

## GOD'S MERCY OR JONAH'S ANGER? AN ORTHODOX APPROACH TO THE CASE OF NINEVEH

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**ABSTRACT.** The Book of Prophet Jonah challenges us to face a reality that justifies our quality of God's children. Often, Christians are faced with a choice between creating or not the necessary frameworks for the redemption of the contemporary man who has sometimes an adverse attitude towards the Church. It is this choice that their privileged status of God's chosen people, of holy people whose mission is to be a light among other people, depends on. Those who set themselves up as judges and punishers of others' deeds are in conflict with God, by neglecting their vocation and the mission to which they have been called. For these reasons, the association with Jonah is extremely appropriate. The prophet refuses to preach in Nineveh in order to avoid being the instrument by which God brings redemption to an impressive number of sinners. The aim of this study is to fructify this behavioural paradigm to acknowledge the fact that disobedience towards God takes us out of communion and makes us lose the privileged status of God's chosen one. In order to succeed in this endeavour, I shall bear in mind the most recent researches that try to solve the mystery of the prophet's unexpected behaviour, but also the opinions of some personalities who represent the Jewish and patristic tradition, which mostly characterises the Christian East. These directions shall offer the reader the possibility of thinking more before choosing to get angry like Jonah or be merciful like God

**Keywords:** Jonah, anger, paradigm, mercy, Nineveh, Jonah's sign, repentance

### Introduction

Jonah's prophetic book gives the reader the image of such a loving God who visibly contrasts with the status of a Ruthless Judge with which the God of the Old Testament was labelled, so that none of His closest collaborators managed to truly understand Him. Jonah did not understand the generosity of

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God, although he knew that the Lord is long-suffering and feels sorry for the mistakes of human beings. He preferred to avoid the mission entrusted to him, to become disobedient and then to fill himself with anger because God did not punish the sinful people of Nineveh. He rather wanted to see how a city where thousands of people lived was destroyed, than to take part without being constrained to the redeeming mission of the people of Nineveh.

Therefore, the book highlights a disturbing conflict whose protagonist is prophet Jonah. He considered himself entitled to feel angry because the Lord did not act as a righteous judge, but on the contrary, He accepted sinners and gave them the opportunity to repent. If we take into account the interpretations of some Church Fathers and exegetes of the Bible<sup>1</sup> according to whom Jonah prefigured through his actions the attitude of the chosen people towards their God, then we will understand that the narrative only draws attention to a wrong relation. The same thing would happen later with the disciples of John the Baptist who did not understand the mission of Christ (Lk 7:19-23) and with all those who over the centuries failed to reach a higher level of understanding of divine mercy. In other words, in each of us there is a Jonah who, by virtue of our privileged status as sons of God, despise those who, while worthy of chastisement, benefit from the mercy of their loving Father.

Jonah's atypical behaviour has been analysed by many exegetes of the Bible. The study of Stuart Lasine<sup>2</sup> gives us an ample perspective of how the prophet was received by posterity<sup>3</sup>. Three major directions of relating to the prophet have been indicated. For specialists, Jonah is: a negative character (an anti-hero<sup>4</sup>); a simple man; and an eminently positive character<sup>5</sup>. To be more explicit, I will point out that, for Gerhard von Rad, Jonah is a ridiculous prophet<sup>6</sup> who does not have the capacity to understand his mission and the mercy of God. Due to similarities, some compare Jonah with Elijah<sup>7</sup> or Jeremiah.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Jerome, St. Maximus the Confessor, Grazia Papola, Rob Barrett.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Lasine, "Jonah's Complexes and Our Own Psychology and the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 2 (2016): 237-60.

<sup>3</sup> S. Lasine analysed the opinions of biblical scholars regarding Jonah's character, underlying in each case whether they based themselves on the Holy Book and whether they were influenced by various psychological approaches. Even if philosophy studies help us assess more clearly Jonah's character and his attitude towards God, S. Lasine wants to pinpoint that the theological factor plays an essential role in understanding Jonah. Lasine, "Jonah's Complexes," 255.

<sup>4</sup> K.J. Dell, "Reinventing the Wheel: The Shaping of the Book of Jonah," in J. Barton and D.J. Reimer (eds.), *After the Exile: Essays in Honour of Rex Mason* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996), 88-90.

<sup>5</sup> Lasine, "Jonah's Complexes," 239-40.

<sup>6</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology. The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, vol. 2, trans. by D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 291.

<sup>7</sup> Like Elijah, Jonah asked God to let him die, because he did not deem himself suitable for the mission that he had been entrusted with „Like Elijah (see 1 Kgs 19,4), sitting under a tree, Jonah

Others have tried to demonstrate that Jonah had a psychological complex: he either had a defensive attitude in the face of danger (Gunn and Fewell; Ackerman) or he was simply fleeing a responsibility imposed on him (Maslow). We end these examples by mentioning that Jonah has also been considered an ordinary, vulnerable man like many of us or a mature man who behaved like a grumpy child<sup>8</sup>. These ways of relating to Jonah, actually quite diverse, have given an insight into Jonah's character, but we have not offered satisfactory responses to clarify his behaviour towards the shipmen, the people of Nineveh and last but not least towards God. Only the research of Rob Barrett<sup>9</sup> makes a consistent contribution in unravelling the mystery of this book. The author demonstrates that this writing highlights the erroneous relation of the entire Israel (assumed mysteriously by Jonah) both to their God and to the other peoples.

In this study, I aim at developing this perspective by placing more emphasis on the paradigmatic character of the prophet<sup>10</sup>. By using the frameworks of replacement theology<sup>11</sup>, according to which Christians are seen by the Church Fathers as the new chosen people<sup>12</sup>, I will emphasise that this type of conflict between the chosen people and God can be encountered in many present situations. Many Christians, not understanding the love of God, choose to be angry, to hate their neighbour, to want his / her evil and await his / her destruction, even though they are aware that the Lord wants to save the sinner and, to top it all, through them. My research is designed to give to the contemporary Christian an Old-Testament behavioural paradigm and a legitimate challenge: What do I choose today? To be angry like Jonah or to be merciful like God?<sup>13</sup>

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expresses his wish to die (see Jonah 4,3.8). His reasons for this wish could not be more different from Elijah's, though. Elijah was fighting with Jezebel and the priests of Baal and wanted to die because he did not feel adequate to this difficult task." Annette Schellenberg, "An Anti-Prophet among the Prophets? On the Relationship of Jonah to Prophecy," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 3 (2015): 357. See also Papola, "A Biblical Story of Conversion," 156.

<sup>8</sup> Lasine, "Jonah's Complexes," 247-54.

<sup>9</sup> Rob Barrett, "Meaning More than They Say: The Conflict between YHWH and Jonah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 2 (2012): 237-57.

<sup>10</sup> According to G. Papola, the history of Jonah "becomes the paradigm for the whole people sent to ask about what it means to truly confess the Lord beyond the formulas of the faith which can appear abstract to the rough test of history. The experience, in fact, often poses a strong challenge which in some cases is intolerable and forces you to think differently both about God and about the way that he does justice in human affairs, and also is the sense of belonging to a community of faith which has specific rules to be observed." Grazia Papola, "A Biblical Story of Conversion: The Book of Jonah," trans. by Carl-Mario Sultana, *The Person and the Challenges* 2 (2016): 174.

<sup>11</sup> The replacement theology is currently criticized especially for the anti-Semitism it can promote. In this study, the supersessionism has only an axiomatic value.

<sup>12</sup> St. Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 11); St. Hippolytus of Rome (*Treatise Against the Jews* 6); Tertullian (*An Answer to the Jews* 3); St. Augustine (*The City of God* 18.46).

<sup>13</sup> While Jonah wanted the destruction of the city, God sought its deliverance, through the very disobedient and angry prophet. Barrett, "The Conflict between YHWH and Jonah," 246. See

To accomplish this, I will first make use of the results of the latest studies taken from the Web of Science that address the issue of the conflict between Jonah and God. Subsequently, I will focus on the interpretation offered by Philo of Alexandria in *De Jona* treaty and, in the end, I will fructify the perspectives of the patristic tradition that creates the basis for assuming Jonah's paradigm in contemporary times. The Fathers of the Church I am referring to during this approach are Saint Maximus the Confessor<sup>14</sup> and Saint Jerome<sup>15</sup>. The assumption of these two interpretive traditions will highlight the Orthodox view of this subject. As one can see, the study will analyse the prophet's inner conflict ever since he was sent on his mission; it will put a marked emphasis on the fourth chapter; it will complete the paradigm by giving it a specific note of the Christian East; and it will apply it in several current contexts that will in turn become behavioural models especially for theology students.

### 1. *Missio Israelis* and the sending of Jonah to Nineveh

The chosen people have had a missionary vocation ever since its foundation. When God chose Abraham and promised him paternity over a great people, he asked him to take responsibility for being a source of blessing to all nations on earth (Gn 12:1-3). For this reason, after his arrival to the Promised Land, He did not allow him to spend much time in the land that was to become his descendants', but He sent him to Egypt and the region of Gerar to give testimony of the True God. In this respect, Father Ioan Chirilă indicated that the choice / calling of Abraham marked the beginning of the brother's mission among peoples<sup>16</sup>. This missionary responsibility was also assumed by Joseph, who was sent by God all over Egypt to deliver Pharaoh and all his kin from the hunger that would fall upon them and, at the same time, to make his elders accustomed to wisdom (according to Psalm 105: 21). His mission was accomplished, for Joseph poured the blessing of the living God on Egyptians, escaping them from death and, at the same time, determined Pharaoh to assert in front of everyone that the Spirit of God worked through Joseph more than through his wise men (Acts 41:38). Similar testimonies would be given to the

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more in: Constantin Oancea, „Câteva observații referitoare la ideea de izbăvire în Cartea Iona,” in *Biblie și misiune creștină. Popas aniversar pr. prof. Dumitru Abrudan*, ed. Constantin Oancea (Sibiu: Universității “Lucian Blaga”, 2010), 261-76.

<sup>14</sup> Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, “Răspunsuri către Talasie. Despre proorocul Iona și Ninive”, in *Filocalia* 3, trans. by Dumitru Stăniloae (București: Harisma, 1994), 418-52.

<sup>15</sup> Sf. Ieronim, *Comentariu la cartea profetului Iona*, trans. by Dan Batovici (București: Anastasia, 2004), 120 p.

<sup>16</sup> Ioan Chirilă, “Reperele fundamentale ale misiunii în Vechiul Testament,” in *In Honorem Pr. Prof. Valer Bel*, Cristian Sonea and Paul Siladi eds. (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2018), 169.

Babylonian kings who were convinced of the power of the Almighty God. These "confessions of faith" were due to the genuine mission that Daniel and the three young people pursued in several situations. Being faced with indisputable evidence, these kings acknowledged the supremacy of the God of Israel over all other gods (Dn 2:47; 3:28; 6:26-28)<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the purpose of Israel was to bring light to peoples<sup>18</sup>, preaching the True God (Is 42:6) and calling them to Zion to learn the Law (Is 22:3-4; 6:9-11; 56:2-8). "The flow of peoples to Jerusalem" (Is 2:2) can constitute, in the opinion of Father Ioan Chirilă, the actual response of the peoples to the mission of Israel<sup>19</sup>.

These missionary coordinates have been presented to state from the very beginning that the sending of Jonah to Nineveh did not come out of the frameworks of the *missio israelis*<sup>20</sup>. Israel's main purpose was to make God known to all peoples and languages on earth. Jonah refused to comply with this imperative request from the Lord ("Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it..." – 1-2) and ran away from Him to Tarshish<sup>21</sup>. The prophet's behaviour is unforgivable<sup>22</sup>! For this reason, his reprehensible gesture was correlated, even in the Jewish tradition, with Cain's attitude. Abraham ibn Ezra believes that, from that moment, the prophet came out of his communion with God<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, Jonah must be seen as the very image of the entire Israel. For his disobedience and for not having fulfilled his mission, he would be sent as a slave to Babylon, to give testimony of the True God<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> S.R. Miller, "Daniel," in *The New American Commentary* 18 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 103. Cf. J.A. Montgomery, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Daniel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), 181. J.E. Goldingay, "Daniel," in *Word Biblical Commentary* 30 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 129. Jerome, "Commentary on Daniel 6.25-27," in *JCB* 69 – K. Stevenson and M. Gluerup, "Ezekiel, Daniel," in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT* 13 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 219. John Chrysostom, "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 12, eds. H. K. Cornish et al. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 217.

<sup>18</sup> Ioan Chirilă, "Luminează-te, luminează-te, Ierusalime! (Is 60,1) – revărsarea luminii dumnezeiești și devenirea întru lumină?," în *Sfânta Scriptură în Biserică și Istorie. Studii Teologice în onoarea pr. prof. dr. Vasile Mihoc*, eds. Alexandru Ioniță and Daniel Mihoc (Sibiu: Andreiană / Astra Museum, 2018), 177.

<sup>19</sup> Chirilă, "Luminează-te, luminează-te, Ierusalime!," 175.

<sup>20</sup> Chirilă, "Repererele fundamentale ale misiunii," 174.

<sup>21</sup> We notice that Jonah did not argue with God after he was entrusted with the mission, but simply headed somewhere else. Schellenberg, "An Anti-Prophet among the Prophets?," 356.

<sup>22</sup> Jonah's evasion is an act of betrayal towards God and his mission as a prophet. Papola, "A Biblical Story of Conversion," 165.

<sup>23</sup> U. Simon, *Jonah. JPS Bible commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 5.

<sup>24</sup> Kurtis Peters, "Jonah 1 and the Battle with the Sea: Myth and Irony," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 2 (2018): 165.

## 2. Jonah's conflict with God

Jonah's attitude is unique in the Old Testament context. No prophet had the courage to refuse God's call in the way Jonah did. Even if Moses tried to evade his mission and asked the Lord to send another in his place (Ex 3-4) or even if Jeremiah asked God to entrust his mission to someone else because he was young (Jer 1:6), none dared to face God. Jonah, on the other hand, refused the mission and ran away from the Lord (Jn 1:3). Even when he confessed to the sailors that the storm came upon them because of him, he did not show any remorse (1:12)<sup>25</sup>. It is also worth noting that he presented himself as a practising Jew who served the Lord (1:9)<sup>26</sup>. Not even in the womb of the fish did Jonah change his mind about this ingrate mission. He asked for salvation because he was in a difficult situation, but he did not recognise his mistake (chap. 2)<sup>27</sup>. This can be confirmed by the anger that he felt when he realised that his message was effective and that the Lord would deliver the city<sup>28</sup>. Not even when, constrained by God, he announced the divine sentence to the people of Nineveh, did he do anything to determine their repentance<sup>29</sup>. He informed them that there were only forty days left until Nineveh would be destroyed (3:4) and he left. So profound and rebellious was the prophet that he asked God to take his soul because it was better for him to die than to be alive (4:3-8)<sup>30</sup>. The thought that the Lord could eventually destroy the people of Nineveh made John stay on a hill near the city to see what would happen (4:5). For him, the comfort offered by the shadow of a castor-oil plant<sup>31</sup> was much more relevant than the

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<sup>25</sup> The repentance of the pagan sailors was a sign for Jonah meaning that, following a salvation act by God, pagans could also repent. Papola, "A Biblical Story of Conversion," 160. See also: D. Stuart, "Hosea-Jonah," in *Word Biblical Commentary* 31 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated., 2002), 464.

<sup>26</sup> *Nota Bene!* Jonah was a faithful prophet (1:9) who knew how God acts (4:2).

<sup>27</sup> In his prayer, Jonah asked God to save him, for he was in an extremely delicate and difficult situation. However, we have to note that he did not ask for forgiveness for his disobedience. Barrett, "The Conflict between YHWH and Jonah," 244-5.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, "Select Orations of Saint Gregory Nazianzen," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series* 7, trans. by C. G. Browne and J. E. Swallow (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 226. See also: Vladimir Petercă, "Supărarea profetului și stăruința lui Dumnezeu (Reflexii despre Iona 4,1-11)," *Cercetări Biblice* (2014): 9-22.

<sup>29</sup> Schellenberg, "An Anti-Prophet among the Prophets?," 356.

<sup>30</sup> Augustin, "Letter 102," in *Fathers of the Church* 18 – A. Ferreiro, „The Twelve Prophets,” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT* 14 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 147.

<sup>31</sup> Several therapeutic measures are applied to Jonah (the storm, the big fish, the scorching sun, the withered plant, the scorching wind) to change his sad vision on God's decision. Papola, "A Biblical Story of Conversion," 160. Therefore, the animals and the other beings are means by which God corrects Jonah in order to make him feel at least mercy. Alluding to the question from the title of the study, I wish to point to the fact that, by means of the plant, God extends His goodness to *the*

one he should have normally felt when a city that numbered more than a hundred and twenty thousand people returned to God (4:9-11)<sup>32</sup>.

The exegetes tried to find a reasonable answer to motivate Jonah's attitude, a behaviour that remains a mystery. I believe the list made by Yael Shemesh<sup>33</sup> in his research on the role and status of animals in this prophetic writing sums up the most relevant motives. In what follows, I will mention the main causes for Jonah's rebellion that were identified by specialists. The first reason would be that Jonah, being a nationalist prophet<sup>34</sup>, would have wanted the destruction of any people who could have affected the safety of Israel<sup>35</sup>. The second reason is of a theological nature: if the people of Nineveh returned from their paths, Israel would have no word of defence in front of the Lord, since the prophets' urge to penance had never ceased<sup>36</sup>. Some considered that Jonah had in mind his prophetic prestige when he refused the mission. If his words had

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*angry...* Alexander I. Abasili, "The Role of Non-Human Creatures in the Book of Jonah: The Implications for Eco-Justice," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 31.2 (2017): 242, 149.

<sup>32</sup> Even if the penitential gesture of the people of Nineveh temporarily saved the city from perdition, eventually it was still destroyed. This is also suggested by the analysis of spacial terms made by motion verbs, deretional and localitonal prepositions and stylistic devices. Karolien Vermeulen, "Save or Sack the City: The Fate of Jonah's Nineveh from a Spatial Perspective," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 2 (2017): 243. Jonah is aware that the repentance of the people of Nineveh is short-lived. Maybe this also contributed to his attitude towards God. And God knew what would later happen to the people of Nineveh, but He wanted to show Jonah the extent of His goodness. Daniel Timmer, "Jonah's theology of the nations: the interface of religious and ethnic identity," *Revue Biblique* 120.1 (2013): 19. See also: Alexandru Mihăilă, "A fost Ninive cruțată?," in *(Ne)lămuriri din Vechiul Testament. Mici comentarii la mari texte* (București: Nemira, 2011), 409-13.

<sup>33</sup> Yael Shemesh, "And Many Beasts [Jon 4:11]: The Function and Status of Animals in the Book of Jonah," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6 (2010): 20-2.

<sup>34</sup> Jonah believed that his status of Israeli prophet did not allow him to preach to other peoples. Such a mission would have given him a bad reputation among the prophets of the chosen people. Moreover, his prophetic credibility would have been questioned. Schellenberg, "An Anti-Prophet among the Prophets?," 357-9.

<sup>35</sup> This direction is also taken on by G. Papola: "Can one accept to live in a world in which paradoxically through his mission, the enemy is spared so that it could act once again against its own people?" Papola, "A Biblical Story of Conversion," 172.

<sup>36</sup> I shall illustrate this line of understanding Jonah's behaviour through Saint Jerome's words: "Enlightened by the Holy Ghost, the prophet was aware that the repentance of the peoples would throw the Israelis into disgrace. Loving his country, he could not rejoice at the salvation of the people of Nineveh as long as he knew his country would perish. Jonah lamented that he had been chosen to go to Assyria, to the enemies of Israel, to their biggest city, where idolatry was blooming and God was ignored. Likewise, he feared that Israel would be completely forgotten once the people of Nineveh converted as a result of his preaching." Jerome, "Commentary on Jonah 1:3," in E.B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets: A Commentary* 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 398.

not come true, he would have been considered a false prophet<sup>37</sup> by the people of Nineveh. Although this direction of interpretation has been assumed by many exegetes, the argument is devoid of consistency. The case of prophet Isaiah is relevant in this respect. Even if he had told King Hezekiah that he was going to die, he was not affected by the change of God's decision following an act of penitence. Upon finishing his prayer, the Lord sent the prophet to tell the king that the Lord had added another 15 years to his life (Is 38:1-6).

The last direction we will insist on is that Jonah wanted the Lord to make judgement and to punish sinners, not to show them mercy. His attitude, even if motivated by this reasoning, is not the right one. Abraham, his father, behaved quite differently. When the Lord revealed his plan with respect to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he began to intercede for their forgiveness and salvation (Gn 18). When the Lord wanted to destroy the Israelites and make a faithful people from Moses and his descendants, the latter prayed to the Lord and said: "Lord, why should your anger burn against your people... Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people." (Gn 32:11-12)<sup>38</sup>. As such, Jonah would have had someone to learn from, but he did not<sup>39</sup>! His insensitivity towards those who repented for their sins is in no way pardonable. And then a natural question arises: Was Jonah, a prophet living in the proximity of God, who knew the depth of Divine Mercy, indeed capable of so much insensitivity? Was his behaviour not a parable for his fellow people? Did Jonah behave like that to draw Israel's attention to the wrong way in which

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<sup>37</sup> "How could the prophet defy the Lord out of fear that the people of Nineveh might call him a false prophet – it wonders rhetorically ibn Ezra? How would that hurt him, given that he did not live among them? Furthermore, the Ninevites were no fools. The Lord sent a prophecy to them so that they would return to Him and if they did not repent the decree would be carried out. If they knew it was true that if they returned to God, He would repent of the evil, how could they call him a false prophet?" Shemesh, "And Many Beasts," 21. More details on this line of interpretation can be found in: B. Ego, „The Repentance of Nineveh in the Story of Jonah and Nahum's Prophecy of the City's Destruction: A Coherent Reading of the Book of the Twelve as Reflected in the Aggada," in P.L. Redditt and A. Schart (eds.), *Thematic Threads in the Book of the Twelve* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2003), 155-64; A. Ferreiro, *The Twelve Prophets*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 14* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 129-30, 146-47.

<sup>38</sup> D.K. Stuart, "Exodus. An exegetical and theological exposition of Holy Scripture," in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2007), 685. Apostle Paul had a similar attitude when he said that he preferred to be anathema than to see his brothers separated from Jesus Christ (Romans 9:3-5). Jerome, "The Letters of St. Jerome," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series 6*, eds. W. H. Fremantle et al. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 172.

<sup>39</sup> Jonah expected God to punish the people of Nineveh and not to show them mercy. His attitude was in clear contrast with that of certain characters who mediated for wrongdoers (eg.: Abraham, Moses). Shemesh, „And Many Beasts," 20-2.



they regarded their mission among peoples? How could peoples flow towards Zion to learn the Law of the Lord if they wanted their destruction? Was this not an alarm sign that the Lord gave to the people, with the conscious help of Jonah?

### 3. Jonah – a paradigm for Israel

In the opinion of Rob Barrett, the whole writing is a parable following which Israel had to realise how far they were from the mission that the Lord had entrusted them with<sup>40</sup>. To argue his claim, he associates the episode with the castor-oil plant, related in the last chapter, with the way in which God treated his people<sup>41</sup>. We will not insist on this demonstration now, but we will focus on how Jewish and Christian tradition relate to this paradigmatic behaviour. Before we do this, we underline that all talking and non-talking beings that are mentioned in the book, even the wind, the sea, the sun and the plants, obeyed the word of the Lord, only Jonah did not<sup>42</sup>! Israel, the chosen people for whom the Lord had done countless miracles and concessions, refused to bow before the Lord and to at least respect His will, if they did not want to partake in fulfilling it.

Philo of Alexandria argues in his commentary (*De Jona*) that the Lord, wanting to heal the illness of the people of Nineveh, like a skilled physician, chose himself a skilful help, a co-worker for their salvation. Even though Jonah was first cured of his lack of wisdom, he remained a partner, a help for the Lord,

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<sup>40</sup> The same idea is signalled by G. Papola: "Like Jonah, Israel is also invited to transform the desire for revenge and to the demands of justice to the recognition of a mercy addressed to itself, whilst also awaiting a manifestation of forgiveness even to its enemy." Papola, „A Biblical Story of Conversion,” 159.

<sup>41</sup> The parable of the plant and, implicitly, of the city of Nineveh is that of offering Israel a lesson. Jonah symbolises the entire Israel. If God cares about a city that he did not raise and take care of, how could He not care about His people: "If YHWH is concerned with the ephemeral city of Nineveh, how much more has he demonstrated his commitment to Israel. [...] Should I not spare Jonah, my prophet who desires death, whom I have laboured over, in order to bring him to this place where he, too, can learn to respond to me? And should I not spare Israel who also chooses death (Deut. 30.19), that great and ignorant people, over whom I toiled and whom I grew, the people who have been my inheritance from times of old?" Barrett, "The Conflict between YHWH and Jonah," 239, 252. Thus, God's attention still rests on Jonah and Israel, the others being but means by which God corrects Israel. In other words, the book of Jonah is a historical testimony of the fact that Israel will be forgiven if it repents for its sins. Jason T. LeCureux, "Reading Jonah as 'history'? The implications of canonical location for Jonah and the Book of the Twelve," *Pacifica* 1 (2015): 78.

<sup>42</sup> Shemesh, "And Many Beasts," 13-4. Jonah is the only person in the entire world who, while being close to God, does not obey Him. Barrett, "The Conflict between YHWH and Jonah," 237.

a true thaumaturge (3:8-9). It can easily be noticed that Jonah, according to Philo, held a privileged status, namely that of an apprentice of the Lord (13:54) who contributed to the fulfilment of the Lord's will even if he did not fully understand it. When he realised his wrong way of seeing things, he asked the Lord to give him as an example to those who would judge things like him so that they could understand their error as quickly as possible: "I have learned not to flee from the eyes of He who sees and knows everything and does not despise any more the words of the Lord. Being convinced now, I just want to be an example of Your Power in Your Book to all those who will read about the story of the fugitive prophet, for whom the fish was both lesson and deliverance." (23:86) From Philo's commentary, we also retain the Lord's harsh indictment against the prophet, when he unjustifiably got angry for the repentance of the people of Nineveh. The message of this text will be fructified in the last part of the paper, in which I will update the case of the prophet for our times: "Why is it precisely you that did not rejoice for their repentance? Why do you not join their worshipping voice? If you are angry because of the peoples' piety you are wrong. If you are taken over by jealousy because of the salvation of those whom I cared for, you are not human." (46:184-5). We note the last phrase in which he who allows himself to be taken over by jealousy when a sinner is saved decays as a being and can no longer be considered human<sup>43</sup>.

Saint Maximus the Confessor considers Jonah innocent in front of the Lord. He did nothing else but present in a prefigurative manner the attitude of Israel, both towards the others and towards God. In his opinion, Jews are the ones who were filled with hatred against peoples who came to the true faith (in Christ), and not Jonah: "This madness of the Jews was portrayed by the great Prophet Jonah within himself as a type, without him suffering – God forbid – from the weaknesses of the Jews, but condemning in himself, with anticipation, their lack of faith, because of which they lost their old glory... The Jewish people, envious of any love of men, complained because of people's salvation and, therefore, dared to rebel even against divine goodness. Full of ingratitude, discontent and hatred of people, he was consumed with anger, felt sick of life and grieved because of peoples' salvation in Christ."<sup>44</sup> Unlike Philo, Saint Maximus absolves Jonah of any blame. The former creates a framework of ideas in which the prophet acknowledges that he was wrong and asks God to make an example out of him for those who would resist divine will in the future. The

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<sup>43</sup> See details on the interpretation of the sign of Jonah in: Ioan Chirilă, "De Jona – un tip profetic oikoumenic cu deschideri spre bioetică," *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă din Cluj X* (2006-2007): 13-36.

<sup>44</sup> Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, „Despre proorocul Iona și Ninive,” 433.

attitude resembles in a certain way the one taken on by king David in psalm 50 when he promised God that he would teach the unlawful how to return to the right path<sup>45</sup>. It is possible that Saint Maximus' choice of keeping the prophet's soul profile untouched was due to the status Jonah acquired through the sign that Jesus Christ offered to the Pharisees (Mt 12:38-41). Jonah's stay in the belly of the big fish had become a prefigurative sign of the Lord's resurrection in the depths of the home of the dead.

More than that, we also notice that Saint Maximus does not criticise only Jews for their rebellion against God, but also Christians. The fact that he first refers to Jews as the first addressees of the text does not prevent him from criticising with similar strength those who are part of the new Israel, the Christians. He gives the example of the Jews' behaviour and urges Christians not to behave contrarily to the Lord by cherishing vain things more than the truly important values: "Therefore, let us not separate ourselves from this city through our inner mood, like the Jewish people, loving our body like an arbour and taking care of the pleasure of our body as if it were a castor-oil plant, lest the worm of consciousness pass through it and dry up our affection that is lost in pleasures and lest we feel sick of life and rebel against the judgement of the Lord because of punishment for what we have done in our life comes upon us like a burning wind, through unwelcome trials."<sup>46</sup>

The intransigence that Saint Maximus applies to Jews is also present in the warnings that he addresses to Christians. If Christians gladly took on the status of God's chosen people, then they must be aware of the mistakes of those who, through disobedience and opposition, disregarded God's generosity. In this situation, adopting an attitude opposing the privileged status of God's son is much more serious, as Christians had to learn from the mistakes of the Israelis. Moreover, the exigencies that Christians had to assume were much greater. God's commands could no longer be accomplished only at a bodily or factual level, but also at the level of the heart. Even sinful thoughts had to be fully removed from the mind. For these reasons, Saint Maximus urged Christians to be very watchful and asked them not to follow the negative example of the Jewish people who, represented beforehand by Jonah, stubbornly opposed God's will.

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<sup>45</sup> Saint Jerome draws attention to the spiritual evolution of the penitent king: "David made such a progress that he, who little before was a sinful penitent, became a teacher and was capable of saying *Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.*" Jerome, "Letter," in *CSEL* 56, 1 – Q. F. Wesselschmidt, "Psalms 51-150", in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament* 8 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, „Despre proorocul Iona și Ninive,” 445.

As for Jonah, we need to understand that his anger could be justified. No one could fully sense or understand God's love for everyone. Jonah was a prophet who loved very much his people and did not want by any means that they suffered following the redemption that God would bring to the people of Nineveh. As much as he had tried to love the people of the city of Nineveh, he could not have been like God. He accomplished his mission before stepping on the shores of Nineveh. In one of his speeches, father Ioan Chirilă pinpointed the fact that, although Jonah did not have the same love as God, he got to be, however, a sign for the Jewish people. When the Pharisees asked the Saviour for a sign, He reminded them of Jonah and, in particular, of his stay in the belly of the big fish. The prophet's stay in the big fish for three days would anticipate God's resurrection (Mt 12:40). Only when God rose all the righteous from the home of the dead, could one truly understand that God loves everyone, irrespective of the people they belong to. This would be confirmed by the openness of Christianity towards the peoples. In fact, Jesus Christ told the Jewish people that many from the East and from the West would come and dine with Abraham and the other two patriarchs, while the sons of the kingdom would remain outside (Mt 8:11-12). Accordingly, God's attention was not focused on his mission in Nineveh, but on his role of sign that announced Jesus Christ's resurrection and, implicitly, the resurrection of all the people who chose the path of life. Therefore, the people of Nineveh would stand up at the judgement and condemn the Jews for not having repented on hearing the words of the Lord, who was "greater than Jonah" (Mt 12:41)<sup>47</sup>.

## Conclusions

Through his attitude, prophet Jonah becomes a model of behaviour both for Jews and for Christians. He offers us the possibility of better understanding how we should relate to our neighbours who, through their deeds, have distanced themselves from their communion with God. The Saviour underlines the prophet's paradigmatic dimension when He offers him to the Pharisees as a sign of His resurrection. The sign of Jonah, which reminds us of his stay in the belly of the big fish for three days, makes us aware of the fact that the human being is destined to resurrect. This reality should make Christians aware of their responsibilities. Each and every one of us must give the people he / she interacts with, irrespective of their moral state or of their attitude towards us, opportunities to redeem themselves.

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<sup>47</sup> See details on the interpretation of the sign of Jonah in: C. Blomberg, *Matthew*, in *New American Commentary* 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 205-7.

Setting ourselves up as judges of our neighbours puts a distance between us and God. By weighing the morality of the others and by spoiling the objectives of our mission into the world, we enter an area of justice and personal whims that has nothing to do with God. As such, the right understanding of Jonah's attitude towards God and the people of Nineveh should give us the possibility of always choosing God's mercy to the detriment of Jonah's anger.

I believe it would be important to research and develop into a study father Chirilă's interpretation with respect to the sign of Jonah. This perspective could provide the book of the prophet a new direction of understanding, which would make the message of prophet Jonah's mission to Nineveh more accessible.

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