



Thirty pebbles had returned to the earth; yet no one had repented. Jonah became known to almost all the citizens of Nineveh, but people kept being unafraid of God and repeated fraudulence, theft and violence. Every day Jonah saw slaves maltreated at various places and children trafficked in the market places. He condemned the slave owners and traders at the cost of being whipped, prophesying that so long as Ninevites continued to treat slaves as non-humans there should come no salvation to them.

He also condemned the execution of prisoners of war. He condemned bandits who sacked foreign communities and brought home captives, cattle and spoils. He condemned those who abused animals.

Then he began to condemn self-professed prophets who were telling the citizens that there should be no destruction of the city but that their gods would give them lasting prosperity; he said their gods were false and hence their prophecies too. Jonah also condemned other self-professed prophets who were foretelling the destruction of the city like himself; he said their gods were loathsome idols unable to do anything but decay, and that only the Almighty God could destroy the city and all in it. He said, “Stop worshipping idols which can neither breathe nor move, because they are false.”

Day by day he got more irritable. He condemned everybody who blasphemed God whose words he prophesied, and threatened them with fist. He condemned even those who practiced magic or told fortunes in the markets or on the streets. Eventually, he condemned everyone, Ninevite or Israelite, that did not agree with him and repent.

He condemned idols and said that all of them together with their altars should be destroyed and burnt. He condemned the human idols too for allowing themselves to be worshipped and misguiding the ignorant citizens, and demanded that they should be banished. He condemned the militants who worshipped weapons as their idols, which, he said, deceived them and led them into error. He said word of God is stronger than weapons. Likewise, he condemned the merchants who worshiped idols cast on the coins. He condemned the lawyers and officials who worshipped laws made by men as their idols. He condemned anyone who was worshipping an idol. He further condemned those who made idols and those who traded in them.

However, this last condemnation caused people to gradually stop giving him alms, for idol worshipping was the basis of the religions of Ninevites and, moreover, idol-related trades constituted a huge guild profiting a

large part of the citizens. From engraving a charm to building a statue, many citizens from children to elderly, were involved in the guild somehow for their living. In short, to the Ninevites, from top to bottom, religion was more of a business than anything else.

Hence Jonah was virtually ostracized and became penniless, and was left to nearly starve. He continued to repeat his prophecy but got so hungry that he even could not concentrate on the meaning of what he was reciting. Yet he was able to say the prophecy correctly, for he had repeated it so many times that he had become able to say it even without thinking.

He came to a fruit tree and condemned it, for it was fruitless. Then, he condemned himself as a fruitless prophet, and swore that it would have been better if the womb of his mother had not born him. He would often fall into absent-mindedness, and he forgot to throw away a pebble on the thirty-second day.

In the afternoon of the next day he went into a marketplace. He had thought he would sing his prophecy at a corner where street performers did jobs, for then he might earn some little money to appease his hunger a little. Street performers invited him to do his singing, for they loved it; but he was so hungry he could not. The stomachache due to hunger had become so unbearable. Faint with hunger, he strayed away, and passed close by a juggler who was throwing shining daggers in the air, then right underneath an acrobat who was balancing himself on a tightrope with a long pole, and then by a snake charmer playing a double-reed pipe with his cobra swinging its head according to the music, all the while Jonah not noticing them at all, for his eyes were glued on a plateful of figs laid on a table of a fruit merchant. When he was close enough to them his hands reached the ripened fruits and put them into his mouth without peeling the rind. He then started eating any food his hands could reach: he swallowed a banana, strawberries, an orange, a bunch of grapes, a peach, a pomegranate, a lemon, and when he bit an apricot, he was stopped by the merchant. He was brought to the palace police, where he was scourged as many times as the number of kinds of the food he took, and was deprived of his cloak to compensate the merchant.

Released, he strayed to the gate of the royal palace, and started prophesying again; but he could not help stopping short frequently due to the surging pains from the scourging. Then, suddenly he was seized by the Spirit of God and, thus ecstasized, became another man and started shouting glossolalic speech fluently.

Some were scared at this sudden change in him and said he was invoking his god to exterminate the city; others said he was simply demented.

The palace police came and took Jonah to a nearby temple, where the monks locked him up inside the tall, huge, hollow statue of fish-god Dagon so his strange shouting was muffled. The statue had a human head and chest but fish elsewhere, was brass outside but clay inside and was stood on a flat bedrock. It was customary to isolate any dangerous persons there without feeding them.

Recovering from the ecstasy in the darkness, Jonah felt something creeping on his skin here and there. He picked one which was trying to enter his right nostril, and was panicked to find it a maggot. He quickly shook and brushed them off his body and clothes. Then he realized he was lying on something fragile, for as he moved, the things beneath him made crushing sound. He soon knew what they were, for the round thing on which he had comfortably laid his head for a pillow had rich hair. He shrieked and could not stop trembling. He was on a tremendous amount of dry bones, skulls and clothes, which were remnants of those who had perished there before him. He shouted for help. He hit the statue with his fists. But he could hear nothing except the echoes of the sounds he made. He then prayed desperately for mercy to God:

“Oh, my Lord, please pardon this weakest of your servants just one more time and help me out of here! Once You abandoned me to the sea, and waves and breakers rushed over me. But it was the whale fish that swallowed me, feeding me with mellow seaweed. In my distress, from the belly of that deep fish, I called for help to You. And You answered me, for it spit me onto dry earth harmlessly.

“Now, I have been cast out of Your sight again. I am locked and barred in the abyss of the dead alive and unfed. Now, I cry for help from within the foul belly of the fish-idol Dagon. And I look again toward Your holy temple in want of thy glorious light. For salvation comes from You alone!”

Then Jonah heard a noise, a rattling sound. At first he thought it was a rat or two gnawing the bones. But he felt some bones start moving about him on their own. He even felt a skull roll over his legs, and heard another grinding its teeth in the darkness. He was scared and crawled away from the bones. When he reached the wall, he stood up and pressed his back to the wall. Now the sound of the bones moving was everywhere. As they grazed against each other, the scratched parts started dimly fluorescing white. It appeared the scattered bones were trying to meet their old mates for a reunion. One after another they seemed made whole and, standing up as skeletons of various sizes, they started walking as if to try and see if the bones were correctly assembled. One after another, they started skipping with light dry steps in a circle. By the time no bone was left lying on the floor, a circle dance had begun and they did not forget to invite Jonah to join. He was dumfounded and his knees failed him and he slowly slid down keeping his back on the wall. It was when they started singing that Jonah shrieked and swooned, and this was what he heard them - some being female - sing in harmony as he collapsed to lie on the floor:

*“Let us collect ourselves upright, and hear Jonah preach,
For we are sinners and have no hope, save it were through repentance!”*

*Let us compose ourselves aright, and hear Jonah teach,
For we lost our flesh and have no life, save it were through penitence!*

*Let us re-make ourselves outright, and hear him speak,
For there is no peace in our bones, as we are but freak... ”*

Chapter IV

A bodily urgency awoke Jonah. He yawned a lot. He was tired and a little dizzy. It took some time in the darkness before he could recall where he was, for unlike that whale of many words, Dagon did not speak to him in his sleep. Nor were the skeletons helpful, for they were dismembered again and scattered all over. “Or,” wondered Jonah, “was it only a bad dream I had on these bones?” Then he started breathing short and heavily as if he had been exercising. He panted helplessly, and realized that the dead there had perished not from starvation but from suffocation. He despaired and began a farewell prayer to God, for he was sure he was a failure and would not be in touch with Him anymore. He sought forgiveness for his failure. But in the midst of the breathless desperate agonizing prayer he heard the door unlocked and saw it open quietly, and he saw a thin tall young black man with a lantern in his hand inviting him to come out. He quickly grabbed a few breaths of cool air smelling burnt oil, and steeled himself against the visitor. The man said something politely in a language Jonah could not understand. He took a deep breath, rose to his feet and went out, staggering and cracking the bones underneath.

The man hastily fell on his knees and, putting the lantern on the floor, said with suppressed tone, this time in Aramaic which Jonah understood more or less: “My master, if I have found favor in your sight, please allow me to escort you out of this temple safely. I am a servant of the king, a eunuch from Ethiopia. And the other day, to my great surprise, I heard your prophesy in none other than my own mother tongue about the destruction of Nineveh but for the citizens’ repentance; and thus I knew you were not demented but were possessed by Jehovah, your god!”

Jonah quickly put his fingers to the eunuch’s lips to silence him and said, “Do not pronounce that name yet. If I used that word, it was only because God’s spirit was speaking using my mouth.” And he raised him to his feet, and continued, “I did not know in what language I was speaking then, for I was in ecstasy, nor do I know any Ethiopian word. So, it’s God’s plan that you should hear it and be enlightened. Well, then, please guide me out. ...But tell me how long I’ve been locked here?”

“My master, you have been here for three days and three nights including this one.”

Upon this Jonah threw three pebbles into the deadly statue. The eunuch closed and locked the door of the

statue and, taking off his mantle, he said, “Please wear this and you will be taken for one of my colleagues, just in case a guard suspects us.”

Then, carrying the lantern, he led the prophet through the labyrinth of the temple. They passed a few guard monks, who had fallen fast asleep, for the eunuch had put on the altar of the fish-god a skin bottle filled with strong wine. On their way the eunuch said that he had now repented and believed in Jonah’s god, that he had reported to the queen about the phenomenon he had witnessed and where the prophet had been locked up, in the hope of obtaining the king’s permission to rescue him, and that only that evening did the queen hand him the key to the statue confidentially – lest king’s enemy should know this. “Hence,” continued the eunuch, “I came to free you secretly. This way the temple men shall not know that you are away.”

When they got outside the temple, it was midnight with the new moon glowing in the color of cheese. Cold wind was blowing and fanning a fire being burnt by a group of moon worshippers in the nearby plaza. A leader was chanting a song in an extremely low and thick voice and others repeated the verses. The women were kneading and baking bread in the shape of the new moon, and children were gathering fallen leaves and twigs for fuel. The wind brought the appetizing smell.

The eunuch said, “My master, please keep the mantle, for winter is coming, and take care not to catch a cold.” Jonah kissed his hands and wished him God’s blessing. After seeing him disappear in the darkness, Jonah put hands into the sleeves of the mantle to warm them, but found a silver coin in one of the sleeves. He thought to return it to the eunuch, and called, “My son, come back! I found this!” But no response came from the darkness except the sound of the wind and the chanting of the moon-worshippers. Jonah had become weak, and picked up a fallen branch of a tree to use as a walking stick. But as he walked toward the fire he started prophesying.

It so happened on the yet-five-pebble-in-the-bag day, that the lumber merchant who had boarded the same ship with Jonah that nearly wrecked came to Nineveh as he had been invited by the king to negotiate a sale of Lebanon cedar. On that day he went to the palace to report his arrival, and on his way to an inn assigned for royal guests, he encountered a flow of a mob and joining it he entered a shrine, where a ritual of child sacrifice was about to be performed in honor of a god named Nis’roch.

Then, he recalled vividly the ocean storm and how the runaway prophet Jonah was swallowed by the whale after neglecting his mission of denouncing the wickedness of Ninevites, and he remembered that the prophet had said his god was going to eradicate Nineveh. Then he heard a keen piteous shrieking of a boy, followed immediately by threatening sounds of cymbal, trumpets and drum, which got so loud that the weak boy’s wailing was made inaudible. Then, the merchant saw the bloody ritual perpetrated by masked priests, and the mob roared crazily. The smell of the wholly burnt body sickened the merchant, and when he saw some

worshippers eating the cuts from the body he was terrified lest the God should annihilate the city any moment. Then, his eyes caught a man standing on a wall of the shrine, which was across the plaza from him; the man was incessantly beating his breast hard with his fists, shouting something hoarsely in tears. The merchant soon recognized him as none other than Jonah the prophet, who he had thought had long been expired in the great fish. He was astounded, and thought with great fear, “Surely God is going to annihilate this city now, for he lifted Jonah’s ghost from Sheol to let it at last prophesy the judgment! Alas, alas! am I cursed, for twice have I fallen into the same powerful palm of the same God!” He called the prophet’s name but the roar of the mob was too loud. He tried to reach him, but the mob started to depart preventing him from approaching the wall, from which the prophet disappeared.

The merchant inquired some who had stayed in the shrine plaza about the man in a mantle who had been shouting on the wall like a demented man, pretending he did not know him. They said to the well-attired foreign merchant that the man was one of those many self-professed prophets – there were no less a hundred of them in Nineveh - who hawk about chanting hymns on the streets and at the doors of houses to earn food and drink, that he had been in the city about a month already, and that he was especially known for his fishy smell and never worshipping an idol, unlike others.

Then a Dagon worshipper said, “I saw him thrown into the statue of the great fish-god Dagon a few days ago; but I found him today walking in the South street wearing eunuch’s mantle to my great surprise, for no one locked in the statue has ever come out of it. So I suspect some conspiracy is taking place and thus followed him up to this shrine.” And he added that he had now come to know to which eunuch the mantle used to belong.

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