

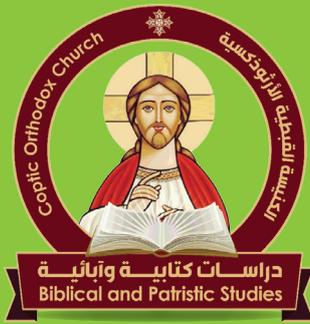
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The Fugitive Servant Kneels Down in Silence



Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty

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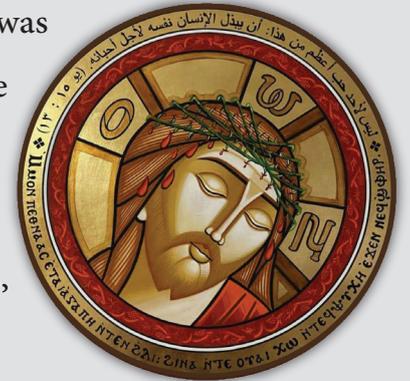


The Fugitive Servant Kneels Down in Silence

In unique spirituality along with eloquent Syrian poetry that is difficult to translate to any language, **Saint Jacob of Serugh** records for us a wonderful poem on the fleeing of Jonah and the repentance of the people of Nineveh. The saint writes about the hidden emotions that filled Jonah's heart while revealing the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection in the prophecy of Jonah.

Jonah Asleep in the Lower Parts of the Ship

Saint Jacob of Serugh contemplates the sea as it raged as though it was crying out loud to awake Jonah who was asleep in the lower parts of the ship. Jonah's slumber was not disturbed by the strong winds that disturbed the whole sea, because his sleep was caused by pain. He was drowned by pain, causing his body to sleep heavily. The suffering one slept and was not able to wake up by all means. He was shattered by depression and sadness, and great sadness fell upon him causing him to remain asleep...



He was afraid because he fled and was scared because the sea caught him, and because of his distress he fell asleep, him who was filled with pain. Saint Jacob then marvels at Jonah's deep slumber saying, "Did he sleep so deeply because of his sadness? Or was there a spiritual mystery that was associated with it (i.e. the mystery of Christ's death)? For when our Lord slept, the sea (the Jews) raged against the disciples. Just as the captain awakened Jonah telling him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish." (Jonah 1:6), so did David cry out saying, "Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off forever. Arise for our help and redeem us for Your mercies' sake." (Psalm 44:23-25)

As the captain woke Jonah up, he found himself under arrest because the sea, the waves and the winds were seeking him to restore him back to whom he ran away from.

The Lot Cries Out Against Jonah

Jonah became as though he was imprisoned in a den, for the sea, the waves, and the winds testify against him and the mariners on the ship are demanding him to take action, and the lot has revealed



that he was the reason for the catastrophe! And now he has no available options except to plead guilty!

In the midst of the violent waves, the fierce storm and imminent danger, we would expect the mariners to lose their peace and calmness, but they proved to be wise. They saw in Jonah a mystery, they asked him about his profession, asking to know the truth. Their questions were a gentle rebuke that God used to fix him. In what they were asking, it was appropriate for Jonah to reflect on his behavior.

As **Saint Jerome** says: [The purpose of the lots was for the sailors they force him to admit why such a great storm, or for what reason divine wrath had come against them. Tell us, they say, where this wickedness comes from which has come upon us. Confess your disobedience to the Lord and your flee from the One who created the sea and land. He then admitted: "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and land.]"¹

Saint Jerome also says: [He did not say, 'I am a Jew', the name given to the people after the schism between the ten and two tribes, but 'I am a Hebrew', that is to say, passing by as Abraham who was able to say: "I am a foreigner and a visitor as were my fathers", and about whom it is written in another psalm: "When they went from one nation to another, from one kingdom to another people..." (Psalm 105:13). I fear the Lord God of the heavens, not the gods that you have invoked and who cannot save us, but the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. The sea that I flee to, the earth that I flee from.]"²

Saint Jacob of Serugh explains the great difference between the mariners' feelings and those of Jonah. The former cried to the false gods, but with no answer from anyone. The latter woke up to see God has caused nature to arrest him. He realized that he sinned by fleeing, underestimating death by drowning in the sea rather than resisting God and refusing His delegation.

The Mariners' Terror in front of Jonah

Saint Jerome envisions the mariners speaking to Jonah saying, [It is because of you, you say, that the winds, the waves, the sea, and swells have been unleashed. You have revealed the cause of this wickedness, now tell us how to stop it. The sea swells against us, and we know that a God is angry because we took you on board. If we have sinned by taking you in, then what can we do so that the

¹ Jerome's Commentary on Jonah

² Jerome's Commentary on Jonah



Lord does not become angrier? "What should we do with you?" that is to say: "shall we kill you?" but you are faithful to the Lord. Are we to protect you? But you flee from Him. All we

have to do is carry out whatever you command, all you have to do is give the command that the sea be calm, for now its wildness attests the wrath of the creator. We cannot wait any longer in face of the creator's revenge.]³

Saint Jacob of Serugh is of the view that the sailors were horrified to realize that the sea, with its mighty power was disturbed because of the sin of one man. Who is this man for whom the sea is raging? How dangerous is his sin? And what is its magnitude? They asked him to take action, for he alone knows how to please the rebellious sea.

The Sea Which Served My Own Nation is Now Arresting Me!

Saint John Chrysostom says: [Jonah expected to escape by the ship, and the ship became his chain.]⁴ He thought that he was able to flee from the God of the sea using a ship, so he was caught inside of it amid the raging water, putting him in the middle of distress, and opening before him the gates of repentance. God used the same method that Jonah thought was his escape route from Him and turned it into a tool by which he restores Jonah back to Himself.

How beautiful is **Saint John the Chrysostom's** saying: [Many days he needed not, nor continued counsel; but speaking these simple words only, he brought all to repentance! On this account God did not lead him directly from the ship into the city; but the sailors committed him to the sea; the sea to the whale; the whale to God; God to the Ninevites; and by this long circuit He brought back the fugitive, that He might instruct all, that it is impossible to flee from the hands of God.]⁵

Saint Jacob of Serugh explains that when Jonah is asked about his nationality, he remembered that he was from the descendants of the Israelites whom the sea was split in front of so that they could walk in it safely and the Jordan's water retreated before them so they may proceed to the promised land! But now the sea is raging against him!

❖ The prophet started to speak in great agony, revealing which nation he belongs to and from what place as he was asked.

I am a Hebrew from the sons of Abraham, I am a slave born in the house of the true God, Adonai.

³ Jerome's Commentary on Jonah

⁴ Conc. Stat. 6: 14

⁵ Conc. Stat. 5: 19



I am the son of Moses who split the great sea, I am from the descendants of Israel who miraculously crossed the great sea.

I am the son of the mighty Joshua son of Nun who split the waters of the Jordan and crossed it. I am a Hebrew from among the people who walked amid the waves and crossed the sea and not a single drop of water touched them.

My tribe is the one which conquered the sea at some point, and stepped in it as if it were land, and walked on land in the middle of the water.

My race is the one that came out of Egypt, and the water of the sea stood for them, and provided them a path to walk on.

My Master is the one who created the Earth and the great sea, and I serve Him...

From Him I fled and for that, He caught me.

He caused the winds to blow over the sea,

If He rebukes the sea, it shall be dried up as though it never existed...

My God is great, and because I opposed His commandment, these dangers of the sea surrounded me like that.

Saint Jacob of Serugh

Preaching to the Gentile Mariners!

Saint Jerome comments on the words that Jonah spoke with the mariners, saying: [For I know this, he says. This great storm is seeking me. The waves themselves command you to throw me into the sea. And since I will have felt the full effect of the storm you will be in calm seas again. We must note here the greatness of spirit of our fugitive: he is not evasive, he does not hide or deny his guilt, but having confessed his flight he accepts his punishment willingly. He would rather die so that the other sailors do not perish because of him.]⁶

Saint Jacob of Serugh highlights Jonah's spiritual wisdom. The mariners asked him about his people and his nation, but his mind was occupied with God. Therefore, even when he was like a prisoner, falling into the hands of the rebellious nature and the mariners, he revealed to them that his God is the Creator of the sea and land. In humility and submission, the mariners did not rebuke Jonah, but rather realized who his God was, so they asked him how the sea could be calmed down. Jonah fled

⁶ Jerome's Commentary on Jonah



away from serving and teaching the people of Nineveh because they were Gentiles, so he found himself testifying to God among the gentile mariners!

Jonah Asks to be Thrown into the Sea's Prison!

Saint John Chrysostom believes that the love and mercy of the mariners rebuked the fugitive prophet, and that these pagans did not want to condemn a person who admitted that he was a sinner and was condemned by the sea, the winds, and the lot, while being indifferent to the destruction of all of Nineveh.

Saint Jacob of Serugh believes that Jonah and the mariners exchanged advice with sincere love, and that each side was asking for what is in the best interest of the other.

Saint Jerome comments on the marvelous reaction of the mariners, for they did not ask about what Jonah did, nor did they ask God for an explanation for the situation, but rather trusted in God's justice in His judgments.

[They wanted to use all their force and conquer nature so as not to offend the prophet of God. If the sailors rowed to regain the land, it was because they believed they could deliver the ship from danger without realizing what Jonah, who ought to have suffered, had said.]⁷

Saint Jerome

The Fugitive Servant Kneels Down in Silence!

Jonah accepted his judgment, and surrendered himself to death, and there was nothing for the mariners to do except to cry out to God so that Jonah's blood would not be asked of them! A wonderful portrait of those gentiles and pagans who are getting to know God for the first time and yet seek His counsel and mercy.

As Saint Jerome says, [The sailors' faith is strong: they are all in danger of losing their lives, and yet pray for the lives of another. They know well that spiritual death is worse than natural death of the body. Do not lay innocent blood upon us, they say. They take the Lord as witness not to visit them for what they are about to do and say something like this: 'we do not want to kill your

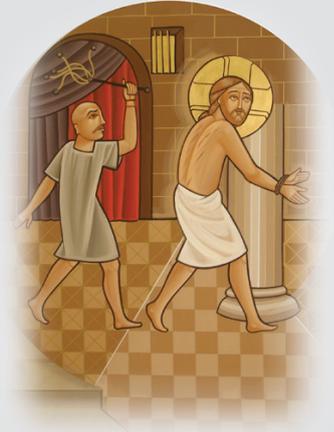
⁷ Jerome's Commentary on Jonah



prophet, but he himself has proclaimed your wrath, and the storm shows us that you have done what you wished, O Lord. Your wish is accomplished by our doing]⁸

The Persecuted Ship Rests from the Waves!

Saint John Chrysostom explains that throwing the disobedient Jonah into the sea was an indication of the expulsion of sin from the ship of our life, so that our true peace may be restored back to us as he says: [The city was shaken because of the sins of the Ninevites; and the ship was shaken because of the disobedience of the prophet. The sailors therefore threw Jonah in the deep, and the ship was preserved. Let us then drown our sins and our city will assuredly be safe!]⁹



Saint Jerome says that the throwing of Jonah into the sea was a symbol of the suffering of the Lord Christ, which took away that rage from our sea and saved the ship and those in it from danger. During the Passion of Christ, the world was filled with a surpassing inner peace!

Saint Jacob of Serugh says that when the fugitive was arrested, the nature revolting against him calmed down, because it fulfilled its mission. It delivers him into the hands of his Creator, to do with him according to His divine command. As for the ship, it rested from the persecution of nature as Jonah was thrown out of the ship into the sea, as though he were a newborn child emerging from his mother's womb, and thus she finally rests from the pain of labor.

Saint Jacob of Serugh believes that the Gentiles were able to enter the house of God while they were on the ship in the midst of the sea, and they offered the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving that were acceptable before God. They enjoyed the fear of God that many of the people of God deprived themselves of.

Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty
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⁸ Ibid

⁹ Conc. Stat. 5: 18

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