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The Missionary Prophet.

BY THE REVEREND J. H. MORRISON, D.D., BUCKSBURN, ABERDEEN.

IN the popular mind the Book of Jonah is associated with some ridiculous story about a whale, but to those who have insight and sympathy to discern its real meaning and intention no book in the Old Testament is more astonishing, more sublime, more worthy of reverence. It is years since Cornill wrote of it: 'I have read the Book of Jonah at least a hundred times, and I will publicly avow, for I am not ashamed of my weakness, that I cannot even now take up this marvellous book, nay, nor even speak of it, without the tears rising to my eyes, and my heart beating higher. This apparently trivial book is one of the deepest and grandest that was ever written, and I should like to say to every one who approaches it, "Take off thy shoes, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."'

It is a book written to teach the universality of God's redeeming love and to enlarge the sympathies of God's people towards all mankind. It was directed in the first instance against Jewish pride and exclusiveness which regarded all heathen nations as lying under the wrath of God and doomed to destruction. The discipline of the Exile, instead of broadening, had narrowed their minds so that later Judaism became more intensely bigoted and exclusive than before. There were illustrious exceptions, and perhaps the greatest of these was the writer of the Book of Jonah. A profoundly thoughtful and religious mind, a truly Christlike spirit, he pondered deeply the meaning of all God's dealings with His chosen people, and especially the significance of the Exile. He worked out under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit a philosophy of Jewish history which though clothed in weird imagery contains lessons of priceless value for the Church of every age.

He embodied his message in a story or parable, not simply because that was a popular form of teaching in the East where it is firmly believed that

Truth embodied in a tale
Shall enter in at lowly doors,

but doubtless also because the subject was so highly controversial and provocative that it could hardly bear to be set forth in formal argument. Moreover, it is not an argument we have here, but a tender appeal to the heart.

The first step towards an understanding of the book is to interpret its strange symbolism, strange to us but familiar enough to those for whom it was first written. That Jonah the prophet should represent Israel is quite in accordance with Old Testament usage, for Israel is frequently spoken of in the singular as God's servant or prophet. But the name Jonah is specially apt and well chosen, for it literally means 'a dove,' the messenger of peace, and there are passages where Israel is spoken of by that name (Hos 7¹² 11¹¹, also probably in the title of Ps 56, which is taken in the Talmud and LXX as referring to Israel in exile). The great fish or sea monster prepared by God is a familiar Hebrew image to denote a heathen empire or power of evil. Every reader of Daniel or the Book of Revelation is acquainted with this style of prophetic speech. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all refer to the heathen empires of their day as devouring monsters which God has prepared according to His purpose, which He rules and bridles and which He will finally overthrow. Particularly in Jer 51 there is the closest parallel to the Book of Jonah, where it is said, 'the king of Babylon hath devoured me . . . he hath swallowed me up like a dragon . . . I will bring forth out of his mouth that which he hath swallowed up.' Nothing could more fitly picture the catastrophe of the Exile when God's people were swallowed up, and the miracle of the Return when contrary to all human expectation the monster was made to disgorge his prey. Nineveh was in its day the great city of the heathen world whose downfall was hailed by the Jews and all the oppressed nations with delirious joy as can be read in the Book of Nahum. Its name is compounded of an Assyrian word meaning 'a fish,' so that all these things would very naturally suggest to the prophet's mind the parable of the great fish.

Once the story is looked at in this way it ceases to be grotesque. It is seen to deal with great historic events and religious principles. We can read it, as we read in the *Pilgrim's Progress* of Apollyon and of Giant Despair, without any sense of incongruity but with appreciation and spiritual profit. Like John Bunyan the writer of the Book of Jonah has an exceedingly fine touch and an unerring instinct. Every stroke of the brush tells,

and his work can bear to be examined minutely for it is significant down to the last detail. The broad outline of its teaching may be set down as follows.

1. *God's World-wide Purpose of Salvation.* The mission of Jonah to Nineveh is Israel's mission to the heathen world. For nothing less than this high destiny was Israel called and chosen. This was in view from the beginning. The blessing of Abraham had a universal reference, and prophetic souls felt that there could be no bounds to God's Kingdom. So they sang :

The beam that shines from Sion hill
Shall lighten ev'ry land ;
The King who reigns in Salem's tow'rs
Shall all the world command.

This prophetic instinct and this sense of a world-wide mission has become in the Church of the New Testament an explicit command. 'Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.' This is the very end for which the Church exists, and to deny it is to deny the faith.

2. *The Church's Failure.* Jonah refused to obey the divine command and sought to evade his mission. When bidden to go to the East he set out to flee to the remotest West, so completely did he set his face against the will of God. Here is a faithful portrait of the narrowness and bigotry of the Jewish Church which had no sympathy with the heathen, nor any desire for their salvation. On the contrary, there was a grim satisfaction in the thought that the heathen world was ripening for judgment, and Israel exulted in the anticipation of their day of doom. It was an attitude which made friendly intercourse impossible, quenched the missionary spirit, and frustrated the redeeming purpose of God. Not only in the Jewish but also in the Christian Church, as we must sadly confess, there are too many traces of this same attitude and spirit. We may not openly argue, as did some of the Post-Reformation Churches, that the Great Commission to go into all the world was the *personale privilegium* of the Apostles and no longer binding on the Church, but in practice we ignore it and take means to evade our Christian duty.

Jonah's disobedience to the divine command speedily brings him into deep waters. 'There was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.' When the seamen cast lots to determine for whose cause the trouble had arisen, the lot fell upon Jonah, and he confessed the justice of the decision. 'I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.' It is the lesson of

Israel's history, a lesson which the prophets were never weary of enforcing, that if only God's people would walk in His ways and fulfil His will, then would their peace be like a river and their righteousness like the waves of the sea. But when they rebelled against God's will then they brought trouble and sorrow upon themselves and upon the world. How different ancient history might have been if Israel had been a dove of peace among the nations !

The world of to-day is a storm centre, and the question arises, Who is responsible? Whatever others may say, the Church at least must be willing in a spirit of sincere penitence to take her full share of the blame. If the Church had cordially accepted and fulfilled her mission, if Christendom had been genuinely Christian and actively missionary, how different the state of the world would have been. Time and again, as history records, tragic failures on the part of the Church have involved the world in a sea of troubles. The corruptions and idolatries of the Early Mediæval Church provoked the reaction of Mohammedanism with all its bloody sequel of wars and persecutions down to the present day. There was a time, too, when the cause of Christ in China was in a most hopeful state, and the Emperor appealed to the Pope for missionaries, but got in reply a bottle of holy water ! Or to come to our own day, how much of the blame lies at the door of the Church for all the sea of bloodshed into which the peoples of Russia and of Spain have been plunged ? It is terrible to think that great nations, after being under the tutelage of the Church for centuries, should rise up in wrath to throw that Church overboard. Or to come still nearer home, had Protestant Britain given to the extension of Christ's kingdom a tithe of the energy she devoted to imperial expansion, might she not have been God's messenger of peace to all mankind ? But she went her own way, to amass wealth and power and territory, and so instead of friendship she stirred great nations to envy and hatred which plunged the world into war and the present sea of troubles. It might be the beginning of better things if the Church would come together in sincere penitence and make confession before the whole world, saying, 'I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.'

3. *The Heathen world* is painted with wonderful sympathy, a sympathy rare indeed among the Jews. Look at the sailors, what fine fellows they are ! How decent in their treatment of Jonah, and how humane ! Even when they know he is

to blame they won't throw him overboard till they have done their utmost to save him. When the Jews were scattered abroad they must have met with many kind and neighbourly people, for there are such people in every age and country. A kindly tea-planter, looking down on a pretty Scottish village, exclaimed, 'I have as many decent hard-working folk in my tea garden as you have down in that village.' To go abroad in a proud spirit, despising the native and brutally saying, 'He understands nothing but the boot,' is the gravest sin and crime against humanity. The heathen have just the same human nature as we have, the same faults and the same virtues.

Moreover, they are religious, and often a reproach to God's people by their devotion. The heathen sailors are at their prayers while Jonah is asleep. Time and again the prophets urge this against Israel that the heathen are more devout. In their blindness they may 'bow down to wood and stone,' but they *do* bow, they have the religious instinct in the highest degree, and they seek after God with an earnestness which may well put God's own people to shame. No wonder then that the gospel, when it comes to such kindly and instinctively religious people, wakens a response. When Jonah preaches to Nineveh, though his message is of judgment rather than of mercy, Nineveh repents. How often has this miracle been repeated down through the Christian ages, and not least in our own time. Cannibals have been won for Christ, and races so degraded as to be counted sub-human have been raised and changed. So that there is now on record, for all who care to read it, abundant and triumphant proof that God's message can touch the universal heart of man, and that the gospel is indeed the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.

4. Finally, *God's infinite pity is movingly set forth.* Jonah was only half converted, as the Church still is on the subject of missions. Jonah had carried out his mission as a duty, but with little faith and love. He is disappointed that Nineveh should escape judgment upon its sins. He is jealous of that heathen city getting a share of God's favour. He is like the elder brother in the parable who, when he heard the music that welcomed the prodigal's return, 'was angry and would not go in.' This was not only the attitude of the Jewish Church generally but it depicts the feelings of many in the Apostolic Church who could not believe it possible that God had 'granted

to the gentiles repentance unto life.' It takes a high degree of the grace of God to purge the heart from such feelings. It is so natural to feel jealous and resentful when peoples and races, which have been counted inferior, claim a share in the Christian heritage and an equal standing within the Christian brotherhood. Missionaries of experience have confessed that what they found hardest of all was to preach the gospel without condescension and in a genuine spirit of brotherly love.

But the prophet's narrowness is rebuked by the infinite pity and patience of God. He looks down on Nineveh and sees not merely its heathenism but its home life, not merely its kings and warriors but the masses of its toiling people, its scores of thousands of helpless infants, even its dumb animals. Nothing kindles sympathy like the actual sight of helplessness and suffering. When we see thousands of little Spanish children brought weeping to our shores every heart is moved. But the heathen are far away and no concern of ours, we think. Because we do not actually see we do not acutely feel. If we could but see as God sees, then perhaps we should learn in some degree to pity as He pities. It is indeed a sublime picture which is here given of God's pity for Nineveh, and a picture which brings comfort to the heart. These ancient cities and civilizations have long since gone down to the dust, without knowledge of the true God and Saviour, but all the while His watchful eye was upon them and His fatherly love brooded over them, and they all have fallen into His hands who, as Jonah confessed, is 'a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.' And there we leave them.

But if any should imagine that this is reason why we may leave the heathen of our day to the uncovenanted mercies of God, then let it be noted that God's pity for Nineveh expressed itself in sending to them His Word through the mouth of His servant Jonah. Nineveh was not saved without Jonah; his preaching brought them to repentance, and made them fit to receive God's mercy. Even so is the Church of to-day commissioned and enjoined to carry the saving word to the heathen world, and through that message to become the means of salvation to all mankind. It is a work of infinite value which may avert wars and sufferings and judgments untold. If that work be neglected and left undone, then the question may be, not about the final destiny of the heathen, but whether the Church itself can be saved.