The Sign of Jonah.

I.

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THERE is a very striking suggested explanation of the story of Jonah which no one has yet mentioned in these columns, and which appears to me to be worthy not only of consideration, but of careful investigation on the part of those whose attainments fit them for the task. If proved tenable, it would certainly clear away some difficulties. It comes to us from the side of Archæology, and I believe owes its origin to Mme. Zénaïde A. Ragozin, to whom it was suggested by a passage in Lenormant's *Legende de Semiramis*. Briefly, it stands as follows :—

1. We learn from the Assyriologist that the Assyrian word for 'Nineveh' and the Assyrian word for 'fish' are almost identical; the former being NINUA, the latter NUNU.

2. The archaic form of the written name 'Nineveh' in cuneiform is obviously hieroglyphic, and plainly represents the outline of a *fish*, surrounded by lines which may indicate a tank or enclosure, thus—

Nineveh is, therefore, the great Fish City; and possibly the origin of the name and figure may be referred, in some connexion more or less remote, to the Babylonian Ea-Oannes, the ancient fish-god who was believed to have given mankind the earliest instruction in the arts and sciences, and to the later Canaanitish fish-god Dagon, and fish-goddess Derketo. Here is a question which would repay a thorough and scientific inquiry.

The solution of the story which is now offered, however, amounts to this: that the fish which swallowed Jonah was none other than Nineveh, the great fish-city itself; out of the depths of which place, menaced on all sides by physical peril, and overwhelmed by the crime and wickedness around him, he uttered the cry for deliverance so poetically expressed in chap. ii. We have then, on this assumption, a story in the form of an Oriental parable, with a kernel of actual historical truth, encumbered with certain foreign additions resulting from long tradition and repetition, whether oral or written; the scribes in the latter case being presumably ignorant of the real history which lay at the root. This may account for the introduction of the incidents in chap. i., which would seem necessary to scribes of a later age (to whom the name NINUA would carry no etymological meaning), in order to account for Jonah's being found in the belly of a fish—an incongruity which must have struck men even in those days. Such is the suggested solution, and it would be a great thing to have it either confirmed or disproved by thorough and competent research.

II.

By Sir J. W. DAWSON, C.M.G., LL.D., F.R.S., Montreal.

In the August number of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, I observe a reference to the apparent severance between criticism and 'common sense,' illustrated, among other things, by letters sent to the editor of *The Biblical World* by 'American' (meaning, I suppose, United States) scholars, in answer to a question respecting our Lord's reference to Jonah in Matthew xii. 40.

Has it occurred to these scholars to inquire as to the sense in which Jesus understood the story of Jonah, on the supposition that the passage is genuine, and that He believed He was referring to a real event, or one so regarded by His audience?

He must have supposed either that Jonah's case was one of mere suspended animation, and therefore natural, or He must have regarded the prophet's deliverance as wholly miraculous.

He could scarcely have cited it in the former sense, though such a view might be physiologically possible, for in that case He would have justified the assertion of those who afterwards held that He was not dead when placed in Joseph's tomb. If, on the other hand, He regarded the prophet's escape as miraculous, it was surely a much less miracle than His own resurrection, for Jonah was not crucified nor transfixed with a spear, nor reported on as dead by a Roman officer. Still

more, Jonah had not ventured to predict his own wonderful adventure before it occurred. Had he done so, the Sadducees, who seem to have viewed his story as historical, would have condemned him as a fraudulent pretender just as they condemned Jesus. Yet Christians are supposed to believe in the resurrection of Christ. 'If Christ be not risen, then is our faith vain.'

It seems plain, therefore, that if the 'eminent scholars' reject the story of Jonah, they must *a fortiori* deny the more incredible pretensions of Jesus of Nazareth. But they may plead that the statement in Matthew xii. 40 is wrongly attributed to Christ. Matthew, however, who, when at the receipt of custom, was no doubt familiar with many such evasions, will not let them escape in this way. His reference to the repentance of the Ninevites, especially when coupled with that to the Queen of Sheba, implies quite as certainly the historical truth of Jonah as does His reference to the three days. It is true that a preacher may cite as illustrations fictitious or allegorical personages, but he must not cite them as analogical evidence. Let him try this before an audience of unbelievers, and he will find them muttering: 'That proves nothing, the thing never happened.' Is it any wonder that in such circumstances ordinary men believe that, as you put it, they must 'make their choice between the critics and Christ?' The Sadducees logically rejected Jesus as a pretentious impostor. Yet it would seem that in so far as the case of Jonah is concerned, they were nearer to the kingdom of heaven than the 'eminent scholars' of to-day. What can plain men do when our religious guides deny so many statements of alleged facts to which Christ commits Himself? In still another sense this is the case. There is something pathetic in the appeal of Jesus. He understands how remarkable was the conversion of the Ninevites by the preaching of a wandering dervish like Jonah, and contrasts this with the manner in which 'His own' received Him not. He realises the long and painful journey of the Queen of Sheba from South Arabia, and contrasts it with the conduct of men who at first derided His heavenly wisdom; and when they found His doctrine making way among the people, conspired to murder Him. Our 'eminent scholars' are insensible to this pathos, and treat Jesus still more scurvily, for they coolly sit in judgment on Him as to whether or not He understood what He was speaking about.

The truth is, that neither the common people nor those of scientific habits of thought can find any standing-room on the gossamer wires on which critical rope-dancers attempt to balance themselves. I have in my long pilgrimage had much experience of the modes of thought, both of the people at large and of advanced scientific thinkers, and I know this to be the case. The critics may do little harm to believers, because they have an evidence within, even the Spirit of God; but they will win no converts, and will drive many to unbelief. I know with what scornful loathing scientific minds reject the attempts to reunite the higher criticism with Christianity. They know that if they believe the one they must reject the other; and the hard-headed working man is exactly of the same mind.

Still, truth must prevail even though the heavens should fall. But what is the truth? In so far as the Book of Jonah is concerned, it is a simple, straightforward story, evidently written in a spirit of humility and self-abnegation, and with honesty of purpose. Irrespective of the miracle or providential intervention which it records, it is natural and probable, and it fits in with the contemporary history of Israel and Assyria so far as known. It is replete with high moral and spiritual teaching, and, like Luke's narrative of St. Paul's voyage, throws much precious light on the life and habits of the time. It seems probable that the critical maw will have to disgorge Jonah, and that he will live to preach to successive generations of men, albeit of more culture and more logical minds than those of our day, after the memory of his detractors has perished.

As I do not take in *The Biblical World*, perhaps you will kindly ask its editor to add the above to the answers he has received, not as that of an 'eminent scholar,' but of a humble student of nature and of man, and of the Bible as the one and indivisible 'Word of God.'