

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

advantage of an elect few, and brings only tidings of the stroke of doom to the great mass of mankind ; or that it applies itself only to one aspect of human existence, in place of covering and blessing it through all its aspects, relations, and pursuits. And hence we have much still to learn from this noble Hebrew psalm, and may well find a very "*present truth*" in its antique but not outworn forms of thought.

S. Cox.

STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS.

I. JONAH.

THE prophet Jonah is the earliest star in that great movement of illumination which glorified the reigns of Jeroboam II., Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah ; he is the dawn of which Isaiah is the noontide. His rising is the boundary-line between two worlds—the age of sense and the age of faith ; and therefore the Book which bears his name is a strange blending of the historian and the preacher. Perhaps of all the Jewish prophets, Daniel excepted, it is the Book whose contents are most widely and popularly known ; it points a moral even to the child in the nursery. The narrative form in which it is cast has made its sayings household words. Joel, Amos, Hosea, Habakkuk, even Isaiah, are in their personal aspect little more than names ; but the incidents of the life of Jonah are familiar to our earliest years. We have received an indelible picture of the man, with his faults and his misfortunes. The call to a Divine mission ; the attempt to avoid that call by flight ; the great storm on the deep, pointing to an act of transgression ; the casting out of the Prophet into the waves ; his miraculous preservation ; his subsequent struggles to fulfil his office, and his final lament over his withered gourd : all these are familiar even to our earliest years.

And yet, as we have said, the Book of Jonah has a spiritual as well as a historical side. Its interest is not limited to the popular mind; it has a problem for the Biblical student. Its problem for him hinges on a totally different point from that which arrests the attention of the general reader. To the general reader the central object of interest is the punishment of Jonah's disobedience; to the student the main point of interest is the disobedience itself. What he wishes to have explained is not so much the miracle of Chapter ii. as the confession of Chapter iv. The miraculous feature of the Book is rather its seeming violation of moral order than its professed violation of physical law. Here is a man receiving a Divine call to the prophetic office, and compassing sea and land to escape that call. In seeking to escape it, he is not actuated by a low and mistaken sense of the character of God; on the contrary the Being whom he recognizes as an object of worship is One who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness. Yet not only does the perception of these qualities fail to attract Jonah into the Divine service; but he expressly declares that it is by his perception of them he is repelled from that service. It is just because the God whom he recognizes *is* merciful, gracious, and forgiving, that he refuses to obey his voice. Is there not something very peculiar here, very different from the ordinary modes of human thought and action? That a man should be offered what in our days would be called "promotion"; that he should be summoned to take a prominent part in the service of the national religion, and promised a special gift for the performance of his task; that he should recognize in the call the voice of a Being who was gracious and merciful, longsuffering and forgiving; that, so far from being attracted by the qualities of such a Master, he should see in these qualities the greatest possible barrier to his service; and that, to avoid becoming his servant, he

should flee from his native country and seek refuge on a foreign shore, is, at first sight, an inexplicable anomaly.

Yet a deeper reflection will convince us that there is here no anomaly at all. For, if we consider the matter more carefully, we shall see that, from the worldly point of view, the misgivings of Jonah were those of a shrewd and calculating mind; and that the conception of a God who was gracious, merciful, and forgiving, was in one sense a deterring element to the mind of any prophet. The conception of such a God was in fact fitted above all other things to shake the prophet's confidence in the fulfilment of his own predictions. In the older days of the Jewish commonwealth the prophets had been bold. They had gone forth to confront the offending man, or the offending nation, and had proclaimed in tongues of fire the advent of impending calamities; but what had been the ground of their boldness? It was their belief that the God whom they served was a Being whose sentences were inexorable, and from whose judgments there could be no appeal. When the prophet was commanded to go out into the Ninevehs and the Babylons of this world, to lift up his voice against their iniquity, to declare that God was about to execute judgment on their transgressions, he had no hesitation in obeying the mandate. And why? Simply because he had no doubt that the mandate would be executed. He believed the God from whom he had received it to be One who never went back from his word, and therefore he was under no apprehension lest his prediction of judgment should be unfulfilled. But when men began to think of God as a Father rather than a Judge, when the thought of Divine mercy began to blend with the conception of Divine law, it was evident that the mind of the prophet must be greatly affected by the change. The threatened judgment upon a guilty city when uttered by an inexorable God was one thing; when uttered by a

heavenly Father it was a very different thing. The inexorable God would surely bring it to pass; the heavenly Father would bring it to pass only if its threatening should produce no repentance. "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown," were words which could be uttered with confidence only by one who believed in a Divine law analogous to the laws of the Medes and Persians. To a prophet who had seen the vision of a God of mercy the call to proclaim such a message might, from a purely selfish point of view, be contemplated only with dismay. What if the very utterance of the prediction should induce Nineveh to repent? What if the impending cloud of Divine wrath should impel the guilty city to seek emancipation from her guilt, and to supplicate a return to the favour of Heaven? A prophet who had seen God in the new light would feel that such a supplication could not be refused. What would then become of his prediction, and what would become of himself as the predictor of that which had not come to pass? Where would be his credit in the eyes of his countrymen? where his reputation in the judgment of posterity? Would not men look upon him with contempt as one who had pretended to a revelation which the facts of life had demonstrated to be untrue? Would not the world say that he had been either a deceiver or a dupe? Was such an office to be coveted? was a sphere fraught with such dangers to be an object of desire? We can hardly wonder that a man so circumstanced should have answered, No; nor can we marvel that the immediate impulse of his frail humanity should have been to shun the Presence which suggested to him his arduous call.

Now, in the days of Jonah, the land of Palestine seems to have been passing through some such period of transition in its conception of the character of God. The lineaments of the Divine face and form were becoming transfigured to its gaze, and the vision of a heavenly mercy was softening

the image of inexorable law. The change had not originated in the days of Jonah; if we are not greatly mistaken, it had been handed down to Jonah from the closing years of Elijah. To institute any comparison between these two men must seem, at first sight, the wildest of paradoxes; they are to all outward appearance moral contrasts. The bold uncompromising prophet of fire whose word was law, and whose purpose was inflexible, seems to have little in common with the shrinking, doubting, almost cowardly spirit of him who fled from the presence of the Lord. And yet, if we mistake not, the last years of Elijah contain the germ of the life of Jonah. Who can study those years and fail to see that the theological change was already in the air?

The prophet of fire, as he stood in the cave of Horeb, experienced the very sense of disappointment felt by Jonah in the averted destruction of Nineveh. He had witnessed the thunder, and the earthquake, and the fire of the Divine wrath on Carmel; and he had read in these the promise of God's instant judgment upon transgressors. That promise, to outward appearance, had not been kept. Ahab had regained his strength, Jezebel had regained her power, and the authority of the Prophet had suddenly lost its influence over the minds of men. In that hour of humiliation Elijah anticipated the despairing cry of Jonah. *His* Nineveh had remained undestroyed, notwithstanding the prophecy of its destruction. The promised thunder and earthquake and fire had passed away, and had been succeeded by a great silence. To Elijah, that silence was a new experience. He must have remembered how in the days of old the prophet spake and it was done. He could not have forgotten how even the forgiveness of David's sin had not procured him exemption from outward chastisement; and he must have felt with some bitterness that he had been called to an office whose visible glory had

departed. It is significant that Elijah under the juniper tree of Horeb, and Jonah under the gourd of Nineveh, should both have uttered the same prayer, that their prophetic ministry might be closed in death (1 Kings xix, 4, and Jonah iv. 3).

But what was the answer to this plaint of Elijah? for in that answer we shall find the key to the moral purpose of the Book of Jonah. The prophet of fire complained that the fire had suddenly vanished from his life, that the earthquake had ceased to follow his word, that the thunder no longer rolled at his command. The answer to his complaint was "the still small voice"; it told him that his power lay in the very silence which, to his mind, constituted his weakness. The symbol of the still small voice had many different meanings to the world; but to Elijah, as a prophet, it had one distinct and peculiar meaning. It said to him that prophecy was about to enter on a new stage of its development, that its external glitter was about to be exchanged for an inward glory. It revealed to him that the office of a prophet was henceforth more and more to become the office of a preacher. Its power was no longer to consist in its ability to bring down fire from heaven, but in its capacity to kindle fire in the silent recesses of the soul. Its glory was not henceforth to be the earthquake which shattered a city, but the strength of moral conviction that could shake the impenitent heart. The still small voice was itself to constitute the thunder of prophetic power. Hitherto the prophet had measured his success by the exactness with which his predictions had been fulfilled; he was now to measure it by the moral effect they had produced on the minds of his audience. He was to go into the wicked Ninevehs and Babylons of the earth, and tell them that their wickedness would bring destruction upon them; but he was to remember that there were two

distinct ways in which the destruction might come. It might come in the death of the city, or it might come in the death of the city's iniquity; it might be either the product of a physical or the result of a moral revolution. And the prophet of the new age was told to long more for the moral than for the physical change. He was told to see the highest success of his preaching, not in the fire or the earthquake, but in the still small voice which revealed the awakened conscience of his auditors. He was told that the law against transgression would have received its noblest vindication in the hour when it should have destroyed the transgression itself. To waste a guilty city by fire and sword was no real victory to the arm of Jehovah; but to burn up the impurity of the city by the fire of penitence was the very triumph of Divine truth. As the messenger of that Divine truth the prophet was above all other things to seek this triumph. He was to realize the fact that, when God spares Nineveh, He disarms it for evermore; that the keenest fire of destruction is that Love which consumes the base alloy, and that the most powerful agent in kindling it is the proclamation of a Heavenly Mercy.

Now it cannot surprise us that this new revelation of the Divine Nature should have fallen on the ancient spirit of prophecy with a somewhat depressing effect. We cannot wonder that such men as Elijah and Jonah should have seen in this Gospel of Mercy an obstacle to all their prophetic aims. They were not unmerciful men. The prophet of fire had given ample evidence in his life that he had been touched with the feeling of human infirmities; the prophet Jonah had too little fire in his nature to render him implacable towards the enemies of God. Yet these men had been accustomed to think it the special function of the prophet to proclaim an unalterable message. That the still small voice of repentance should avert the thunder, and the earth-

quake, and the fire; that the destruction of the sin should be substituted for the destruction of the sinner, was, to them and to their age, the revelation of a new experience, and an experience which, because it was new, was not wholly free from pain. It was the first breath of a Christian atmosphere which had been wafted into the Jewish theocracy; and to those who had held the glory of the Theocracy to be its fixed and immutable government, the breath of the Christian atmosphere brought a sense of disturbance and innovation.

It was essential, then, first of all, that the mind of the prophet himself should be impressed with the necessity for the change. Before he could proclaim the new Gospel of Mercy he must be taught that he himself had need of that Mercy, that the conception of an immutable Divine law was not sufficient to support his soul in passing through the waters of tribulation. In order to be taught that fact the prophet had to pass through the waters. There are some things which a man may learn from the testimony of others, but the sense of need is not one of them; he can only learn that by the experience of his own life. Accordingly, before the great roll of the new prophetic age was opened, the need for such an age had to be impressed on the heart of the prophet; and an individual life was selected to be the recipient of that experience. That life was Jonah's. He came into the world to be the first of that noble band who may be called distinctively the prophets of the Divine Mercy; and his special mission, as their forerunner, was to learn by experience that he himself needed the mercy he was to teach. A hundred morals have been pointed from his life; but the deepest and the most unnoticed is that which lies on the very surface of the history—the soul's necessity for an intervening help of God. Here is a man starting on the path of existence with a set of preconceived opinions derived

from his ancestors, believing above all things in the creed of Elijah with its laws of inexorable retribution, its thunder, its earthquake, and its fire. God meets him on the way,—as He meets us all—in those experiences which we call the dispensations of Divine Providence. The life of Jonah has to pass through two forms of affliction to which every life is more or less exposed; he has to learn the nature of great calamities, and he has to learn the vexation of trivial circumstances. He first meets with affliction on a grand scale. He is placed in the midst of the storm, and his life is in jeopardy. All human resources prove powerless to avert the impending stroke, and the Prophet is only saved by the interposition of an influence over which he has no control. In that hour he awakens to the sense of his nothingness and his need. He finds himself to be frail and impotent in the presence of the mighty forces of Nature, and he sends through the vast expanse a cry for succour. Then the curtain falls, to rise again upon a new scene. The storm subsides into a calm, and the man, who recently had been tossing on the waves, is seen resting quietly under a green and leafy shade. Suddenly, the black care which had been expelled from the ocean rises out of the garden, and Jonah is confronted by sorrow, no longer in the form of a tempest, but in the withering of a gourd. One feels almost disposed to smile at the seeming anti-climax, and would do so but for the remembrance that the picture is true to life. Men are as powerfully affected by the withered gourds of life as by its tempests; not infrequently they are more deeply moved. One half of our miseries arises from disappointment in trifles. Sometimes the withering of the gourd is a purely subjective process. It is not necessary that a man's possessions should be lost or diminished in order that his gourd may wither; he has only to lose the freshness of his first joy in it. The transition from happiness

to discontent is in most cases made from within. A man's wealth may be the same this year as it was last, and yet the gourd of his wealth may be withered; he may have learned by bitter experience that wealth is inadequate to the wants of his soul. Such moments are harder to bear than the positive storms of existence. The storm is at least a definite calamity, and reveals the source of the trouble; but the withering of the inward gourd is a sense of calamity everywhere, incapable of being defined, and therefore more inaccessible to cure. The withered gourd, even more than the storm, reveals to the human heart its need of mercy. The sense of dissatisfaction is ever a sense of solitude. It drives the spirit back within itself by the revelation of the fact that the outer streams are dry; and by awakening within it the experience of its own loneliness, it impels it to seek for supernatural succour.

Such, then, was the mission of Jonah. He was sent into the world to be educated into a new experience—the need of a God who could modify his penalties. He was to be the first prophet of the Divine Mercy; and he was to learn by the tempest and the withered gourd the necessity for that mercy. He was to be what his name signifies—the dove. He was to come forth from the flood of waters a witness, in his own experience, of man's need of redeeming Love, and a herald, in his own testimony, of the approaching advent of that Love. In him the old spirit of prophecy was to go down into the waves to be baptized anew, and to come forth from its baptism purified and ennobled, having exchanged the frown of vengeance for the smile of reconciliation and the glance of forgiveness. For, let us remember, how wide was this message of mercy which Jonah was to proclaim. It was a proclamation of pardon to Nineveh, the capital of that great Assyrian empire whose power and whose religion were so dangerous to the peace of Judea. But that is the smallest part of the wonder; the marvel lies

in the ground of the forgiveness. As we read the closing words of the book of Jonah, we are surprised beyond measure at the breadth and liberality evinced by the Jewish nation of that age. We find there the mind of a prophet taken captive against its will by a Divine impulse of forgiveness, impelled to utter words of pardon to a guilty and a hostile city; and impelled to utter these words on the broad ground of a common humanity. The sparing of Nineveh is not based on any Jewish or local consideration. It is not founded on the intercession of a prophet of the God of Israel; it is offered in spite of his opposition. It is grounded, purely and exclusively, on the pity of a Divine Father's heart. It is based upon the vastness and the ignorance of a heathen population, whose numbers and whose darkness have stirred into tenderness the depths of the fatherhood of God. Nay, the sense of Divine Pity has a more universal basis still. It listens not merely to the cry of a helpless humanity; it extends to the wants of the inferior creation: "Should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; *and also much cattle?*" The transition from the world of men to the world of cattle seems an anti-climax, but it is an anti-climax which reveals the majesty of God. The Divine Light shines the more brightly in its downward flight of condescension, and its highest glory appears when it has enfolded the lowest grades of being. Judaism never had a grander vision of God than it saw in that moment. It was no longer the mere Father of the nation it beheld, no longer simply the theocratic Ruler of the Jewish commonwealth. It looked in that hour upon the God of the whole earth, in the whole breadth of his earthly sympathy. It saw Him as the Father not only of Jews but of Assyrians, not only of men but of cattle. It beheld his care stretched outward to embrace the heathen, bent

downward to enfold the beast of the field. For once at least in its history, it had a glimpse of unconditioned Divine Mercy, of sympathy free from local boundaries, of pity unqualified by conditions of race or clime. In the utterance of the earliest of its prophets, it struck the very key-note of Gospel liberty.

And let us remember the circumstances in which Judaism struck this key-note. It was not the utterance of its despair; it was not the cry of its captivity; it was the voice of its days of triumph. We are apt to think of the Jewish nation as having been broadened into catholic sentiments only by those repeated strokes of adversity which impaired its national strength. We are not surprised to find that the nation, in emerging from captivity, began to think more kindly of those heathen lands wherein it had sojourned and with whose customs companionship had made it familiar; it seems only natural that in circumstances such as these the barrier of exclusiveness should give way. But the matter is altogether different when we see the barrier surmounted in the days of Jonah. The days of Jonah were not days of national depression; they were full of promise and rich with fulfilment. The national dreams of the past had almost realized themselves; the expectations of the future had become yet more aspiring. The people of Israel seemed about to retrieve the lost glories of the age of Solomon. The brilliant reign of Jeroboam II. had revealed the latent resources of the theocratic kingdom, and had opened up the prospect of an universal dominion. There was success abroad; there was prosperity at home; and on every side there were materials to foster the pride of the Jewish commonwealth. Yet it was precisely at this period that the theocratic kingdom began to display the sentiment of national brotherhood. It was from its age of prosperity that it first cast upon the surrounding nations a glance of genuine interest and kindness. The prophecy of Jonah

suggests more than it expresses. When we read between the lines, we see in this Book the utterance of a Protestant tendency which had long been hovering in the air. We see that the Jewish commonwealth was becoming weary of its own narrowness, and was eager to find some point of contact with the culture of neighbouring lands. We are impressed, in short, with the fact that the heart of Judaism had become for a moment the heart of humanity, had forgotten its individual distinctions, had remembered only its interests in common with the race of man. The pulse of all creation was beating within it; the object of its worship was the God of the whole earth, who cared not only for the wants of the heathen but for the wants of the cattle; and in the worship of Him the heart of Judaism felt that its sympathies were linked to every living thing. Nor need we be surprised that, in this age of prosperity, the nation should have exhibited a generosity so remarkable and unwonted. We must remember that its earliest days had been days of national unselfishness. The Jews had once been Hebrews, and the spirit of Hebraism had never been exclusive. The prophets of Israel were not the sudden growth of a new spirit; they were rather the revival of a great past. The spirit of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob was reproduced in them. The cosmopolitan feeling which had enabled the patriarchs, even while preserving their nationality, to sojourn in all lands, and to accommodate themselves to all customs, lived again in the hearts of the prophets. They felt that, like the father of the faithful, they had not yet found their country; and they were willing to view all lands as steps on the journey towards it. They must have remembered, too, that the old tradition of the rainbow (Genesis ix. 12) had associated their nation with God in a cosmopolitan covenant. That rainbow was to be a token not only between God and man, but between God and beast; the cattle of the field had been

made parties to the sacred covenant. It was no unfitting sequel to such a promise that, when the flood of waters was gathering around a heathen city, the Prophet should see the vision of a rainbow of Mercy, which embraced and transfigured the whole creation of God.

Jonah, then, was the precursor in the Jewish Church of that great movement towards liberty which never paused until it culminated in the universal priesthood of Pauline Christianity. Between Jonah and St. Paul—the first and the last of the Jewish Protestant leaders—there are not wanting points of strong analogy. We see, originally, in both, a struggle between the old and the new, an attachment to the prepossessions of childhood warring against the influx of modern culture. In both, it seemed, at one time, as if the prepossessions of childhood would prevail, as if the influence of Jewish prejudice would conquer the tendency to recognize the brotherhood of humanity. Jonah goes to Nineveh, not to bless, but to curse; Paul goes to Damascus, not to save, but to destroy. Yet, in both cases, the prophet is conquered by the influence of that foreign culture against which he has come to inveigh. Jonah is compelled, against his will, to strike the first note in the message of universal fatherhood; Paul is constrained, in opposition to his birth and education, to preach that faith of which he had long made havoc. The battle of Jewish Protestantism was often doubtful, but never lost. It had to contend not only against the weapons of its enemies, but against the half-heartedness of its own supporters; Jonah and Paul were driven into the fight by an influence which they struggled to repel. Yet the very fact proves that, behind the individual man, there was a national spirit. In some lands the spirit of freedom has been awakened by the life of a great soul; in Judea souls naturally humble were made great by the impulse of the spirit of freedom. The national life worked out its own emancipation. It called Abraham out of his natural home

in Ur of the Chaldees ; it summoned Jonah from his dreams of Jewish patriotism in the court of the second Jeroboam : and it awakened Saul of Tarsus from the sleep of Pharisaism into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

GEORGE MATHESON.

ON THE SECOND EPISTLE OF ST. PETER.

I. HAD THE AUTHOR READ JOSEPHUS ?

It is well known that the genuineness of the Second Epistle of St. Peter is open to considerable doubt. In attempting to ascertain the character of the Apostle's teaching, Bishop Lightfoot (*Epistle to the Galatians*, p. 355), writes as follows : " If the deficiency of external evidence forbids the use of the Second Epistle in controversy, the First labours under no such disabilities." The " if " appears to be not hypothetical, but equivalent to " although " : at all events in the following pages (*Ibid.*, pp. 356-8) the Bishop confines himself strictly to the First Epistle, and makes no use whatever of the Second. Canon Westcott states with great force the deficiency of external evidence. To obtain a complete idea of the judgment of the Church upon the Canon, we must combine (Westcott, *Canon*, p. 264) the two Canons of the East and West ; by doing this " we obtain, *with one exception*, a perfect New Testament without the admixture of any foreign element." That " exception " is the so-called Second Epistle of St. Peter, which is excluded by the consent both of the Eastern and Western Canon. Up to the time of Clement of Alexandria " no trace has been found " of its existence (*Ibid.*, p. 349) ; and it is rejected both by Origen and by Eusebius. The circumstances in which the Epistle was written (supposing it to be genuine) make the