

*Jesus left all of his disciples in all ages to be Jonahs,
whose task it was, and is, to enlarge their ideas of God sufficiently
to guide them as they take up their errand to the Great City.*

IN QUEST OF THE CHRISTIAN CLASSICS: THE BOOK OF JONAH

By Karl C. Sandberg

TOWARD THE END OF THE '60S, A YOUNG WOMAN student in our department confided in me that she had found another student on campus with whom she could pray. I took this passing word as a sign of what I had already concluded from other observations, that this one-time Presbyterian college had turned almost completely secular. Yet in that milieu of great freedom, which was eroding and breaking up established religions, the religious quest started to spring up again of its own roots, and so, two or three years later, I realized that students of a different kind were showing up in my humanities courses. They identified themselves as "Christian" and not as "Presbyterian," "Methodist," or "Catholic." To be a "Christian" was first of all to have had the conversion experience and thus to have had a new beginning centered in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

They were intelligent, buoyant in their faith, and surprised that when they read Dostoevsky, or Pascal, or Camus, they found ideas that led them to see their newly acquired faith in larger and deeper ways. Several of them asked one day if I would give them a tutorial in "reading the Christian classics." I said that I would, if we could simply read the texts together, and then I suggested that we begin with some disparate but rewarding texts from the Old Testament. We would not try to do a course in textual history or development, but rather read the texts as people high and low had read them for hundreds of years, i.e., as stories. We would see what we could make of the text without going outside of the text, trying to see everything that was there and only what was there. We would try to draw meanings out of the texts rather than to read meanings into them from the various interpretive traditions. We would call on works outside the text only when they might be helpful in establishing context and in clarifying ambiguous passages. We would not follow the age-old Christian practice of seeking out prophecies in the Old Testament to prove the divinity of

KARL C. SANDBERG is DeWitt Wallace Professor Emeritus of French and Humanities, Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Christ. Rather, we would guide our reading of Christian classics according to the following notions.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN CLASSIC?

Drawing out what resonates with Jesus' life and death.

THE life of Jesus, especially to those closest to him, was a puzzle. They listened to him teach, and then came to him privately to say they didn't understand . . . would he go over it again? Traveling with him, eating with him, acting out with him the actions that made up his life, they often drew up short and realized they didn't understand what they were doing. They sometimes affirmed—"We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41), or "Thou art the Christ" (Mark 8:29)—they sometimes feared or doubted or worshipped, but always, they wondered. And at the end, they understood less than at the beginning. It was only afterward, at a distance, that the life of Jesus yielded bit by bit for them, like an image from stained-glass bits in a cathedral window, the meaning that its acts had gathered in.

At his life's end, they understood less of his life than at the beginning because they understood nothing of his death. The violence of it was unthinkable. Peter, while they were on the road to Jerusalem, was not even going to let Jesus talk about it. Thomas was willing to die his death with him, but like the others, he was unable to grasp the fact of it. To those closest to him, while they were experiencing the events of his death, his death was simply shattering and senseless.

Only later did his death begin to yield for them the meaning that through his death, Jesus had become both Lord and Christ. And Jesus' death and its mystery worked like a leaven in Saul become Paul—Jesus' life and death encompassed all lives and all deaths, and all of life and all of death. For the writer of Hebrews, "it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren in all things" (Heb. 2:17), and for Paul, he that ascended above all things first descended below all things (Eph. 4:9-10).

Every generation of Christians and seekers comes just as fresh and novice as did the apostles to the puzzle of the life of

Jesus and the mystery of his death. A Christian classic is a work that continues the disciples' task. Whether intentionally or not, it reveals some aspect of the human condition that informs the life and death of Jesus and draws out of us that which will resonate to it.

done with such a man?" David answers and thus convicts himself out of his own mouth: "the man who did this thing deserves to die . . . because he had no pity." Nathan answered, "You are the man." (See 2 Sam. 12:1-8; another example is in Isa. 5:1-7.) This kind of parable is really a dialogue in that the

JONAH

IS A MAN IN CONTRADICTION WITH HIMSELF
AND THEREFORE IN CONTRADICTION WITH GOD.
HE IS A MICROCOSM OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE
DURING AND AFTER THE BABYLONIAN EXILE.

READING JONAH

*It is a five-act play that obliges the listener
to confront its religious questions.*

IS the Book of Jonah such a work?

The first step in reading it, or any other text, is to become ignorant, to put away any idea we have ever had of it, especially if we have a great number of ideas about it. We try to read it with virgin eyes. We look for what we can see: characters, actions, decor. When we have identified the parts, we look for the connections between them; we look for the progressions of the work toward generalized meanings. We then decide what the text is about and what we can say about it on the basis of what we have read. If the text is a rich one, we will continue to get new ideas and better perspectives as we renew the process on future occasions.

If we give the text an overall reading, we notice that the story breaks down into five natural groupings like acts in a play. Each act has its own dramatic statement, but each also builds toward a denouement and an overall effect.

There is a cast of characters (personae who do or experience some action):

The LORD	By Himself
Jonah	Hebrew prophet of the LORD
The pagan sailors	Worshippers of various local gods
The great fish	The Monster of the Deep
The Ninevehites	Ignorantly wicked people, played by the world
The gourd	By appointment
The worm	Likewise

There are also two characters who are invisible but indispensable: the *narrator*, who tells the story, and the *listener* or reader, who reacts to and comments on it. This pattern is a familiar one in the Old Testament. For example, in order to convince David of his sins, Nathan the prophet tells the story of the rich man who had many flocks and herds, yet in order to serve dinner to a visitor, he stole the one ewe lamb belonging to his neighbor. The narrator (Nathan) asks, "What should be

parable is not complete without the response of the listener.

In Act I (Jon. 1:1-3), what would we see if this turned out on film? We would see a man fleeing toward a seaport. God has spoken and called Jonah to service to carry a message to the "great city" of Nineveh, and Jonah the Hebrew, prophet among the Hebrews, tries to flee to where God isn't.

Act II. Jonah pays his fare and goes on board a ship bound for Tarshish, some port at the ends of the earth. Once they are at sea, the LORD appoints a storm so great that it threatens the ship. The pagan mariners row hard against the storm but with no effect. They call upon their gods but with no effect. Meanwhile, at the time of greatest struggle, Jonah is asleep in the hold. The captain awakens him and asks him to pray to his god. By the way, who is his god? Jonah answers with assurance that he is a Hebrew and therefore worships the god that made heaven and earth and everything in them. At this word, the mariners, who worship local gods of a city or a country, are amazed and afraid. Jonah has mentioned to them that he is fleeing from the presence of the LORD. They draw lots to see who is the cause of the storm, and the lot falls on Jonah, who has a moment of self-recognition: "Yes, I am the cause of it," he says, "throw me overboard." The sailors do not want to, but since the storm grows stronger, they accede, and the storm stops. The sailors, pagans all of them, now become worshippers of the LORD. (See Jon. 1:3-17.)

Act III. The LORD appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah, and from the belly of the fish, Jonah cries out. He had intended to go where God wasn't, and now he is afraid that he has. When Jonah cries out in his distress from the portal of Death, God hears his cry and brings him up from the Pit. Deliverance belongs to the LORD. Jonah gives thanks and promises to keep his vows and gratefully sacrifice to the LORD. The fish comes to dry land. Exit Jonah; exit fish. (See Jon. 2.)

Act IV—the LORD, Jonah, the Ninevehites. The LORD again speaks to Jonah. "Go to Nineveh and tell the inhabitants of that great city that in forty days the city will be destroyed." Jonah announces the message, and the people believe him. They seek to turn aside the destruction by fasting and repentance. The LORD sees their repentance and withdraws the

judgment. (See Jon. 3.)

Act V. Jonah has gone from anger to happiness and back to anger. Why? Because God changed His mind about destroying Nineveh. Jonah speaks to the LORD in anger, "Is this not what I said while I was in my own country? This is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning. For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." (See Jon. 4:2-3.)

The LORD answers with a question, "Do you do well to be angry?" Jonah thinks that maybe the city will be destroyed after all. He sits on the hillside outside of the city to see. The LORD appoints a gourd, perhaps a castor bean plant, which springs up overnight and provides shade for Jonah, who is happy now because the LORD has provided him a shady spot from which to view the destruction of the city. His happiness is dashed the next day when the LORD appoints a worm that gnaws at the plant, causing it to wither and leaving Jonah exposed to the hot, east wind. He becomes so faint that he calls on the LORD to take his life. God answers, "Do you well to be angry about the plant?" Jonah answers, "Yes, angry enough to die." The LORD thus gives a summation, "You are concerned about the plant for which you did not labor and which you did not make grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are 120 thousand persons who do

ings, but we can say it is about an individual type, about a people in a historical milieu, and about the character of God.

First, we see a man, an individual, Jonah the Hebrew. He willingly asserts his belief in the God who made heaven and earth and everything in them. Yet when God calls Jonah to service, the first thing he does is to flee from the presence of the LORD. In the belly of the great fish, Jonah cries out in thanksgiving for the mercies and deliverance of the LORD, and then he becomes angry when the LORD shows these same mercies to the people of Nineveh. Jonah, in short, is the picture of a man in contradiction with himself and therefore in contradiction with God. We can also see here a kind of life in contradiction with itself, the kind of life that hedges itself up within the narrow confines of itself, and if the word of the LORD comes to it in any form, the first reaction is to go where God is not, or at least where He is not so intrusive.

On a larger scale, we see a people in contradiction with themselves—Jonah is in fact a microcosm of the Hebrew people during the Babylonian exile (586–516 B.C.E.).

What, for example, is the great fish, and who had been swallowed by it? Anyone familiar with the prophecies of Jeremiah (who wrote before the Book of Jonah) would see an obvious allusion to what had happened to the Jewish people: "Nabuchadrezzar the king of Babylon hath devoured me, he hath crushed me, he hath made me an empty vessel, he hath

TWO

IDEAS ABOUT GOD CONTEND: JONAH PREFERS A GOD WHO COMES IN JUDGMENT, PROTECTS HIS PEOPLE, AND DESTROYS THE WICKED; HE IS VEXED BY ONE GRACIOUS, SLOW TO ANGER, QUICK TO TURN AWAY PUNISHMENT.

not know their right hand from their left hand, and also much cattle?" (See Jon. 4.)

Here the narrator ends abruptly and waits for the listener (reader) to make a response. What in fact is the book about? What can we draw out of it?

DISCERNING CONTRADICTIONS

The Book of Jonah confronts the differences between two concepts of God in the Old Testament.

WHO is Jonah? Not the prophet mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 who lived in the eighth century B.C.E., but he is a persona in a parable written during the Second Temple period, i.e., after the return from exile in Babylonia, starting about 538 B.C.E. The Book of Jonah is to the historical Jonah as Shakespeare's Hamlet is to the obscure historical Hamlet.

What is the book about? How much can we say about it or draw from it? We are far from having exhausted all the mean-

swallowed me up like a dragon, he hath filled his belly with my delicacies, he hath cast me out" (Jer. 51:34).

Like Jonah, the Kingdom of Judah had been swallowed up by the monster of the deep. Jerusalem had been left in ruins, and the temple had been destroyed. As Jonah had cried out from the belly of the monster of the deep, those who had been taken into exile had been humbled and had cried out for deliverance and the sight once more of God's temple. (See Baruch 1, 2.) "To the LORD belongs integrity, to us the look of shame" (Baruch 1:15, Jerusalem Bible).

When Ezra the high priest and other exiles under Cyrus the Great had been spat up from the entrails of the great monster of the deep and returned to Jerusalem, they were confronted with baffling questions: How had the debacle come about? God by covenant had supposedly established the Davidic kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12). It had lasted four hundred and fifty years, and it was now in shambles. What had gone wrong? What did God want of them now?

In Ezra's mind, the catastrophe had come because they had

not kept the Law strictly enough. In Babylon, some of the Jews had started to assimilate. The Jews were in danger of losing their identity and needed to retrench. Therefore, one of Ezra's first acts upon returning to Jerusalem was to call all of the people together and tell all of those who had taken non-Jewish wives and had children by them to cast them off if they wanted to be numbered among the people of Israel (Ezra 9, 10). Thus, by scrupulous observance of the Law, he launched the people on the road to separateness from all other peoples. This formative period some see as the beginning of what we know as Judaism.

But in the Old Testament, especially in the Prophets, there is another current, the current of universalism. The calling of Israel was to become an ensign to the nations: "I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth" (Isa. 9:6). The emphasis is not on withdrawing behind the hedge of the Law and looking inward, but rather on looking outward, trying to comprehend the sovereignty and care of God over all nations.

And so we see two contending ideas about God. Jonah would prefer to think of the LORD as one who comes in judgment, protects his chosen people, and destroys the wicked. Jonah seems, in fact, to need to have someone else down so that he can be up, to have the city destroyed so that he can be vindicated, and he is vexed with the LORD for being gracious, merciful, kind, slow to anger, and quick to turn away punishment. With this description of God's character, with this picture of God, we are very far from the God who commanded Saul to commit genocide on the Amalekites and then rejected Saul as king for having left one Amalekite still living (1 Sam. 15). The God in Jonah looks very much like the Father in Heaven in The Sermon on the Mount.

The Book of Jonah, then, marks a theological crossroads, clearly setting forth the difference between two different kinds of religion. Which road is correct? The Old Testament does not tie things up in a neat bundle. It is full of "unfinished business."

JESUS AND THE "UNFINISHED BUSINESS"

*All disciples are Jonahs on their expansive
errand to the Great City.*

IS the Hebrew story of Jonah a Christian classic? Does it inform Jesus' life?

One of the reasonable assumptions that we can make about Jesus is that he grew up as a Jewish boy, precocious and immersed in the scriptures, since he quoted from them throughout his life and even on the cross. Moreover, the Jewish way of studying scripture was not by way of catechism, memorizing a correct answer, but rather by way of interpretation, working out the best meaning among several possible meanings. It is a process of sifting and thinking about scripture and thereby becoming aware of the tensions in it, and therefore Jesus must have become increasingly aware of the tug-gings this way and that within the Judaism of the time.

As he began his ministry, Jesus was already on the path that led outward. He had broken with the rules that made table fel-

lowship with non-Jews or non-observant Jews impossible. He ate with publicans and other unclean people (Matt. 9:10-11). When the Roman centurion asked him to heal his servant, Jesus was ready and willing to go right into the home of a Roman (Luke 7:2-10). His teachings likewise transcended the narrow hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans. When one worships God in Spirit, one is above the dispute of whether the temple at Jerusalem or the holy mountain of the Samaritans is the right place to worship. (See John 4.)

If Jesus temporarily limited his teaching to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24), the movement of his life and teachings was outward in increasingly wider circles. He began his life in a small town as part of the artisan or peasant class, and he ended it by saying, "All power has been given me both in Heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore and teach all nations . . ." (Matt. 28:18-19). He thus left all of his disciples in all ages to be Jonahs, whose task it was, and is, to enlarge their ideas of God sufficiently to guide them as they take up their errand to the Great City. 



BARBED WIRE

*after FSA Rehabilitation Clients. Near
Wapato, Yakima Valley, Washington,
1939, by Dorothea Lange*

Famous for being poor,
You stand clutching
A barbed wire fence.
You don't seem to notice
The barbs pressed against hands,
Bodice, crotch through your dress.

Maybe it's the picture
(You're striking a pose);
Maybe it's your mother,
Shading her eyes from a distance
(You want to be by yourself);
Maybe that's what poverty is:
Dirt and barbed wire and grief,
And the two fence strands
Pressed against your dress
Showing what the body
Can take, even now.

—KIM BRIDGFORD