.

Jonah the unconscious or unwilling cause of the conversion, first of the mariners, and then of the Ninevites, but also teaches the divine truth of the universal Fatherhood of God. Our book thus reflects the two opposing schools of thought, the particularists and the universalists, within Jewry. The author was, thus, a propagandist, and accordingly it may well be that he chose the name of Jonah as his leading *persona dramatis* for the purpose of propaganda.’⁶

Bewer, in the *International Critical Commentary*, says, ‘Surely this is not the record of actual historical events nor was it ever intended as such. It is a sin against the author to treat as literal prose what he intended as poetry. This story is poetry, not prose. It is a prose poem, not history.’ ‘His story is thus a story with a moral, a parable, a prose poem, like the story of the Good Samaritan, or Lessing’s Ring story in *Nathan the Wise*, or Oscar Wilde’s poem in prose, *The Teacher of Truth*.’⁷

Robert H. Pfeiffer, of Harvard University, in his elaborate *Introduction to the Old Testament*, expresses himself thus: ‘The story of Jonah is neither an account of actual happenings nor an allegory of the destiny of Israel or of the Messiah (cf. Matthew xii, 40) it is fiction—a short story with a moral.’⁸ And Bruno Balscheit, the Swiss author, in his short introduction which appeared under the title *Der Gottesbund*, starts immediately with the assertion: ‘This booklet is not a prophetic writing, but a legend, viz, a story which pursues with its different traits a tendency and wishes to edify therewith the congregation of God ... Primarily it opposes the spirit of narrow-mindedness which arose in the Jewish people about 400 B.C., as if the people of God is limited to the racial Israel, the spirit which makes Yahweh the exclusive God of this nation.’⁹

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Even a number of Roman Catholic scholars have embraced this opinion, e.g. the renowned Louvain professor of Old Testament, A. van Hoonacker,¹⁰ and A. Feuillet, in two articles in the *Revue Biblique*.¹¹

Now this, in my opinion, is the real problem of the book, and it is this that I intend to discuss in this paper. What is the author’s purpose? Did he intend to write down an historical record of real occurrences, or to present his readers with a moral in fictitious form? It is clear that this problem is a literary one. As Feuillet rightly puts it: have we to do here with ‘un récit historique’ or ‘une fiction didactique’?¹² In this connection it is of no consequence whether

⁶ W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, *An Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament* (London, 1934), pp. 375 f.

⁷ Julius A. Bewer, *Jonah* (I.C.C.), p. 4. Cf. the same author’s *The Literature of the Old Testament*, revised edition (New York, pp. 403 ff.

⁸ R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York—London, 1941), p. 587.

⁹ Bruno Balscheit, *Der Gottesbund: Einführung in das Alte Testament* (Zürich, 1943), p. 218: ‘Dieses Büchlein ist keine Prophetenschrift, sondern eine Legende, d.h. eine Erzählung, die mit ihren verschiedenen Zügen eine Tendenz verfolgt und mit dieser die Gemeinde Gottes aufbauen möchte... Um das Jahr 400 herum begann sich in Judentum der Geist abzuzeichnen, gegen den die Schrift sich wendet. Der Geist der engstirnigen Verböhrtheit, der Geist, der Gottes Volk auf die Juden dem Blute nach beschränkt und den Gott des Bundes zum jüdischen Volksgötzen machen möchte.’

¹⁰ A. van Hoonacker, *Les Douze Petits Prophètes* (Paris, 1908), pp. 315 f.

¹¹ A. Feuillet, ‘Les Sources du Livre de Jonas,’ *Revue Biblique*, 1947, pp. 161-186; ‘Le Sens du Livre de Jonas.’ *Revue Biblique*, 1947, pp. 340-361.

¹² Feuillet, *Revue Biblique*, 1947, p. 161.

the book is regarded as entirely fictitious or as containing at least a certain historical nucleus.¹³ The question is: did the author intend to write history or to compose a parable?

III. Inconclusive Arguments

In tackling this problem it seems necessary from the start to eliminate a number of inconclusive arguments.

First of all we must exclude the argument of historical improbability. It will be immediately clear that this cannot have any bearing whatever on the question of the author's aim in writing his booklet. For what people *today* might regard as improbable is beside the point; an author of ancient times might implicitly believe many things which people today would call impossible, and he might relate as historic facts what a number of modern scholars would stamp as legends. We have to discuss what was the idea of the author, and this cannot be ascertained by appealing to *our* idea regarding the contents of his writing.

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If the argument of historical improbability should really give due reason for taking the book of Jonah as a parable, this would have far-reaching consequences with respect to other parts of the Old Testament. It would lead to the conclusion that, e.g., the narratives concerning Elijah and Elisha, the entire story of Israel's exodus from Egypt and its wanderings through the desert, more than one episode in the conquest of Canaan, and the history of Balaam and of Samson, might have to be interpreted as parables. But even modern scholars, who are themselves convinced that the miraculous events related in these narratives did not actually happen, shrink from this conclusion, and readily acknowledge that the authors may have intended to write history. Why, therefore, should we regard the miraculousness of the contents of Jonah as proof that the author intended to compose a parable?¹⁴

A second argument which has to be put aside is the late date of the book. It is generally assumed that the book must originate from the post-exilic period. Opinions vary, but it is agreed that we are not justified in going farther back than the fifth century B.C.¹⁵ We must devote our attention for a moment to the arguments which are advanced in favour of such a date. According to Oesterley and Robinson, they are as follows:¹⁶

(a) The author seems to have known the book of Joel (cf. iii, 9, with Joel ii, 14; and iv, 2, with Joel ii, 15). Oesterley and Robinson, however, admit that not much stress need be laid on this fact. They are right here, for the date of Joel itself is absolutely uncertain, though most of the critics are inclined to favour a late date; more over, as we shall have opportunity to point out

¹³ As is explicitly stated by Th. C. Vriezen, *Oud-Israelitische Geschriften* (den Haag, 1948), p. 185. Generally scholars admit that the materials used by the author were supplied by tradition. Cf. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, 1913), p. 324.

¹⁴ As an instance of how historical improbability is applied as an argument for parabolic interpretation I quote Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 404: 'The author took this bit of folklore [viz, the fish story] and used it as a means of transporting Jonah back to the land. He never thought that readers would be so much without poetical imagination as to strip it of its fantastic beauty and nullify the wonderful lesson he had to teach in the sequel.'

¹⁵ Cf. Driver, p. 322. Oesterley-Robinson say approximately 350 B.C. (p. 374); Bewer (*Literature*, p. 403) perhaps between 300-200.

¹⁶ Oesterley-Robinson, pp. 372-374.

in more detail later in this paper, if there is a certain similarity between texts of different authors it is always extremely difficult to decide with any certainty which is the earlier, and, as has been observed by Robert

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Dick Wilson, how can we be sure that either or both of them may not have borrowed from a third writer whose work has been lost?¹⁷

(b) The language displays several Aramaisms and modes of expression not found in classical Hebrew. Now the number of these alleged Aramaisms is not great; there are only five in all. Considerable caution should be exercised in such cases. The inclusion of some Aramaisms does not definitely prove a late date for it is impossible to determine at what time isolated Aramaic words may have found their way into the Hebrew language. And if we look at the words themselves, there is still more reason for caution. The word used in i, 5, for ‘mariners’ is also employed in Ezekiel xxvii, 9, 27, 29, which surely does not favour a post exilic date. In the same verse we meet with the word *sefinâ*, which does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament. The English version renders it as ‘ship,’ and in the Mishnah and Gemara it is generally used in this sense. But we have to realize that the ordinary Hebrew word for ‘ship’ is employed in the same and in the two preceding verses; and it is therefore not improbable that the word may have here a different meaning. It may be formed from the genuine Hebrew root *safan*, meaning ‘to cover,’ and may be taken for the covered part of the ship; so it informs us that Jonah had gone down to sleep ‘below decks.’¹⁸ Likewise, the word ‘preaching’ in 2, is a *hapax legomenon* of the Old Testament, but, though it may be common in post-Biblical Hebrew, it is derived from the very common Hebrew verb *qara*, ‘to call,’ ‘to preach.’¹⁹ With the word ‘decree’ in iii, 7. it is a rather peculiar case: the word is found several times in the Old Testament in the sense of ‘taste’; metaphorically it has the meaning ‘sense’ or ‘intellect’; here is the only place where it means ‘decree,’ as it often does in the Aramaic parts of the Old Testament and in the papyri from Elephantine; it seems to have received this meaning from the *usus loquendi* of Assyrians and Babylonians,²⁰ which does not necessarily

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point to the post-exilic age. In i, 6, the verb to ‘think upon’ is, again, a *hapax legomenon* of the Old Testament; but we meet with two different derivations, one in Job xii, 5, and the other in Psalm cxlvi, 4, so it is not beyond doubt that the word is Aramaic. It may just as well have been taken over from the Hebrew into Aramaic, as it is found in some of the Targums, but does not occur at all in Syriac.²¹ Another verb, ‘to be calm,’ in i, 11, 12, may be common in late Hebrew, but it appears twice in the old Testament besides, in Psalm cvii, 30, and Psalm xxvi, 20.

Oesterley and Robinson quote i, 4, where the Hebrew literally has ‘so that the ship thought to be broken’ (the English version says: ‘was like to be broken’). They call attention to the fact

¹⁷ R. D. Wilson, ‘The Authenticity of Jonah,’ *Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. xvi, p. 443

¹⁸ Cf. Wilson, *Princeton Theological Review*, xvi, p. 282.

¹⁹ The substantive noun has been formed in the same manner as e.g. לחיכה from הלך; חליפה from הלף; and סליחה from סלח; cf. Jouon, *Grammaire de l’Hébreu Biblique* (Rome, 1923), para. 88b.

²⁰ Cf. Wilson, *Princeton Theological Review*, xvi, p. 289.

²¹ Cf. Wilson, *Princeton Theological Review*, xvi, pp. 282 f.

that in classical Hebrew the verb 'to think' is never used with reference to inanimate objects like ships. But can such a peculiarity of expression prove a late date? Furthermore, they point to iv, 10, where, in reference to the gourd, it is said: 'which came up in a night, and perished the son of a night.' But we have to keep in mind the peculiar manner in which the Hebrew word 'son' is often employed to indicate a certain relation; to quote a couple of examples: in Deuteronomy xxv, 2, the idea that a wicked man 'be worthy to be beaten' is expressed by the words: he is 'a son of beating'; in Isaiah v, 1, 'a very fruitful hill' is called 'a hill, son of fat.' The very rare particle *beshel* (i, 7, 12), which apart from Jonah is found in the Old Testament only in Ecclesiastes viii, 17 (a book which according to its language must indeed be rather late), cannot in itself be taken as a decisive proof of post-exilic date; it may be common in post-Biblical Hebrew, but it is possible that such a word by way of exception may appear in a book of a much earlier date.

Others have argued that iii, 3, 'Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city,' proves that Nineveh had long since perished.²² It has, however, been argued that the entire story would have had no meaning had Nineveh no longer existed.²³ We can view the perfect

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tense as synchronistic; it says no more than that when Jonah went to Nineveh it was a great city.

So it is clear that there are no adequate reasons for assigning a late date to the book of Jonah. But it is also clear that even if there were, this would not afford decisive proof that it has to be regarded as a parable. Of course a writer living in a much later period could undertake to record historical occurrences which happened centuries before. Must we deny to the Chronicler the right to compose an historical narrative because he lived many centuries after the events of which he tells us in his book?

A third argument which must be discarded is that based on the parallels, especially of the fish story. Many scholars have been engaged in collecting parallels from non-Biblical sources.²⁴ Time and again it has been asserted that the author utilized ancient myths and folk tales to compose his story.²⁵ It is, however, impossible to prove that he was even acquainted with such tales. Feuillet, himself a convinced adherent of the parabolic interpretation, has demonstrated that there is no reason whatever to assume that the author has borrowed from such sources.²⁶ The points of conformity which can be shown are so few and insignificant, that it is impossible to prove from these that the author of Jonah used or even knew the heathen legends. And if acquaintance with such material cannot be clearly proved, how can these parallels contribute to the solution of the problem whether the author intended to give an historical record or to compose a didactic fiction?

²² Cf. Beyer in I.C.C., p. 13; Harlan Creelman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York, 1927), p. 280.

²³ B. D. Eerdmans, *De Godsdienst van Israel* (Huister Heide, 1930), vol. ii, p. 9; F. Dijkema, 'Het boek Jona,' *Nieuw Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 1936, pp. 338 f.

²⁴ In particular, Hans Schmidt, *Jona, eine Untersuchung zur Vergleichenden Religionsgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1907) deserves to be mentioned.

²⁵ Cf. R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 588.

²⁶ A. Feuillet, 'Les Sources du Livre de Jonas,' *Revue Biblique*, 1947, pp. 162-167. He concludes: 'En tout cas, rien n'autorise à penser que l'auteur de ce livre ait emprunté, consciemment ou non, à telle légende païenne; les rapprochements qu'on a tentés sont tous factices ou forcés.'

So far the arguments which have had to be eliminated have been such as are often adduced in favour of the parabolic interpretation. Now we must dispose of an argument of the opposite tendency.

It cannot be denied that the book of Jonah is written in the form of an historical narrative. As Raven remarks: 'the style is like that of simple history.'²⁷ But this cannot be advanced as an

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argument in favour of the historical interpretation. It is easy to see that all parables resemble a record of historical events. Look at the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Then there came a priest, and then a Levite, and finally a certain Samaritan who, when he saw him, went to him. He bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and, setting him on his own beast, brought him to an inn, where he took care of him. As he departed, he asked the host to take further care of him, and paid the fee with the promise to pay more if necessary.²⁸ This is quite simple history. It sounds almost like a report in one of our newspapers. Therefore it is impossible to argue from the form of the book of Jonah that it must have been meant as a record of historical events.

The question assumes greater importance when we realize that the book is an entirely independent little piece of literature and is not connected with any other piece of writing. We might indeed compare the story of Jonah with other historical narratives relating to prophets, as that of the man of God who came out of Judah and preached against the altar of Bethel,²⁹ or those dealing with Elijah and Elisha.³⁰ There is not the slightest doubt that these portions of the book of Kings are meant as records of actual events. But we have to be careful in drawing any conclusion from this comparison: there is a considerable difference between these prophetic reports and the book of Jonah. They form part of a larger body of writing which is undoubtedly historical in character; they are embodied in a book which from beginning to end is clearly intended as a description of actual occurrences. The book of Jonah, however, stands alone, and the only larger unity with which it might to any extent be identified, the book of the Twelve Minor Prophets, is quite different from the book of Kings: it is a collection of prophecies, not of historical communications. Certainly if the story of Jonah, as we find it in the book, appeared in the book of Kings, there would be no reason to doubt that it was meant as a record of

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historical events just as much as the similar stories relating to the other prophets. But, taking into consideration the rather isolated position of the book of Jonah and its unique place among the Twelve, we are not justified in drawing any conclusion from its form and style.

IV. Parables and Allegories in the Old Testament

²⁷ John Howard Raven, *Old Testament Introduction* (New York—Chicago—Toronto, 1906), p. 227.

²⁸ Luke x, 30-35.

²⁹ 1 Kings xiii.

³⁰ 1 Kings xvii-xxi; 2 Kings i-vii, xiii, 14-21.

Having thus cleared the ground by discarding those arguments which cannot lead to a decision, we now bring forward a series of considerations which may help to solve our problem.

First of all we notice that the Old Testament does indeed present us with a few instances of parables. These are the well-known story of the ewe lamb told by the prophet Nathan,³¹ that of the two brethren and the avengers of blood narrated by the wise widow of Tekoa,³² the parable of Jotham to the men of Shechem, concerning the trees which went forth to anoint a king over them,³³ and that of Jehoash, to Amaziah, the king of Judah, concerning the thistle and the cedar.³⁴ Perhaps we might also regard as a kind of parable the tale which a man of the sons of the prophets told king Ahab about a missing captive.³⁵ So we are fortunately in a position to compare the book of Jonah with a number of real parables in the Old Testament. And, in looking at these parables, we are struck by two facts, First they are simple and not compound. Secondly, they are accompanied by an explicit indication of their meaning.

(a) The parables are simple; they treat only one subject: the king of the trees, the ewe lamb, the quarrel between the two brothers, the proposal of the thistle to the cedar, the escape of the captive. Now if we compare these with the book of Jonah, we cannot fail to observe a marked difference: the book of Jonah is decidedly compound; it has at least two distinct parts: (i) the flight of Jonah and his adventure with the fish, followed by (2) his preaching in

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Nineveh and the incident of the gourd. This compound character has always puzzled those who advocate the parabolic interpretation. If the main intention is, as is generally assumed, to make an explicit protest against narrow nationalism,³⁶ we are bound to ask what the adventure with the fish has to do with that. It is generally argued that the author utilized ancient myths and folk tales in his story of the fish.³⁷ But this does not answer the question *why* he did so. If he wanted to combat particularistic narrow-mindedness by using a parabolic form, why did he insert the folkloristic episode with the fish? Feuillet tries to offer an explanation. He points out that the parable consists of two parts, of which the first is subordinate to the second, and thus he represents the meaning to be that 'predictions of destruction against heathen nations, even if they bear the most certain marks of their divine origin, always remain conditional, although they have been announced by the Lord in absolute form.'³⁸ He believes that the episode with the fish emphasizes the fact that Jonah was indeed a divine messenger, yet his message, which was surrounded with all desirable guarantees, was nevertheless not realized.³⁹ But even this is not sufficient to explain why the author had recourse to the episode with the fish and gave it such a prominent place in his parable.

³¹ 2 Samuel xii, 1-4.

³² 2 Samuel xiv, 6-7.

³³ Judges ix, 8-15.

³⁴ 2 Kings xiv, 9.

³⁵ 1 Kings xx, 39-40.

³⁶ Which is the shortest formulation of the purpose ever voiced; cf. H. Wheeler Robinson in *Record and Revelation* (Oxford, 1938), pp. 34 f.

³⁷ Cf. Pfeiffer, *Introduction*, p. 588.

³⁸ Feuillet, *Revue Biblique*, 1947, p. 345: 'Les décrets de destruction dirigés contre les nations païennes, même s'ils portent les marques les plus certaines de leur origine divine, demeurent toujours conditionnels, bien qu'ayant été prononcés par Dieu de manière absolue.'

³⁹ Feuillet, *op. cit.*, p. 344: 'Jonas est bien un envoyé divin, dont la parole est entourée de toutes les garanties désirables, et cependant l'oracle où il annonce la ruine prochaine de Ninive ne se réalise pas.'

(b) The parables are always followed by a clear indication of their meaning. Jotham immediately adds the interpretation of his parable: it refers to the fact that the men of Shechem have made Abimelech king.⁴⁰ David may not have grasped the idea of Nathan's parable at once, but the striking words of the prophet, 'Thou art the man,' leave no room for misunderstanding.⁴¹ The woman of Tekoa does not neglect to explain her parable, 'for the king doth

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speak this thing as one which is faulty, in that the king doth not fetch home again his banished.'⁴² Neither does King Jehoshaphat leave his meaning doubtful: 'Thou hast indeed smitten Edom, and thine heart hath lifted thee up; glory of this, and tarry at home; for why shouldst thou meddle to thy hurt, that thou shouldst fall, even thou and Judah with thee?'⁴³ And in the case of the escaped captive the son of the prophet addresses King Ahab with the divine message: 'Thus saith the Lord, because thou hast let go out of thy hand a man whom I appointed to utter destruction, therefore thy life shall go for his life.'⁴⁴

It is obvious that such an explanation is entirely lacking in the book of Jonah. Perhaps it is less likely that an explanation should be given in the case of the book, but judging by the other parables of the Old Testament, we might reasonably expect at least a slight clue which would help us to discover the true sense. But not even a slight hint can be found.

Frankly, I do not think this settles the matter. But it may not be going too far to state that, since Hebrew literature as represented in the Old Testament does not produce any example of a compound and unexplained parable, it is very probable that the book of Jonah is not intended as a parable.

It may be useful to make a similar comparison with instances of allegory, as some scholars believe that the book of Jonah may have an allegorical character. According to their view the story of Jonah is the story of Israel, which had to bring God's truth to the nations; it evaded its duty and therefore was swallowed up by the world-power Babylon. When liberated from the exile, it became dissatisfied with Jehovah's longsuffering and eagerly waited for the divine punishment of the nations.⁴⁵

Though this interpretation is no longer considered seriously, it may be useful to consider briefly the characteristics of Old Testament allegories. We may mention the well-known allegory of old age and death in Ecclesiastes xii, 3-5; the wine-cup to be drunk by all the nations of Jeremiah xxv, 15-29 the eagles and the vine of

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Ezekiel xxvii, 3-10; the lioness and her whelps in Ezekiel xix, 2-9; the boiling pot in Ezekiel xxiv 3-5; and the shepherd and his two staffs in Zechariah xi, 4-17. Now we observe that these allegories are rather short, unlike the, book of Jonah; and, in particular, that they contain

⁴⁰ Judges ix, 16.

⁴¹ 2 Samuel xii, 7.

⁴² 2 Samuel xiv, 13.

⁴³ 2 Kings xiv, 10.

⁴⁴ 1 Kings xx, 42.

⁴⁵ See e.g. George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, in *The Expositor's Bible* (London, 1898), pp. 501-505.

unmistakable indications of their allegorical character. The meaning of the allegory in Ecclesiastes is indicated in verse 5: 'because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.' In Jeremiah xxv the wine-cup has not to be taken literally, as it is called 'the wine-cup of this fury.'⁴⁶ Likewise in Ezekiel xvii the branch of the cedar which the eagle broke off is said to be carried 'into a land of traffick' and set 'in a city of merchants.'⁴⁷ In Ezekiel xix the princes of Israel are addressed, and the lioness is called their 'mother'; one of her 'whelps' is said to be 'brought with chains unto the land of Egypt'; another of her 'whelps' 'laid waste their cities,' 'the nations set against him on every side from the provinces,' they brought him to the king of Babylon.⁴⁸ In Ezekiel xxiv the 'pot' is identified with the 'bloody city.'⁴⁹ In Zechariah xi the peculiar names given to the staffs, 'Beauty' and 'Bands,' suggest a deeper meaning.⁵⁰ This is explicitly shown when the staffs are cut asunder, 'that I might break my covenant which I had made with all the people,' and 'that I might break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.'⁵¹ As such indications are entirely lacking in the book of Jonah, its allegorical character is highly questionable.

Moreover we should bear in mind that a parable is generally self-explanatory. When we read in chapter xi of the second book of Samuel, which describes the outrageous trespass of David, we know at once who is the rich man who took away the poor man's lamb; we are not like David, who was so thoroughly ensnared in his sin and so sure that he had succeeded in concealing it that he needed the prophet's 'thou art the man' And it is the same with the other parables; being well acquainted with the circumstances, we cannot doubt what they mean.

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It is not so with the book of Jonah. Scholars who believe in the fictitious and didactic character of the book do not agree in their suggested interpretations. There may be a certain agreement regarding the general tendency, but if we go into particulars, there is a remarkable difference of opinion. As a rule this detailed examination is omitted, but if a serious effort is made to find the parabolic meaning of the different parts of the book, unanimity disappears. I pointed out how Feuillet endeavours to connect the fish story and the preaching in Nineveh.⁵² But Balscheit's conception is quite different; he distinguishes a fourfold meaning: (1) it is impossible to escape God; (2) God rescues from death; (3) God summons the world to penitence; (4) God is merciful.⁵³ I think we may safely state that such diversity of interpretation does not support the idea that the book of Jonah has to be understood as a parable.

V. Alleged Dependence on Earlier Writings

Another approach to the 'solution of the problem is this. Feuillet feels able to provide sufficient proof that the author of the book of Jonah has reproduced his narrative from other Biblical sources; this in his opinion demonstrates beyond doubt the fictitious character of the

⁴⁶ Jeremiah xxv, 15.

⁴⁷ Ezekiel xvii, 4.

⁴⁸ Ezekiel xix, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9.

⁴⁹ Ezekiel xxiv, 6.

⁵⁰ Zechariah xi, 7.

⁵¹ Zechariah xi, 10, 14.

⁵² Feuillet, *Revue Biblique*, 1947, pp. 344, 345.

⁵³ Bruno Balscheit, *Der Gottesbund: Einführung in das Alte Testament*, p. 218.

book and therefore solves the problem.⁵⁴ We must now proceed, therefore, to put his arguments to the test.

Feuillett thinks he can show that Jonah depends on information provided in the book of Kings and in the prophetic writings, especially Jeremiah.⁵⁵ Yet it is extremely difficult to prove literary dependence, as it cannot be shown by the existence of superficial similarities. But even if we have to deal with a recognizable likeness, it is extraordinarily difficult, and in most cases even impossible, to decide on which side the priority has to be assumed. As an example of

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indisputable priority I point to Jeremiah xlix, 14 compared with Obadiah 1. In both verses, which are almost identical, we meet with the expression 'against her.' The Hebrew has here the feminine form of the suffix of the third person singular. In Jeremiah this suffix is only natural, as it refers to the city of Bozrah, mentioned in the preceding verse, which is of the feminine gender; but in Obadiah it causes considerable difficulty, as it refers to the people of Edom, and the name Edom, when indicating not the country but the people, is always employed in the masculine gender. This shows clearly that the word was first used by Jeremiah, and, in being quoted from him by Obadiah, retained the feminine form. This, however, is an exception. As a rule it is very hard, if not altogether impossible, to say which of two very similar passages is the original. And, as I pointed out before, we have also to reckon with the possibility that both were derived from a third and unknown source.

After this caution, we proceed to consider what Feuillet advances. We need not dwell at length upon the parallel between Jonah iv, 3 and 1 Kings xix, 4. Both Jonah and Elijah pray that the Lord may take their life from them. But this is simply due to likeness of circumstance, and cannot be considered as obvious imitation.⁵⁶ In this connection I must express my astonishment at Feuillet's comment on the phrase 'he requested for himself that he might die.' This is indeed a peculiar expression and its translation occasions some difficulty; it does not occur elsewhere, but it is not true, as Feuillet suggests, that it is found both in the story of Elijah and in that of Jonah;⁵⁷ it appears only in 1 Kings XIX, 4, and not in the book of Jonah.

Of more importance is the parallel which he adduces between Jonah iii, 10 and Jeremiah xviii, 7, 8. God repented of the evil that He had said that he would do unto the Ninevites. This is a practical instance of a general rule stated by Jeremiah. (N.B.—Jeremiah mentions cancellation of a 'menace as well as of a promise; see verses 9, 10.) Can it be proved then that Jonah 10 must be the particular application of the general rule, formulated in Jeremiah xviii, 7, 8? Is it not also possible that what was clearly demonstrated in the

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⁵⁴ Feuillet, *Revue Biblique*, 1947, p. 162: 'Mais nous voulons maintenant étudier en elle-même cette importante question des sources, dont la solution peut achever de nous fixer sur le genre littéraire de notre petit livre' (italics mine); p. 185: 'L'enquête que nous venons d'entreprendre sur les sources bibliques du livre de Jonas apporte, nous semble-t-il, une démonstration positive du caractère fictif de ce récit.'

⁵⁵ Feuillet, 'Les Sources du Livre de Jonas,' *Revue Biblique*, 1947, pp. 167-185.

⁵⁶ As has been rightly observed by R. D. Wilson, *Princeton Theological Review*, xvi, pp. 445 f.

⁵⁷ Feuillet, *Revue Biblique*, 1947, p. 168. In Hebrew the phrase runs thus: רִישָׁאֵל אֶחָד־נִפְשׁוֹ לְמִוּחַ.

particular case of Nineveh found its more general formulation at a later date in the prophecy of Jeremiah? Besides, Jonah iii, 10 is not the only instance of the withdrawal of an announced calamity. Consult Amos vii, 3, 6. Moreover, the idea that the Lord repents of something is found quite often; the Lord repents of what He *has* done (Genesis vi, 6; Judges ii, 18; 1 Samuel xv, ii, 35), of what He *has* done and thought to do *furthermore* (2 Samuel xxiv, 16), and of what He has *announced* that He will do (Exodus xxxii, 14, cf. verse 10). So there is no reason to regard Jonah iii as dependent on Jeremiah xviii, 7, 8.

There are more points of conformity between Jonah and Jeremiah, according to Feuillet. He calls attention to Jonah iii, 9 'Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?' We agree with his caution that this is also found several times in the prophecies of Jeremiah (xxi, 2; xxvi, 3; xxxvi, 3, 7). But, in comparing the texts, we immediately observe a great difference in Jeremiah's wording. The summons to the Ninevites: 'let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands' (Jonah iii, 8) is textually repeated in Jeremiah xxv, 5; xxvi, 3; xxxvi, 3, 7, and nearly textually in Jeremiah xviii, 11; xxiii, 22; xxxv, 15. The similarity, however, is limited to the few words, 'turn every one from his evil way'; and we have to notice that this same phrase occurs in Ezekiel xxxiii, 11 and Zechariah i, 4. It is also found in 2 Kings xvii, 13; 2 Chronicles vii, 14; Isaiah lix, 20; Ezekiel iii, 19; xviii 23; xxxiii, 9, and there are a great number of analogous expressions. This very common phrase, therefore, proves nothing.

Feuillet seems to lay much stress on the fact that Jonah iii and Jeremiah xxxvi present an analogous situation. In both cases there is a divine menace, followed by a general fasting;⁵⁸ the matter comes before the king and his ministers, but their attitude is quite the reverse of Nineveh's. We have, however, to be on our guard, and beware of stating a parallel too hastily; to be precise, the fasting in Jerusalem was not proclaimed as a result of the divine warning announced in the prophecies of Jeremiah. It was only when a fast had been proclaimed for some other reason unknown to us that Baruch seized the opportunity of publicly reading the prophecies of Jeremiah. Therefore this parallel is of no value at all

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Feuillet proceeds further. He even supposes that the person of Jeremiah has suggested to the author the idea of a prophet charged with a divine mission against a pagan nation, and trying to escape his responsibility. He must admit that Jeremiah never left the boundaries of Israel to preach to a foreign people; yet he is very often 'concerned with the non-Israelitic nations as we can see from the wording of his commission, 'I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.'⁵⁹ And it is this prophet who repeatedly revolts against his mission: 'Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of way faring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them!'⁶⁰ Then I said, I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name.'⁶¹ But notice the vast difference between Jeremiah and Jonah. It is not from a mission to a pagan nation that Jeremiah seeks to free himself but from a mission to his own people. There fore the supposition of Feuillet can only be erroneous.

Moreover, Ezekiel must likewise have provided material which the author of Jonah utilized. This complication makes Feuillet's case less convincing. But let us look again at the data

⁵⁸ With the peculiar expression, found nowhere else: קדא צרט

⁵⁹ Jeremiah 1, 5.

⁶⁰ Jeremiah ix, 2 (in Hebrew ix, 1).

⁶¹ Jeremiah xx, 9.

which he produces. He compares the book of Jonah with Ezekiel xxvii, 25-28; in particular he underscores the expressions: 'the ships of Tarshish were thy caravans for thy merchandise,'⁶² 'glorious in the midst of the seas,' 'the east wind hath broken thee in the midst of the seas,' the words 'mariners' and 'pilots,' 'fall into the midst of the seas' and the 'cry. of thy pilots.'⁶³ It is easy to see that such terms are quite commonplace, and that they do not occur more often in the Old Testament is simply due to the fact that it only rarely refers to seafaring. Apart from the book of Jonah and Ezekiel xxvi-xxviii, only Psalm cvii makes any mention of shipping and storms at sea.

Another parallel which is adduced is Ezekiel xxvi, 16: 'Then all the princes of the sea shall come down from their thrones, and lay away their robes, and put off their brodered garments: they shall

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clothe themselves with trembling; they shall sit upon the ground, and shall tremble at every moment, and be astonished at thee.' Compare Jonah iii, 6, where it is said of the king of Nineveh, that 'he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.' We have to keep in mind that an entirely different situation is pictured in each text, and we are not entitled to draw far-reaching conclusions from the use of similar and fairly usual expressions.

In this connection it may not be out of place to consider the prayer of Jonah in chapter ii. This is a problem in itself. Generally Old Testament commentaries and introductions agree that it does not belong to the original script; it must have been inserted by a later hand.⁶⁴ Therefore I did not take it into consideration in discussing the problem of the date of the book. If this chapter is regarded as later than the book itself, it cannot be adduced as an argument to fix that date. Here I venture to express my opinion that the argument brought forward to prove that the prayer is an interpolation proves, on the contrary, its originality. The argument is that the 'prayer does not explicitly refer to the actual situation'⁶⁵ (it does not contain a single word relating to the belly of the fish). But is it not highly probable that a later reader who 'missed the prayer which Jonah had uttered in the fish'⁶⁶ and wanted to add a suitable supplication, would have made it tally more precisely with the actual circumstances? Surely he would not have omitted a few words referring to the belly of the fish. It is generally argued that he merely patched together a number of reminiscences from different Psalms;⁶⁷ but apparently he had sufficient originality to insert such a peculiar phrase as 'the weeds were wrapped about my head,'⁶⁸ which is found nowhere in the Psalms; the Hebrew *suph* in the sense of seaweed occurs only in this prayer of Jonah. Such a man would not have refrained from inserting at least something to describe the sojourn of the prophet in the bowels of the sea-monster.

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⁶² A.V. has here: 'The ships of Tarshish did sing of thee in thy market.' Feuillet renders the text as it appears in the R.V. This depends upon a slight alteration of the Hebrew text; cf. G. A. Cooke, *The Book of Ezekiel* (I.C.C.), p. 306.

⁶³ For the phrase 'in the midst of the seas' cf. Jonah 3; literally 'in the heart of the seas.'

⁶⁴ Cf. Bewer, *Jonah* (I.C.C.), pp. 21-24, and the *Introductions* of Oesterley Robinson and Pfeiffer.

⁶⁵ S. A. Cook, *The Old Testament: a Reinterpretation* (Cambridge—London—New York, 1936), p. 53, says: 'The psalm of thanksgiving ascribed to Jonah (chapter ii) is incongruous in its present context.'

⁶⁶ Bewer, *Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 405.

⁶⁷ Cf. Driver, *Introduction*, p. 322.

⁶⁸ Jonah ii, 5

And therefore the absence of such a reference must be acknowledged as an important indication of the authenticity of Jonah's prayer.

And more can be said. Time 'and again it has been remarked that this 'prayer sounds like a thanksgiving. Indeed it is, and in the circumstances it had to be, for Jonah, by being swallowed by the fish, was rescued from the peril of drowning. As we can gather from the experience of the sailor mentioned in the article of Ambrose J. Wilson, the first sensation of the prophet must have been one of deliverance; he was rescued from death in the depths of the sea: 'The floods 'compassed me about, all thy billows and thy waves passed over me,' 'I went down to the bottoms of the mountains,'⁶⁹ and now he can utter words of praise: 'thou hast brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God.'⁷⁰ That he does not mention exactly how he was saved is only natural; do we not express our gratitude in the same way? We need not tell the Lord who rescued us or how we escaped the imminent danger; we simply want to give vent to our feelings of joy and thankfulness.

As to the resemblance it bears to a number of Psalms, we observe that in the Psalms there are a number of oft-recurring phrases picturing deadly peril. Yet the similarities are not so marked as to lead us to the conclusion that they must have influenced the author of Jonah ii. Feuillet is of the same opinion and, unlike all others who assume the fictitious character of the book, he is fully convinced that the prayer formed an integral part of the story from the beginning.⁷¹

Two further remarks may be added. First, we must deal with the fact that the holy temple of the Lord is mentioned twice.⁷² It is not likely that the same temple is meant in both cases. In verse 7 it undoubtedly is heaven, and in verse 4 we have to think of the earthly temple. The English version, 'yet I will look again toward thy holy temple,' expresses the prophet's firm conviction that the Lord will rescue him. Yet this seems to be somewhat out of place in the midst of his passionate complaint; it immediately follows the sentence, 'Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight.' Sinking away in the waters of the sea he feels himself utterly lost, forsaken even

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by God. Therefore it may be better to translate with Theodotion, 'how shall I ever look again toward thy holy temple?'⁷³ The prophet would then be recalling the moment when he had lost all hope of survival. But in verse 7 he rejoices: 'When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple'; and fully realizing the miraculous nature of his escape, he is sure of his final rescue. Therefore, repudiating vain idolatry (verse 8), he makes his vow to the God of heaven, who has shown His saving power; 'I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pray that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord' (verse 9).

Thus understood, the prayer is not at all out of place, and there is no reason to place it after ii, io, as some would suggest.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Jonah ii, 3, 6.

⁷⁰ Jonah ii, 6.

⁷¹ Feuillet, *Revue Biblique*, 1947, pp. 181-183.

⁷² Verse 4 and verse 7.

⁷³ Read 𐤒𐤍 instead of 𐤒𐤍 as most commentators do nowadays.

⁷⁴ E.g. Bewer in I.C.C.

VI. Why Jonah?

There is yet another important consideration. If the book of Jonah really has to be regarded as a parable, there must be some definite reason for the selection 'of the prophet Jonah as the *persona dramatis*. This has been rightly perceived by Oesterley and Robinson. There should, of course, be a definite connection between information given by other sources and what we are told in the -book itself. We are told little about him, however. We are only informed in the book of Kings that he 'predicted the rise of the kingdom of Jeroboam II.'⁷⁵ Oesterley and Robinson have undertaken to show the connection between this information and the theory that Jonah personifies Jewish narrow-minded particularism. They remind us that the historical Jonah lived at a period during which the Assyrian empire was growing to great power; it was shortly before his activity that the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III came for the first time into direct contact with Israel. The result was humiliating to the Israelites, who had, therefore, no reason to love the

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Assyrians.⁷⁶ And this they regard as a reason why the writer of the book of Jonah gave this prophet's name to his hero; for no other prophet had the same contact with the land of the north-east as Jonah.⁷⁷

This explanation is not altogether satisfactory. It may be true that shortly before the time of Jonah, son of Amittai, the Assyrian Empire had unfortunate dealings with Israel, but we have no reason for assuming that the fear and hatred of the Assyrians were particularly embodied in this prophet. His attitude shows no great enmity towards them. On the contrary, his prophecy is directed against the kingdom of Aram, which was defeated in battle by Jeroboam. If the author of the book of Jonah was looking for a prophet with a particular prejudice against Nineveh, he might have made a better choice; why did he not select as his hero Nahum the Elkoshite? And even if Jonah had prophesied against the Assyrians, would this fact be sufficient to explain why he was chosen to personify the spirit of particularism? There is not the slightest suggestion that he shared such views.⁷⁸

On the other hand, if somebody thinks it more advisable to follow Feuillet, who suggests the idea of withdrawal from divine mission, why did the author choose Jonah, the son of Amittai, regarding whom we read nothing of the kind in 2 Kings xiv, 25? Why did he not have recourse to the figure of Jeremiah, who actually says that he tried to 'silence the word of his God?'⁷⁹

A different explanation is suggested by Bewer. According to him the name of Jonah 'attracted our author as especially appropriate for his purpose' because Jonah's name, meaning 'dove,' had become a symbolic name for Israel. He 'needed a representative name' and Jonah 'suited

⁷⁵ 2 Kings xiv, 25. That no other than he is meant is manifest from the addition 'the son of Amittai' (Jonah i, 1). The identity is indisputable, as is stated by Karl Marti, *Das Dodeka-propheton* (Tübingen, 1904), p. 241.

⁷⁶ Shalmaneser III himself tells us that he received tribute from Jehu, the son of Omri; cf. Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament*, p. 304.

⁷⁷ Oesterley-Robinson, *Introduction*, pp. 376 f.

⁷⁸ Bewer, *Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 403, says, 'He was most probably a thoroughly nationalistic prophet'; but there is no proof for such an assertion.

⁷⁹ Jeremiah xx, 9.

his purpose.⁸⁰ But no one has yet proved that the term 'dove' had become a symbolic name for Israel. Bewer appeals

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to Psalm lxxiv, 19, where the synonym 'turtle dove' is applied to Israel, but the Hebrew word which is employed here⁸¹ is entirely different. Ephraim is compared to a 'silly dove' (Hosea vii, 11), but there is nothing symbolic in this; and likewise, when in Hosea xi, 11, the returning exiles are pictured as 'trembling as a bird out of Egypt, and as a dove out of the land of Assyria,' this cannot be adduced in favour of the idea that Jonah (Dove) was a symbolic name for Israel. It 'may have become a standing title for the people in later times,⁸² but there is no proof that this was already the case during the Biblical period.

Oesterley and Robinson also supply an additional reason why the author of the book may have chosen this name. Nineveh was the chief sanctuary of the goddess Ithtar, whose sacred bird was the dove; and, though they admit that the idea may seem fanciful at first, they think it possible that the author wished to place in contrast the 'dove' sent by Yahweh, the God of Israel, and the 'dove' sacred to the tutelary goddess of Nineveh.⁸³ As this is only a tentative suggestion, we need not attach much value to it, but we must state that it is highly artificial and in no way presents a satisfying answer to the question why this prophet should have been selected as the personification of Jewish nationalistic particularism.

VII. Conclusion

Let us survey the line of argument which we have 'been following, and try to reach a conclusion.

'Comparison of the book of Jonah with recognizable parables and allegories extant in the Old Testament has taught us that the character of the book is certainly not in harmony with the characteristics that the parables and allegories exhibit. The book completely lacks the simplicity and lucidity of the parables, and, unlike the allegories, it lacks any suggestion of non-literal meaning.

Careful examination of parts of the Bible which the author of the book of Jonah might have used in preparing a didactic story

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has demonstrated that there is not sufficient reason for assuming that he has borrowed any of his material. Even the prayer of Jonah can be regarded as a component part of the narrative.

Endeavours to discover the reason why the author chose the prophet Jonah, the son of Amittai, as the hero of a fictitious story (as some scholars allege), and in particular why he made him the mouth-piece of its moral teaching, have utterly failed.

⁸⁰ Bewer, *Jonah* (I.C.C.), p. 8. Cf. also his *Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 403.

⁸¹ דור

⁸² As Cheyne sets forth, *Encyclopaedia Biblica* II, 2567.

⁸³ Oesterley-Robinson, *Introduction*, p. 377.

We may conclude that there is not one single decisive argument in favour of the theory that the author did not intend to record historical facts, but rather to present a fictitious story with a moral purpose.

This may seem to be a negative conclusion. In reality, however, it is definitely positive. We recollect that the problem we had to solve is one that touches upon the literary genre. Now it is obvious to everyone that the form of the book of Jonah is that of an historical narrative. This in itself, as we pointed out, does not decide whether the author purposed to write an actual record of historical occurrences or a parable. But if all efforts fail to demonstrate that he meant to compose a parable, we are bound to conclude that he really intended to write history.

Such was also the opinion of the Jews. They did not regard the book of Jonah as a parable, but assumed it to be a record of real historical events. This is evident from the apocryphal book of Tobit. As Tobit is dying he calls to his son, Tobias, and commands him to go into Media, 'for (says he) I believe the word of God upon Nineveh, which Nahum spake, that all those things will be, and will befall Assyria and Nineveh.' This text is probably correct, but the Septuagint (with exception of Cod \aleph) has Jonah instead of Nahum. This may be a false emendation, but it proves that the Jews certainly did not regard the book of Jonah as a parable.⁸⁴ In the third book of Maccabees the priest Eleazar when praying refers to the deliverance of Jonah as follows: 'And when Jonah was languishing unpitied in the belly of the sea-born monster, thou didst restore him, O Father, uninjured to 'all his household.'⁸⁵ This reference is preceded by similar recollections of the Pharaoh who

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was drowned together with his proud host, of Sennacherib, who was defeated in sight of the holy city, of the deliverance of the three friends from the fiery furnace, and of Daniel from the lions' den. This likewise is a firm proof that the Jews regard the book of Jonah as a record of actual historic events. And Josephus, who repeatedly emphasizes the historical character of 'his work, includes the contents of the book in his *Antiquities*.⁸⁶ Though we may have good reason to question the actual value of his historical accuracy, there is no doubt at all that he voices the view of his people.

In this respect we may appeal to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah; for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'⁸⁷ The sign the Jews were looking for was certainly not a symbol or a parable; they requested a fact, a miracle, which

⁸⁴ Tobit xiv, 4. Cf. R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1913), Vol. I, p. 239. The LXX text reads: καὶ νῦν τέκνον, ἄπελθε ἀπὸ Νινευῆ, ὅτι πάντως ἔσται ἃ ἐλάλησεν ὁ προφήτης Ἰωνᾶς.

⁸⁵ Maccabees vi, 8.

⁸⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, ix, 10, 2.

⁸⁷ Matthew xii, 39 f. (cf. xvi, 4). It may not be out of place to insert a short comment on the phrase 'three days and three nights.' According to the Jewish method of reckoning 'a day and a night' make one 'onah; and a part of an 'onah could likewise be indicated as 'a day and a night.' So, as 'three days and three nights' were three 'onoth, even one entire day and night, with parts of the other two were equivalent to three 'onoth, cf. W. Ewing, 'The Sign of Jonah,' in *The Expositor*, Vol. XXV, pp. 466 f. Accordingly Jonah need not have been 3 x 24 hours in the belly of the fish, as Jesus actually was not 3 x 24 hours in the grave. This removes every difficulty which might arise from the fact that our Saviour was buried on Friday and rose from the grave on Sunday morning.

should prove Him to be the Messiah; and as Jesus refers to the sign of Jonah, this shows that he was aware of their implicit belief in the fish episode. Otherwise this reference would have been vain. I certainly do not contend that this opinion of the Jews is decisive, but it is not without importance, as they stood so much closer to the time and the spirit of the author of our book. Therefore Jewish tradition may serve to corroborate the result of our investigation.

Finally, and this is of much greater importance, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself undoubtedly accepted the events narrated in the book of Jonah as truly historical. This is manifest not only from the fact that He alludes to the stay of Jonah's sojourn in the whale's belly, but also from His reference to the repentance of the

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Ninevites: 'The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generations and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold a greater than Jonah is here.'⁸⁸ Our Lord could not have, made such a serious pronouncement unless He was firmly convinced that the Ninevites actually repented at the preaching of Jonah. A parabolic interpretation of this repentance is absolutely impossible in the light of this emphatic warning of Christ.

Now this may not 'mean much to many commentators, but it means everything to us who believe in Him as our precious Saviour, the Son of the Father, faultless in His humanity. And perhaps it may mean something to those who share this belief, but do not fully and entirely agree with us in accepting the Old Testament as an integral part of the infallible, authoritative Word of God.

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It should be noted that the account of the sailor swallowed by a whale on page 6 has recently been proved false (see "A Whale of a Tale: Fundamentalist Fish Stories" by Edward B. Davis [<http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1991/PSCF12-91Davis.html>]) and should therefore be discounted.

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⁸⁸ Matthew xii, 41. Cf. also Luke xi, 32.

The Book of Jonah book. Read 180 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. A major literary debut, an epic tale of love, failure, and unexp...
Overall, the biggest problem I had was a complete lack of believability. There wasn't a moment where I bought the idea that Jonah was a high-profile corporate lawyer on the verge of becoming partner of a Manhattan law firm or that Judith was a troubled genius. Sure, the narrative constantly reminds us they are by stating it outright, but a lot of telling isn't convincing if you're characters constantly act like moody twenty-somethings who are constantly befuddled by the world around them.