

A NEW LIFE OF JONAH

BY

CHARLES BRADLAUGH

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JONAH was the son of Amittai of Gath-hepher, which place divines identify with Gittah-hepher of the Children of Zebulun. Dr. Inman says that Gath-hepher means “the village of the Cow’s tail,” but he also says it means “the Heifer’s trough.” Gesenius translates it “the wine-press of the well.” Bible Dictionaries say that Gath-hepher is the same as el-Meshhad, and affirm that the tomb of Jonah was “long shown on a rocky hill near the town.” The blood of Saint Januarius is shown in Naples to this day. Nothing is known of the sex or life of Amittai, except that Jonah was his or her son, and that Gath-hepher was her or his place of residence; but to a true believer these two facts, even though standing utterly alone, will be pregnant with instruction. To the sceptic and railer, Amittai is as an unknown quantity in an algebraic problem. Jonah was not a very common proper name, **יונה** means a dove, and some derive it from the Arabic root – to be weak, gentle: – so that one meaning of Jonah, according to Gesenius, would be feeble, gentle bird. The Prophet Jonah was by no means a feeble, gentle bird; he was rather a bird of pray. Certainly it was his intention to become a bird of passage. The date of the birth of Jonah is not given; the margin of my Bible dates the book of Jonah B.C. *cir.* 862, and my Bible Dictionary fixes the date of the matter to which the book relates at “about B.C. 830.” If from any reason either of these dates should be disagreeable to the reader, he can choose any other date without fear of anachronism. Jonah was a prophet; so is Dr. Cumming, so is Brigham Young; there is no evidence that Jonah followed any other profession. Jonah’s profit probably hardly equalled that realised by the Archbishop of Canterbury, but he had money enough to pay his fare “from the presence of the Lord” to Tarshish. The exact distance of this voyage may be easily calculated by remembering that the Lord is omnipresent, and then measuring from his boundary to Tarshish. The fare may be worked out by the differential calculus after evening prayer.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah; when or how the word came the text does not record, and to any devout mind it is enough to know that it came. The first time in the world’s history that the word of the Lord ever came to anybody, may be taken to be when Adam and Eve “heard the voice of the Lord” “walking in the Garden” of Eden “in the cool of the day.” Between the time of Adam and Jonah a long period had elapsed; but human nature, having had many prophets, was very wicked. The Lord wanted Jonah to go with a message to Nineveh. Nineveh was apparently a city of three days’ journey in size. Allowing twenty miles for each day, this would make the city about 60 miles across, or about 180 miles in circumference. Some faint idea may be formed of this vast city, by adding together London, Paris, and New York, and

then throwing in Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Marseilles, Naples, and Spurgeon's Tabernacle. Jonah knowing that the Lord did not always carry out his threats or perform his promises, did not wish to go to Nineveh, and "rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord." The Tarshish for which Jonah intended his flight was either in Spain or India or elsewhere. I am inclined, after deep reflection and examination of the best authorities, to give the preference to the third-named locality. When Cain went "out of the presence of the Lord," he went into the Land of Nod, but whether Tarshish is in that or some other country there is no evidence to determine. To get to Tarshish, Jonah — instead of going to the port of Tyre, which was the nearest to his reputed dwelling, and by far the most commodious — went to the more distant and less convenient port of Joppa, where he found a ship going to Tarshish; "so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them into Tarshish, from the presence of the Lord." Jonah was, however, very shortsighted. Just as in the old Greek mythology, winds and waves are made warriors for the gods, so the God of the Hebrews "sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken." Luckily she was not an old leaky vessel, overladen and heavily insured; one which the sanctimonious owners desired to see at the bottom, and which the captain did not care to save. Christianity and civilisation were yet to bring forth that glorious resultant, a pious English shipowner, with a newly-painted, but, under the paint, a worn and rusty iron vessel, long abandoned as unfit, but now fresh-named, and so insured that Davy Jones's locker becomes the most welcome haven of refuge. "The mariners were afraid . . . and cast forth the wares" into the sea to lighten the ship. But where was Jonah during this noise? Men trampling on deck, hoarse and harsh words of command, and the fury of the storm troubled not our prophet. Sea-sickness, which spares not the most pious, had no effect upon him. "Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship, and he lay and was fast asleep." The battering of the waves against the sides disturbed not his devout slumbers; the creaking of the vessel's timbers spoiled not his repose. Despite the pitching and rolling of the vessel Jonah "was fast asleep." Had he been in the comfortable berth of a Cunarder, it would not have been easy to sleep through such a storm. Had he been in the hold of a smaller vessel on the Bay of Biscay, finding himself now with his head lower than his heels, and now with his body playing hide and seek amongst loose articles of cargo, it would have required great absence of mind to prevent waking. Had he only been on an Irish steamer carrying cattle on deck, between Bristol and Cork, with a portion of the bulwarks washed away, and a squad of recruits "who cried every man to his God," he would have found the calmness of undis-

turbed slumber difficult. But Jonah was on board the Joppa and Tarshish boat, and he “was fast asleep.” As the crew understood the theory of storms, they of course knew that when there is a tempest at sea it is sent by God, because he is offended by some one on board the vessel. Modern scientists scout this notion, and pretend to track storm waves across the world, and to affix storm signals in order to warn mariners. They actually profess to predict atmospheric changes, and to explain how such changes take place. Church clergymen know how futile science is, and how potent prayers are, for vessels at sea. The men on the Joppa vessel said, “every one to his fellow, Come, and lets us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.” It is always a grave question in sacred metaphysics as to whether God directed Jonah’s lot, and, if yes, whether the casting of lots is analogous to playing with loaded dice. The Bishop of Lincoln, who understands how far cremation may render resurrection awkward, is the only divine capable of thoroughly resolving this problem. For ordinary Christians it is enough to know that the lot fell upon Jonah.

Before the crew commenced casting lots to find out Jonah, they had cast lots of their wares overboard, so that when the lot fell on Jonah it was much lighter than it would have been had the lot fallen upon him during his sleep. Still, if not stunned by the lot which fell upon him, he stood convicted as the cause of the tempest: — and the crew “Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land. Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous. And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you; for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not; for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them. Wherefore they cried unto the Lord, and said, We beseech thee, O Lord, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased thee. So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging.” No pen can improve this story; it is so simple, so natural, so child-like. Every one has heard of casting oil on troubled waters. It stands to reason that a fat prophet would produce the same effect. What a striking illustration of the power of faith it

will be when bishops leave their own sees in order to be in readiness to calm an ocean storm. Or if not a bishop, at least a curate; and even a lean curate; for with sea air, a ravenous appetite, and a White Star Line cabin bill of fare of breakfast, lunch, dinner, tea, and supper, fatness would soon be arrived at. In the interests of science I should like to see an episcopal prophet occasionally thrown overboard during a storm. The experiment must in any case be advantageous to humanity; should the tempest be stilled, then the ocean would be indeed the broad way, not leading to destruction; should the storm not be conquered, there would even then be promotion in the Church, and happiness to many at the mere cost of one bishop. "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah." Jesus says the fish was a whale. A whale would have needed preparation, and the statement has an air of *vraisemblance*. The fish did swallow Jonah. "Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." Poor Jonah! and poor fish! Poor Jonah, for it can scarcely be pleasant, even if you escape suffocation, to be in a fish's belly with too much to drink, and no room to swallow, and your solids either raw or too much done. Poor fish! for even after preparation it must be disagreeable to have one's poor stomach turned into a sort of prayer meeting. Jonah was taken in; but the fish found that taking in a parson was a feat neither easy nor healthy. After Jonah had uttered guttural sounds from inside the fish's belly for three days and three nights, the Lord spake unto the fish, and the fish was sick of Jonah, "and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land." Some sceptics urged that a whale could not have swallowed Jonah; but once, at Todmorden, a Church of England clergyman, who had been curate to the Reverend Charles Kingsley, got rid of this as an objection by assuring us that he should have equally believed the story had it stated that Jonah had swallowed the whale. And then the word of the Lord came to Jonah once more, and this time Jonah obeyed. He was to take God's message to the citizens of Nineveh. "And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Should Jonah come to London in the present day with a similar message, he would meet scant courtesy from our clergy. A foreigner, and using a strange tongue, he would probably find himself in Colney Hatch or Hanwell. To come to England in the name of Mahomet or Buddha, or Osiris or Jupiter, would have little effect. But the Ninevites do not seem even to have raised the question that the God of the Hebrews was not their God. They listened to Jonah, and "the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he

caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands." The consumption of sackcloth for covering every man and beast must have been rather large, and the Nineveh sackcloth manufacturers must have had enormous stocks on hand to supply the sudden demand. The city article of the *Nineveh Times*, if such a paper existed, would probably have described "sackcloth firm, with a tendency to rise." Man and beast, all dressed in or covered with sackcloth! It would be sometimes difficult to distinguish a Ninevite man from a Ninevite beast, the dress being similar for all. This is a difficulty, however, other nations have shared with the Ninevites. Men and women may sometimes be seen in London dressed in broadcloth and satins, and, though their clothing is distinguishable enough, their conduct is sometimes so beastly that the naked beasts are the more respectable.

Nineveh was frightened, and Nineveh moaned, and Nineveh determined to do wrong no more. "And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not." God, the unchangeable, changed his purpose, and spared the city, which in his infinite wisdom he had doomed. "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry." It was enough to [vex] a saint to be sent to prophesy the destruction of the city in six weeks, and then nothing at all to happen. "And he prayed unto the Lord, and said, I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish." Jonah did not like to be a discredited prophet, and cried, "Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live. Then said the Lord, Doest thou well to be angry?" Jonah, knowing the Lord, was still curious and uncertain as well as angry. He was a prophet and a sceptic. "So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a boot[h], and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city. And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even

unto death. Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" The Lord seems to have overlooked that Jonah had more pity on himself than the gourd, whose only value to him was as a shade from the sun. Jonah, too, might have reminded the Lord that there were more than 120,000 persons similarly situated at the deluge and at the slaughter of the Midianites, and that the "much cattle" had never theretofore been reckoned in the divine decrees of mercy.

Here ends the new life of Jonah. Of the prophet's childhood we know nothing; of his middle age no more than we have here related; of his old age and death we have nothing to say. It is enough for good Christians to know that "Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." According to Jesus the story of Jonah is as true as Gospel.