

CHAPTER III

JONAH

The Author and Date.

JONAH the son of Amittai prophesied during or shortly before the reign of Jeroboam II (782-753 B.C.—II Kings 14: 25). It should not, however, be taken for granted that the book was necessarily written by Jonah himself, as it is throughout in the third person.

The usual modern claim, based on linguistic evidence¹ reinforced by the almost universal unwillingness to accept its miraculous element, is that the book is post-exilic, and that it was written as a protest against the national exclusiveness of those that had returned from exile. We are far from convinced of the truth of the argument. We shall later show that the book fits into the needs of the middle of the eighth century B.C. We have insufficient evidence (only Hosea for certain) for the language of the North in the century before its fall to be dogmatic about the date of literature claiming to come from there. We agree with Sampey, "The Book of Jonah is anonymous, and we really do not know who the author was or when he lived. The view that Jonah wrote the story of his own disobedience and his debate with the merciful God has not been made wholly untenable."²

Historicity.

The uncertainty as to authorship need not affect our view as to the historicity and accuracy of the book; the oriental memory does not need to be tied to ink and parchment. If it was indeed written (and the same claim is made about Ruth) as a protest against the illiberality of the dominant spirit in post-exilic Judaism, it would hardly have had much effect unless it had been universally accepted as true.

Decisive should be our Lord's use of the book as historical (Matt. 12: 40f, Luke 11: 30). The appeal to our Lord's self-emptying (Phil. 2: 7, R.V.—the "*kenosis*" theory) is invalid, for He who had not the Spirit "by measure" would surely have been able to distinguish between history and parabolic or allegorical teaching, however noble.

¹ See Driver: LOT, p. 322, HDB, article Jonah.

² ISBE, article Jonah, The Book of.

Apart from the deep-rooted dislike of the modern spirit to accept the miraculous, there is no really valid argument against the historicity of the book. A man's unwillingness to accept the miraculous lies outside the scope of rational argument, and indeed our own willingness to accept is primarily an act of faith based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which in the last analysis we accept unhesitatingly because of what we know of Him. The other arguments against the historicity of Jonah are really arguments against an early date for its writing.

The Purpose of the Book.

Our estimate of the book's purpose will to some extent depend on the date we assign to its composition. Still it should be clear that the closing words are the climax of the book, "And should I not have pity on . . . persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle." Jehovah is not merely the creator of all life but its lord, and "He loveth all He made."

The idea that the early Israelites looked on Jehovah merely as a localized "tribal deity" has been largely exploded.¹ Their belief in Him as Creator was fundamental, even if its implications were often overlooked or forgotten. Jonah forgot one of them, when he tried to run away from Jehovah to Tarshish, and so earned for himself the stinging rebuke of the sailors (1: 9f). Just as the ordinary Israelite of the time attributed real, though perhaps vague powers to the gods of the other nations, so the sailors had quite understandably assumed that Jehovah was the god of the hills of Israel (cf. I Kings 20: 23).

Another implication was that Jehovah was the absolute lord of the nations, doing His will in and through them as He willed. But Jonah shows that this power was linked to a loving kindness which embraced all His creation.

This lesson of the power and love of God needed urgently to be learned in the middle of the eighth century B.C. In 745 B.C. Pul seized the throne of Assyria and called himself after one of the famous kings of the past Tiglath-Pileser (III). From then on Assyria was to be the rod of God's anger (Isa. 10: 5), smiting Israel until it ceased to be a people, and Judah until it was brought to the verge of destruction (Isa. 1: 9). In this time of unparalleled distress God's spokesmen had to see clearly that Jehovah was the lord of Assyria, and that behind all His smiting was His love. Where this truth was not grasped, the only logical course was to turn and worship

¹ Cf. Wright: *The Old Testament against its Environment*, p. 13.

the "victorious" gods of Assyria as did Ahaz and Manasseh (II Kings 16: 10-16; 21: 3).

The Sufferings of Disobedience (Ch. 1).

The wickedness of Nineveh needs no elaboration. The Assyrians seem to have been the only nation of antiquity in the Near East that gloried in cruelty, which they frequently depicted on their bas-reliefs.¹ A vivid impression of the hatred they caused will be gained from Nahum's fierce exultation over the coming fall of Nineveh. It is easy to understand why Jonah had no wish to save them from judgment.

In order to escape Jehovah's compulsion Jonah sailed for some port at the western end of the Mediterranean, the end of the world for him. (Ships of Tarshish were probably originally the ships that brought the metal ores for smelting; then the places called Tarshish would have got their name as main ports for the ore trade.)

There seems little point in stressing that neither the Hebrew nor the Greek (Matt. 12: 40 R.V.mg., R.S.V.) says that it was a whale that swallowed Jonah, for there are varieties that would have not the least difficulty in so doing. In actual fact we are left entirely in the dark as to what kind of marine monster it was.

The Psalm of Thanksgiving (Ch. 2).

This psalm is confidently appealed to as an added proof of the unreality of the story. It is said not to suit the circumstances (cf. ver. 5f) and to be a mere mosaic put together from other psalms (cf. the references *ad loc.* in any reference Bible); it is usually regarded as a later insertion. We agree that superficially at least the psalm is so incongruous, that its later insertion seems hardly reasonable. When, however, we grasp that Jonah is thanking God for saving him from drowning—hence the language of ver. 5f—which was for him a guarantee of God's forgiveness and ultimate deliverance, the psalm drops into place as entirely congruous. Even a land-lubber like Jonah knew that this was no ordinary fish.

As regards the language of the psalm, there are no direct quotations of other psalms, but rather echoes. Modern research has shown that the "psalm of thanksgiving" largely conformed to stock patterns, so such echoes are not entirely surprising, especially if Jonah, as was very likely the case, was attached to a sanctuary, where he may often have put together such psalms for the worshippers.

¹ There are some interesting examples in the British Museum.

Nineveh Repents (Ch. 3).

In the description of Nineveh there is probably an element of Oriental exaggeration, which is quite understandable. After the small tightly packed Palestinian cities on their *tells* the wide expanse of Nineveh, including even open land within its walls, must have seemed enormous. While "three days' journey" is a rough approximation, we find it confirmed for the circumference of the city by Diodorus Siculus, who estimated it at about 60 miles.¹ The impression—not necessarily correct—made by ch. 3 is that the whole of it took place within a day. If so the "day's journey" (ver. 4) covers his whole movements.

God's Tender Mercy (Ch. 4).

There came to Jonah the certainty that God had accepted the repentance of Nineveh (3: 10). It offended his sense of what God should do (4: 2), it spared Israel's most dangerous enemy, and though he did not say so, it destroyed his reputation as a prophet, so he asked to die (ver. 3). Still he decided to watch out the forty days in case God changed His mind (ver. 5).

His black spirits were slightly lightened by a gourd which grew up rapidly—"in a night" (ver. 10) need not be taken absolutely literally—and gave him a little shade. A worm at its root killed it and the hot sirocco wind both shrivelled it up and threatened Jonah with heatstroke. In his depression the loss of the gourd seemed the last straw. God was then able to bring home to Jonah through the importance to him of a mere ephemeral plant what God's creation must mean to the Creator. It seems likely that the 120,000 persons that could not "discern between their right hand and their left hand" are the younger children of two or three and under.

Additional Note.

The miracle of Jonah's preservation has more relevance than we might think. To the Israelite the untamable sea was a picture of chaos, the enemy of all settled order. Jehovah's control of the sea was also a picture of His control of chaos, and hence of everything. The great fish was doubtless a picture to Jonah of Leviathan, the monster lord of chaos, who meekly serves Jehovah as need arises.

A further treatment of the prophet may be found in my *The Prophets of Israel*, ch. VIII.

¹ See Lanchester: Obadiah & Jonah (C.B.), p. 53. It is "Greater Nineveh" that is meant, the actual city was much smaller, see Bewer: Jonah (I.C.C.), p. 51.