



Jonah and the Whale and the God

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by Nagamitz Kazuhiro

Chapter I

Voice of God came to Jonah, son of Amittai, ordering that he should hurry to the exceeding city of Nineveh and be an alarm to her people against a destruction purposed by Him, at whom her evil eyes were glaring. However, Jonah went away for Tarshish, thus disobeying the Almighty. [Verses 1 - 3, Chapter 1, Book of Jonah, Old Testament]

Some 750 years before Christ's first advent, there was a city called Nineveh, which is modern-day Mosul of Iraq, and there remain its ruins. It was one of the central cities of an ancient empire Assyria, and later it would be the final capital of the same. Having a king of its own, Nineveh was a city-state as well. According to the author of Book of Jonah, it was so exceeding that it took three days for a traveler to cross it.

As is often the case with exceeding cities in all ages and lands, Nineveh was not an honorable one. Corruption, iniquity and deception were practiced at all levels of the society, ever aggravating imbalance of wealth, which invited violence. Striving to remedy the imbalance in vain, violence only added to insecurity of the city until terrorism was no longer a big news. Growing stronger through competitions and merges, armed bands came to have such might that even the king had to compromise with them. Uncontrolled and gaining momentum, some bandit groups got so powerful as to advance outwards as well: they went to sack foreign communities and took home captives and spoils, bringing about wars. The history of the vicious cycle of attacking and being overly retaliated increased the mutual hatred and fear of enemies in the neighborhood regions so much that nations became excessively cruel to each other, and Ninevites, for example, were notorious for flaying war prisoners alive. They scarcely feared gods.

Then, gods for Ninevites were usually idols of various myths and traditions, made by human hands in the shape of a human being or an animal or a combination of them. The idols were enshrined at various places in the city, and a wealthy family would boast of having two or more idols in their house. No small number of these gods, however, were vague about their origins of divinity, and a human-shaped idol in a shrine of a handsome temple could originally have been a wooden puppet used in a puppet show, nobody knowing how it had ever found its way up into the shrine. Such a thing was not uncommon with regard to human beings either, in that a genuine human being would be raised to rank as a divinity and treated as a living idol for a reason that he or she did or was said to have done something that seemed unexplainable unless they were a

god or a goddess. (This book provides incidentally an example which might have led to such an idolization for both categories – a puppet and a man.)

Now, the gods, living or not, worshipped by Ninevites were far cry from the concept of a righteous and almighty being, the creator of the universe, and were more like Greek gods and goddesses, who fall short of almightiness and, like human beings, can be unrighteous, sometimes setting examples of immoral nature.

Thus, for many Ninevites the gods they daily saw were not such terrible beings to fear. However, authorities exalted the gods for the purpose of extracting wealth from the citizens to stabilize their supremacy, especially through strengthening of military and police power.

Many stories were concocted to incite fear of the gods. The story writers described natural phenomena and disasters as gods' signs and punishment, thus exalting gods above the nature. The authors created a history of immortals and mortals, in which immortalization of the latter was among the powers of the former, thus gods were exalted above time. The history was entwined with well-known myths and legends full of supernatural phenomena and mystification, thus thwarting scientific approach. The editors added to the manuscript many laws allegedly given by gods, and quoted divine testimony to sanctify the entire script. Thus the stories and laws were compiled to form holy textbooks and preached, and people believed – for who, atheist or theist, or educated or uneducated, is not superstitious?

The story makers and the cohorts availed themselves of the wealth gained. So, for example, in temples, where gods were usually wooden idols overlaid with gold or silver plates, which were cast from articles offered by worshippers, the priests would steal pieces from the gods for their private use. In fact, the general tendency was that the higher in the hierarchy did a Ninevite rank, the less pious he or she turned. Gods were used by them to justify the hierarchy by which they could maintain their privileges, while they scarcely did justice to gods.

Naturally, the authorities would punish people who were found tending to be blasphemous, while they themselves were more so in fact. The laws bound people in strict obedience to gods, and any departure from the laws was severely punished. Thus, pious or not, a citizen of Nineveh would fear the authorities far more than gods.

Then, the authorities on their part feared the revolt of dissident citizens more than anything else, especially the kind tied to an enemy nation. And to prevent this, they regularly conducted public events such as cruel execution of enemy soldiers, which was designed to intimidate and discourage the citizens from revolting, as well as to satisfy certain barbaric desires. And for the purpose of the latter, the most atrocious event was this:

Despite the general belittling of gods, the Ninevites had indulged themselves in an evil practice on the pretext of being loyal to gods - they sacrificed to them their own children. And this manslaughter, borrowing the authority therefor from gods, was the greatest of all sins committed by Ninevites.

So, according to the Book of Jonah, God, unable to live with Ninevites any further, decided to inflict a capital punishment. However, he deigned to give a final chance to the Ninevites, and rang an oracle in the ears of Amittai's son Jonah, a Hebrew prophet. And he did not hear.

Incidentally, an oracle is a message given by a god to human beings, and it can easily be suspected that there were no small number of pseudo-oracles that were concocted by priests or prophets coerced by a pressure from an authority such as a king or a governor, who plotted to urge the people into a certain movement in his favor. If so, it should not have been unusual for prophets or diviners, like Jonah, to escape from "god". The present author was at a loss whether to adopt an interpretation that Jonah did hear a voice of God and escaped, or that he merely escaped from the king of Nineveh, who tried to make him propagate a fake prophecy to remedy the insecurity of his city (for Jonah was the very prophet that had predicted for Jeroboam, King of Samaria, about his recovery of the frontier lands from an enemy nation, which was eventually fulfilled and probably made him renowned to many nations including Nineveh, and thus influential there), with a possible promise such as the king would give the Hebrew a high-ranking priesthood in Nineveh (which seemed to have happened in any event, for the ruins of the city seem to include the prophet's spacious tomb). The author eventually decided to swallow Jonah's miracle, and hence his fish.

God said to Jonah, "Let me give Nineveh one last chance for survival. You, my prophet, are to hurry to Nineveh and instruct the people to repent and abstain from evildoings. If they listen to you and repent, well and good, I shall stay my hands from Nineveh. If they do not, I shall put out Nineveh from the face of the earth."

"My God!" retorted Jonah, "what are you saying? You want me to go to Nineveh to help the wicked Ninevites escape your punishment? Why? Have you forgotten? They are my number-one enemy! I'd rather die than help them!"

Now, when a man or a woman is visited by God's spirit, as Jonah was on this occasion, they become ecstatic and unusually talkative and would say many things that they would not say out loud otherwise. Oftentimes, they would fall into what is called glossolalia, in which they would start saying things in words they themselves do not understand, sometimes in a genuine language unknown to themselves, although they would know what they were meaning. Such was the state in which Jonah was, and he talked very much and rather eloquently in response to God's oracle, although he was normally a reticent and non-eloquent person, and he spoke in a language quite foreign to himself – who knows it was in fact modern English, and he went exactly

as follows:

“You well know that, when I was merely an infant boy, bandits from Nineveh attacked our town. They broke through the town wall and attacked houses. My father and mother were murdered before my own eyes by them. I was so shocked I swooned, and when I came to myself I had lost all my memories - I even could not tell which was my right hand and which left. Every item of value was taken away from our house, and the roof was burnt down. Then, many young men and women were captured and taken to Nineveh in chains and fetters like animals. They were crying crazily being forcibly removed from their dear families. A huge number of cattle were stolen too, including what little we had. Left an orphan, I would have starved to death if it weren't for the fig tree that grew and spread over my roofless house. I declare the scoundrels of Nineveh are not fit to live a moment longer on this earth of your creation, my Lord! Their destruction has long been my wish, as you well know. Please let that wish of mine at last come true!

“And, oh my Lord, why is this softening? What's the matter with you? They don't deserve your love a bit! And, why me? Why pick me to do this? Go and alarm the wicked Ninevites? I know it'll be a false alarm, and I a false prophet! For I know you are merciful and forgiving; you always give a second chance to the bad ones and pardon them. I know you are going to do the same kindness to the wicked Ninevites, for you want to be loved even by those pagans! ...Oh, what am I saying?! A slip of tongue! Oh my Lord, it's a slip of tongue! Pardon me, and do please erase it from your memory! And who am I to argue with you? It's your holy business. Only, please do not make me the one to carry out your business. It crashes me!”

"Jonah, Ninevites are waiting for you. Hasten there."

"Pardon me, my Lord! Not Nineveh, please! Not Jonah!" The prophet whined in tears, fell on his knees, and started hitting his breast with fists. Then he had an idea. “Oh, yes, my Lord, there are more suitable servants of yours for this mission.” Jonah recovered from tears and took courage again. “You know, ones who have blood relatives in Nineveh! They will certainly be glad to hurry there to rescue them. Let them go, and they can do a far better job than I! So, please do spare me from this journey to Nineveh."

"I decided on you because you are the best for this. I never use a second best."

But Jonah did not obey. He rushed in a direction opposite to Nineveh, and arriving at a seafront city of Joppa (a part of modern-day Tel Aviv), he bought a ticket and jumped on a ship leaving for Tarshish, which is thought to be modern-day Spain. He thought if he could reach a distant place way beyond the horizon of the vast ocean, he would be unreachable by God, for in those days people did not yet realize that the earth was round - still less spinning.

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