

THE SIGN OF THE PROPHET JONAH AND ITS MODERN CONFIRMATIONS

There are few stories in the Bible which have been subjected to more adverse criticism than that of Jonah and the "great fish," rightly interpreted, no doubt, to mean the greatest fish of all, the whale. In its simple directness it reads like a fable. The bare suggestion that a man could be swallowed by a fish and yet survive seems so unlikely in the face of our ordinary experience as to amount to an absurdity. We are prepared readily to welcome evidence against it. There is also probably another rather more subtle reason. When Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury, who tried to base all virtues on selfishness, claimed that pity consisted in imagining how we should feel, if we were in like evil case to the object of pity, he was touching upon an undoubted natural instinct. Pity apart, we cannot help putting ourselves in Jonah's place, condition most repellent even in the imagining. As a result the story is widely discredited, jeered at by some, treated by others as a myth or fable improvised for teaching purposes, and by the more believing sort as a miracle, once enacted under divine interposition, and never, it is hoped, to be repeated.

It is suggested that these views need regularising. If Modernism requires that Revelation shall be tested scientifically, it is obvious that the science so applied must be itself above suspicion. When such an event is recorded as a fact in serious literature as part of a sequence of historical events, it deserves to be treated seriously, not by impressionism, or sentiment, but by reasonable tests of physiological and historical experience. It is proposed in this article, to weigh the story by these two kinds of tests.

But before doing so it is necessary for purposes of clearness to examine more closely the common objection that the event was miraculous and therefore impossible. By this it is probably intended to imply that it was due to *divine interposition in breach of natural law*. This suggests a distinction which it is well to keep in mind. If, as is probable, the common acceptance of miracle does presuppose divine inter-

position—in so far as it is truly Scriptural it must do this—there are yet two different ways in which this interposition could be exercised. It need not be in breach of natural law. It may equally well be through use of laws of nature, which are beyond the range of human knowledge or if known are beyond human power to use, or through laws of God which transcend the laws of nature as constituted by Him.

The modern revolt against the miraculous is probably directed in considerable measure against interposition *contrary to nature*. And there is consequently a tendency in orthodox circles to find the account of the miraculous in the employment of natural forces outside the range of human knowledge, of which it is obvious there must be a vast array, or beyond the reach of human power. But it should be clearly understood that any attempt to include these miracles, these “signs” or “powers,” within the limits of laws of nature and to treat them as special providences, by no means excludes the miraculous in the more specific sense of a direct and unmediated divine interposition. Scripture clearly recognizes both.

In the present case we seem to be dealing with a miracle in the broader sense. When in language suited by its primitive simplicity to readers of those early records the Biblical account says “The Lord prepared a great fish,” “The Lord spake unto the fish,” it ignores second causes and attributes to the Creator a direct, and, in that sense, miraculous, control of His creatures of the sea, which is continuous with the several instances in the Gospel narrative in which our Saviour exercised a similar control over the fishes. In both cases it is apparently natural forces only which are set in motion, but in a fashion which was miraculous, because it was quite outside the range of human power.

I

We come then, to the application of the two tests before mentioned. In the first place the physiological test.

The great fish in question would be the *sperm* whale or cachalot, the species which inhabits the southern waters

where Jonah was voyaging "being met with . . . in all tropical and subtropical seas"¹ and "in summer occasionally visiting the Shetlands and even Iceland."² It differs from the "right" or "whalebone whale" of northern seas by having teeth on its under jaw instead of whalebone, fitting into sockets on the upper jaw.³ It "attains a very large size and may measure from 50 to 70 or 80 feet in length." "The head is about one-third of the length of the body, very massive, high and truncated in front."⁴

It will not therefore be considered exorbitant, if we postulate for Jonah a whale 60 ft. long (9 ft. shorter than the model in the South Kensington Museum), with a mouth "20 ft. in length," also "15 ft. in height and 9 ft. in width," says Sir John Bland Sutton.⁵ When one compares this with an actual house-room one would be inclined to agree with his further estimate, "Such a chamber would easily accommodate twenty Jonahs standing upright." To this it has been objected, however, that it "has also an enormous tongue." But this idea is due to the common confusion between sperm whale and "right whale." It is the tongue of the latter which is very large. Whereas Herman Melville, that working whaler, with his unique and minute knowledge of practical cetology insists that "the sperm whale has no tongue or at least it is exceedingly small"⁶—"Scarcely anything of a tongue,"—"quite small for so large an animal. It was almost incapable of movement, being somewhat like a fowl's." Anyhow Jonah had no opportunity of making the experiment of standing, as he passed speedily into the whale's belly.

Now here we face one of the most prevalent popular criticisms of the story. Again and again impossibility is

¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, art., "Whale."

² E. G. Boulenger, *Queer Fish*, p. 183.

³ Frank T. Bullen, *Cruise of the Cachalot*, pp. 53, 221.

⁴ *Popular Encyclopaedia*, art. "Ocsophagus"; and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, art., "Sperm Whale."

⁵ *A Lecture on the Psychology of Animals Swallowed Alive* by Sir John Bland Sutton, President Royal College of Surgeons.

⁶ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, pp. 401, 415; also *Cruise of the Cachalot*, p. 54.

urged, on the ground that the "whale's oesophagus or gullet is too small." This misapprehension is due no doubt once again to the false analogy of the right whale which⁷ "has a very small throat and feeds on *small animalculae*" on "minute crustaceans and tiny molluscs" which abound in the Arctic seas.⁸ But biologists tell us that as a general rule "in fishes the gullet is small, short, wide and *distensible*." It is like that of a serpent, able to swallow "prey of large bulk." Sir John Bland Sutton in his lecture illustrates the "black swallower" (*Chiasmodon nigrum*) which has "swallowed a fish larger than itself," just as a boa constrictor will readily gorge itself with a kid, which is larger than its undistended mouth. The right whale has little reason to develop a distended oesophagus. The sperm whale has constant reason. "It swims about with its lower jaw hanging down—and its huge gullet gaping like some submarine cavern."⁹ Only too easy to be swallowed by it!

Anyhow this is not a question of calculated possibilities but of recorded facts. The sperm whale subsists for the most part on the octopus, "the bodies of which, far larger than the body of a man, have been found whole in its stomach."¹⁰

⁷ Robert Kinnes and Sons, Dundee; so also Officials at S. Kensington Museum; and *Queer Fish*, p. 182.

⁸ "The contrast between the two animals (sperm whale and *Mysticetus* or right whale) is most marked, so much so in fact that one would hardly credit them with belonging to the same order.

"Popular ideas of the whale are almost invariably taken from the right whale, so that the average individual generally defines a whale as a big fish which . . . cannot swallow a herring. Indeed so lately as last year [this was written in 1898] a popular M.P. writing to one of the religious papers allowed himself to say that 'Science will not hear of a whale with a gullet capable of admitting anything larger than a man's fist'—a piece of crass ignorance which is also perpetrated in the appendix to a very widely distributed edition of the Authorized Version of the Bible. This opinion, strangely enough, is almost universally held, although I trust that the admirable models now being shown in our splendid Natural History Museum at South Kensington will do much to remove it" (*Cruise of the Cachalot*, p. 191; cf. similar statement in *Queer Fish*, p. 182).

⁹ *Cruise of the Cachalot*, pp. 221, 342.

¹⁰ *S. Kensington Museum Records*. "Guide to Whales," etc., p. 20 (publ. 1922).

"Great masses of semi-transparent looking substance of huge size and irregular shape—portions of cuttlefish—massive fragment—tentacle or arm as thick as a stout man's body," "capable of devouring large animals whale," "almost elephantine cuttle fish." Frank I. Bullen has given dramatic eyewitness accounts of the titanic struggle when "a . . . cachalot meets a cuttlefish of almost equal dimensions." The manager of a whaling station in the extreme north of Britain stated that the largest thing they had found in a whale was "the skeleton of a shark 16 feet long."¹² When confronted with the difficulty about the oesophagus he smiled and explained that "the throat of a sperm whale can take lumps of food 8 feet in diameter." Asked if he believed the story of Jonah and the whale he replied "Certainly. It is of course a miracle how Jonah was kept alive, but as to the possibility of his being swallowed there can be no question."—"One may reasonably question the prophet's survival after being swallowed, but there is no doubt that certain species of whales could swallow a man without the least inconvenience to themselves."¹³

Was there then after all a miracle? This is the next point to be "reasonably questioned." Could a man live in a whale? The answer seems to be that he certainly could, though in circumstances of very great discomfort. There would be air to breathe—of a sort. This is necessary to enable the fish to float. The heat would be very oppressive. 104-6° Fahrenheit is the opinion of one expert; a provision maintained by his "blanket"¹⁴ of blubber "often many feet in thickness" which is needed "to enable him to resist the cold of ocean," and "keep himself comfortable in all weathers, in all seas, times and tides"; "for the same reason that a Channel swimmer covers himself with grease"; but this temperature, though high fever heat to a human being, is not fatal to human life.

¹¹ *Cruise of the Cachalot*, p. 77; see also p. 342, and *Queer Fish*, p. 182.

¹² *Sixty-Three Years of Engineering* by the late Sir Francis Fox, p. 295. *Cruise of the Cachalot* says "Fifteen feet," p. 276.

¹³ *Queer Fish*, pp. 181 and 186.

¹⁴ *Moby Dick*, p. 368; *Queer Fish*, p. 181.

Again the gastric juice would be extremely unpleasant, but not deadly. It cannot digest living matter, otherwise it would digest the walls of its own stomach.

How long then could one live?¹⁵ "*Until he starved*" was James Bartley's estimate based, as we shall see presently, on his practical experience.

So far the physiological test.

II

This brings us in the second place to the *historical*. Such an amazing experience as that of Jonah, almost universally believed to be unique, even when it is shewn to be consistent with natural laws, is greatly corroborated and illuminated if it can be compared with another similar case. Such is that of James Bartley, as recently as 1891, recorded by Sir Francis Fox, in his book already referred to. But before giving details let it be clearly understood that the whole story was carefully investigated, not only by Sir Francis Fox, but by two French scientists, one of whom was the late M. de Parville, the scientific editor of the *Journal des Débats* of Paris, "one of the most careful and painstaking scientists in Europe," who concluded his investigations by stating his belief that the account given by the Captain and crew of the English whaler is worthy of belief. "There are many cases where whales in the fury of their dying agony have swallowed human beings; but this is the first *modern* case in which the victim has come forth safe and sound." After this modern illustration he says, "I end by believing that Jonah really did come out from the whale alive, as the Bible records."

Outlines of the story can best be given by means of quotations from Sir Francis Fox's account, which are quoted by his kind permission.

¹⁵ *Sixty-Three Years of Engineering*, p. 300. So far from fatal to animal life is it to be swallowed by a fish that the porcupine fish (*diodon*) not only has been found floating alive in the stomach of a shark, but has been known to eat its way out through the greater fish's side. See Sutton's lecture; also *Queer Fish*, p. 43: "None the worse for his Jonah-like experience."

In Feb. 1891, the whaling ship "Star of the East" was in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands and the lookout sighted a large sperm whale three miles away. Two boats were launched and in a short time one of the harpooners was enabled to spear the fish. The second boat attacked the whale but was upset by a lash of its tail and the men thrown into the sea, one man being drowned, and another, James Bartley, having disappeared could not be found. The whale was killed and *in a few hours* was lying by the ship's side and the crew were busy with axes and spades removing the blubber. *They worked all day and part of the night.* Next morning they attached some tackle to the stomach which was hoisted on the deck. The sailors were startled by something in it which gave spasmodic signs of life, and inside was found the missing sailor doubled up and unconscious. He was laid on the deck and treated to a bath of sea water which soon revived him. . . . He remained two weeks a raving lunatic. . . . At the end of the third week he had entirely recovered from the shock and resumed his duties.¹⁶

Now let him comment on the possibility of *living* in such surroundings.

Bartley affirms that he would probably have lived inside his house of flesh until he starved, for he lost his senses through fright and not from lack of air. He remembers the sensation of being thrown out of the boat into the sea. . . . He was then encompassed by a great darkness and he felt he was slipping along a smooth passage of some sort that seemed to move and carry him forward. The sensation lasted but a short time and then he realized he had more room. He felt about him and his hands came in contact with a yielding slimy substance that seemed to shrink from his touch. It finally dawned upon him that he had been swallowed by the whale . . . he *could easily breathe*; but the heat was terrible. It was not of a scorching, stifling nature, but it seemed to open the pores of his skin and draw out his vitality. . . . His skin where it was exposed to the action of the gastric juice . . . face, neck and hands were bleached to a deadly whiteness and took on the appearance of parchment . . . (and) never recovered its natural appearance . . . (though otherwise) his health did not seem affected by his terrible experience.

These details in their vivid realism seem to bear the stamp of truth upon them, even apart from the verification of M. de Parville's careful scientific research. But still further corroboration is forthcoming in the accident recorded by Sir John Bland Sutton as having happened rather more than a century earlier to Marshall Jenkins in the South Seas. "*The Boston Post Boy*, Oct. 14th, 1771, reports" as it says "upon un-

¹⁶ *Sixty-Three Years of Engineering*, pp. 298-300. The possibility is suggested also in *The Cruise of the Cachalot*.

doubted authority"¹⁷ that an Edgartown (U.S.A.) whaling vessel after striking a whale had one of her boats bitten in two by the whale, which "took said Jenkins in her mouth and went down with him." On returning to the surface the whale had ejected him on to the wreckage of the broken boat, "much bruised but not seriously injured."¹⁸

We may gather from each of these accounts parallelism in part to Jonah's experience. In the latter case it was the whale which reproduced its victim. In the former there is a very interesting similarity in chronology. It should be noticed in the account, that James Bartley's detention "in durance vile" was—similarly to Jonah's—for one complete day coming between two nights and two parts of days. What are the words? "A few hours passed after the whale was secured." But part of the preceding day and part of the night had already been spent in killing and securing it. After this, with dawn of the second day the work began. "All that day and part of the night" (the second night) "they worked with their axes and spades" at the main body of the labour. Then, this second night being over, "next morning they took the further action which led to the man's release."¹⁹

¹⁷ A copy of the *Massachusetts Gazette Boston Post Boy and Advertiser* No. 738, Boston, Monday, Oct. 14th, 1771, can be seen at any time in the Public Library at Boston, U.S.A. That is to say it is contemporaneous history undisputed at the time. The actual quotation verified in 1926 from the original on the spot by thoroughly reliable public authority is as follows: "We hear from Edgartown that a vessel lately arrived there from a Whaling Voyage, and that on her Voyage, one Marshal Jenkins with others, being in a Boat that struck a Whale, she turned and bit the Boat in two, took said Jenkins in her mouth and went down with him; but on her rising threw him into one Part; from whence he was taken on board the vessel by the crew, being much bruised; and that in about a Fortnight after, he perfectly recovered. This account we have from undoubted authority."

¹⁸ This is the regular method by which the sperm whale is accustomed constantly to rid itself of awkward and indigestible objects that it has swallowed, as for instance the horny beaks of giant cuttlefish which, if retained, it covers with a waxy substance called ambergris. See *Queer Fish*, p. 185: "When dying the cachalot always ejects the contents of his stomach." Cf. also *Cruise of the Cachalot*, p. 77.

¹⁹ The first part of this period can be clearly visualized by comparing

So far then the historical test seems to be amply satisfied in the two similar though more modern cases of James Bartley and Marshall Jenkins.²⁰ Is there any further difficulty as to the historicity of the story of Jonah?

Now that the central event is established on scientific grounds as in itself quite possible, the Bible story takes its place as an ordinary historical record, claiming to be subjected to the usual tests of history. There is one line of modern criticism which would reject it on the assumption that the Book of Jonah was written some 700 years later than the date assigned for the events. Of this there is no proof. It is mere conjecture. As however, it bears not only on this but on many questions of history of the distant past, it is worth careful consideration how far lapse of time tends to vitiate the truth of historic records.

There are two sources from which a late writer could draw the facts for his history, (a) public records, (b) tradition. In both cases the persistence of the story would be in proportion to the startling nature of the event.

(a) As to the existence of such early records, long before the days of Jonah, the following statement by Professor A. H. Sayce, the celebrated Egyptologist, will be accepted as conclusive. He says under date July 7, 1927:

The "critical" assumption about the late date of literary works and Herman Melville's description of the method usually followed: "When a captured sperm whale after long and weary toil is brought alongside late at night 'the vast corpse' has to be 'tied by the head to the stern and by the tail to the bows' with 'heavy chains' and then 'It is not customary to proceed at once to the exceedingly laborious business of cutting him in.' 'The common usage is to . . . send everyone below to his hammock till daylight'" (*Moby Dick*, chap. LXIV. and beginning of chap. LXVI).

²⁰ Others, though less plausibly, have supposed that the "great fish" in question was the "Sea Dog" (*Carcharodon carcharias*), which "is found in all warm seas. It is said to reach a length of 40 feet and to be the most voracious of all sharks" (*Records of British Museum* (Natural History) South Kensington). There is a record of one caught that had swallowed a sea lion. And Oken and Muller, quoted by Keil, state that in the year 1758 a sailor fell overboard from a frigate in the Mediterranean and was swallowed by one of the sea dogs, and that the captain of the vessel ordered a cannon on the deck to be fired at the fish, which being struck by the ball, vomited up the sailor alive and not much hurt.

codes of law in the ancient East are long since dead. Besides the great Babylonian Code of Khammurabi or Ammurapi (= Amraphel) which was based on the earlier Sumerian laws, we now have the Assyrian and Hittite Codes, in both earlier and later forms, the latter dating about 1400 B.C.

As for literature, women as well as men were writing to one another on every day matters long before the Abrahamic age; the chief cities of Western Asia had their public libraries; and "chronicles" similar to those represented by the Book of Kings (or Genesis) had been compiled for "popular" reading from the early annals. I have just been translating some letters written by members of a "Company" representing one of the Babylonian firms who worked the silver, copper and lead mines of the Taurus, B.C. 2300. They came from the banks of the Halys, not far from Kaisariyeh in Cappadocia, and might have been written today so far as the wording and enquiries about domestic affairs, etc., are concerned.

(b) *Tradition* also offers a fascinating study. Could a tradition survive 700 years? Now the average generation, father to son, is roughly 30 years; and the generation for purposes of tradition, grandfather to grandson, is therefore 60 years; needing no more than twelve successive generations to carry any notable tradition seven hundred years along; and, if the event be sufficiently startling, it is a universal tendency to perpetuate in this manner even local happenings generation after generation. One typical instance will probably suffice. There is on the verge of the New Forest in Hampshire "Tyrrell's Ford" on the river Avon, and a village, Avon Tyrrell, nearby. Few events in English history made a greater stir in their time than the sudden, accidental (?) demise of the Red William in the centre of his own and his conquering father's tyranny. Whether or not popular belief as to the hand that shot the arrow is correct, the tradition that it was Walter Tyrrell still survives in the name and the minds of the people though 827 years have passed away.²¹

To sum up. The story of Jonah occurs in Hebrew literature and tradition as an historical record. It can hardly be

²¹ The tradition appears to pervade the locality. Close to "Tyrrell's Ford" are also Avon-Tyrrell Farm and Avon-Tyrrell Cottage; and a disused forge where it is said that Tyrrell had his horse shod on his flight to the coast. Further till within very recent years the village of Avon-Tyrrell had to pay a fine (say three pounds per annum) to the Crown ever since the death of Rufus, for allowing Walter Tyrrell to escape his deserts by crossing the Avon at the ford.

disputed that the tests applied to it are in fairness bound to be the most careful, accurate and dispassionate that science and history can supply. Physiological tests entirely disprove the alleged impossibility of the story. It is shewn by study of the structure of the sperm whale and its habits that it is perfectly possible for a man to be swallowed alive and after an interval vomited up again, also for him to remain alive for two or three days within the whale. Historical tests shew that a similar event has happened in later times in at least one case, and that it is quite possible for an authentic record to have survived over even a much longer period than 700 years.

It is obvious that this whole subject has a direct reference to Christology. Our Saviour refers to it in the course of His most solemn teaching. If it is not true, then how was He using it? Did He know it for a fiction or did He not? He is a teacher, whose whole attitude is confessedly one of absolute and unique devotion to Truth.²² How flagrantly unlikely that He would have fathered a story so unique and improbable without careful verification. "But if He was ignorant or mistaken," so runs the common argument, "what does it matter? He was using the well-known story simply as a parable." Now supposing the story were impossible, this view would offer a reasonable resource. But the impossibility having been removed, the Master's use of it in His teaching obviously demands deeper and more careful investigation. If a parable, then what is the lesson it was intended to convey? The folly of rebellion against God? The duty of self-sacrifice for the advancement of His kingdom? Nay, but the Old Testament writings teem with warnings on so rudimentary a theme.

On the contrary He himself declared what His purpose was. It was not parable but prophetic parallel. The sea-burial and resurrection of Jonah, a very unique event, foreshadowed another event still more unique and momentous: "as Jonah . . . so the Son of man." As Jonah's experience at God's hand was the guarantee of his divine mission to the Nine-

²² Matt. xxiv. 16. John i. 14, viii. 40, xiv. 6, xviii. 37.

vites, so in his great Antitype's resurrection lay the power and appeal of His Gospel of salvation. What solemnity was there not in the thought for Him, who was foretelling the very crisis of the World's salvation, and by means of the past event in a measure guaranteeing the future one. It is the method of this guarantee which claims our careful consideration. The link between the two is the period of "three days."²³

Our Saviour used it repeatedly as an integral part of His prophecy about what lay before Him. "In three days," on "the third day," and it may have escaped the notice of students of the Greek Testament that every mention of it is marked by emphasis as of a period of gravest significance. Being such a teacher as He was it seems inconceivable that He should have used for such a purpose what He knew to be nothing more than myth or fable.

What then as to the other alternative, the assumption of His ignorance? To put this to the test it is well to reverse the usual process of reasoning. There was in Him such a super-human insight that prophetically He could foretell His own death and resurrection. It was little likely to fail Him in the lesser task of judging the truth of the record of Jonah in the past.

Or again as to the particular criticism commonly advanced about the accuracy of this very estimate of "three days and nights." Was He mistaken about it in reference to Himself? But if He foreknew the *days* of His resting "in the heart of the earth," it were folly to refuse Him the equal knowledge of the *hours* of its duration, especially as it was under His own control and determination, who had "power" over His own life "to lay it down and to take it again": but it is this,

²³ In His direct prophecies of His death the phrase used in Matt., Luke and John is "the third day" (Matt. xvi. 21, xvii. 23, xx. 19. Luke ix. 22, xviii. 33, xxiv. 7. John ii. 19). In Mark, according to the R.V. readings it is "in three days" (Mark viii. 31, ix. 31, x. 34), the two phrases being obviously intended to be identical in meaning. In all the passages about "destroy this Temple" the phrase used is "in three days" in Matt. and John alike.

stated in the comprehensive phraseology of the East, which He gives as the identical measure of Jonah's imprisonment in the past with His own in the future, so that however many hours it implied in the one case it implied equally in the other. The weapon turns in the critic's hands. Christ's "Jonah-word" emerges not as any evidence that He was ignorant, but contrariwise that when He drew the historic parallel He was "speaking that which He knew, and testifying that which He had seen," having before Him the vision of past and future alike and knowledge of Nature's secrets and the secrets of the Underworld. Truly, we can say, this was no ignorant peasant man. Truly this was the Son of God.

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