

Jonah The Messenger Who Obeyed*

Hans Walter Wolff

The author is professor of the Old Testament at the University of Heidelberg, Germany.

(Jonah's about-face, Nineveh's about-face, and the about-face of God — Jonah 2:1-2, 11 [Hebrew verse numbers]; 3:1-10)

Chapters two and three of Jonah tell about three different types of "conversion." It is true that the Hebrew word *sub* is used in reference only to the repentance of Nineveh and God's change of mind (3:8-10). But what happens earlier with Jonah is really a change of direction as well; even in a sublime sense. It is the about-face of Jonah that has captured people's imaginations throughout the ages, and a massive amount of literature bears dubious testimony to this.

The second new start is made by the men of Nineveh. This turn-around was not directly commanded by Jonah's message concerning the destruction of their city. Rather it is a surprising result of that pronouncement, and the reader is excited by the intensity and the sweep of Nineveh's conversion. The third about-face is God's own. Theologically speaking, it is the most difficult to understand, not only for Jonah, but also for us. That will become clear as we discuss the last chapter (in the June issue). At the same time it is really the greatest cause for joy. By insisting on this, our narrator seeks to help overcome the difficulty Jonah has, and the difficulty we have, in accepting God's about-face. Here we are led to discover the real goal of the book's message. Here we should be able to feel the heart-beat of its "gospel." The most remarkable thing of all is that by its

about-face, Nineveh hopes beyond hope for a reciprocal about-face by God, whereas that is precisely what Jonah fears most (4:2). But first we will ask what leads up to God's about-face and what actually happens thereby.

Jonah's Turn-Around

1. It all begins with *Jonah's turn-around*. Jonah himself had absolutely no choice in the matter, and was at best only an object of God's power play. "And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow' up Jonah" (2:1). Could Jonah, deserter as he is, possibly consider this anything other than his death sentence? That his life could continue to go on seemed to lie outside the realm of his own powers. A real about-face, an act of conversion, too, is never an achievement on man's part. That can be no more appropriately illustrated than by our miracle story. Jonah is swallowed up by a monster and three days later is spit up. This turn of events is brought about solely by God's act of love. In creating this story, our narrator is probably making use of material which was being passed around the port city of Jaffa as a fable, and which has many details in common with sagas known to us from Greece and India. We must ask very carefully what he wants to convey to his readers in his particular development in the plot of this fairy-tale-like story.

Here is where opinions differ.



Jonah's stay in the fish has often been held up as a test-case for one's belief. When the orthodox assumed it to be historical fact, because they didn't want to give rise to any doubts about God's boundless power, their concern was valid. But it was bad when they insisted upon its historicity merely because they refused to recognize that a mere storyteller or poet could actually be a witness to the living God. When the liberals perceived the Jonah story to be poetic fiction, they correctly hit upon its literary genre. Precisely as poetic fiction it stands as a witness on a level comparable to Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. But the liberals were wrong if they neglected to emphasize that hope our witness seeks to arouse. God can bring to fruition that which has never before happened, even that which has never before been anticipated, or things that are unprecedented and indeed unforeseeable, when he brings his work to an end.

The readers of Jonah should refrain from feuding and fighting as to whether and how the story concerning the monstrous fish could have taken place. This section of the story, like the whole of the Jonah book, is according to our present knowledge without question the work of the imagination. The crucial issue is whether or not one perceives in this imaginative work a call to faith, a call which reckons with the surprising and unexpected stepping in of God in our own lives and in the history of the church. The narrator seeks to offer something other than an "on-the-spot"

report of past events. He wants to testify to his God, provocatively, via something fantastically unbelievable, and not without a good-sized shot of humor. This type of story-telling has been appropriately labeled "a fortissimo of faith" (Gottfried Quell).

We have to realize that even for the most hardened failures among God's agents there is still hope — hope even for a church which has fallen fast asleep aboard its escape ship and has already been thrown overboard. Through many of its individual members the church has experienced that God can still summon means of transportation to haul her to the place where he wants to put her to use, whether this means of transportation is called the Gestapo or invasion troops, whether it takes the form of madly increasing news reports hostile to the church, or of some other anti-Christian campaign. These and other "large fish" equally serve God in "swallowing up Jonah." Without them any about-face would obviously never get into gear. We should note well that such new dangers are the very way of deliverance for us and for Christianity.

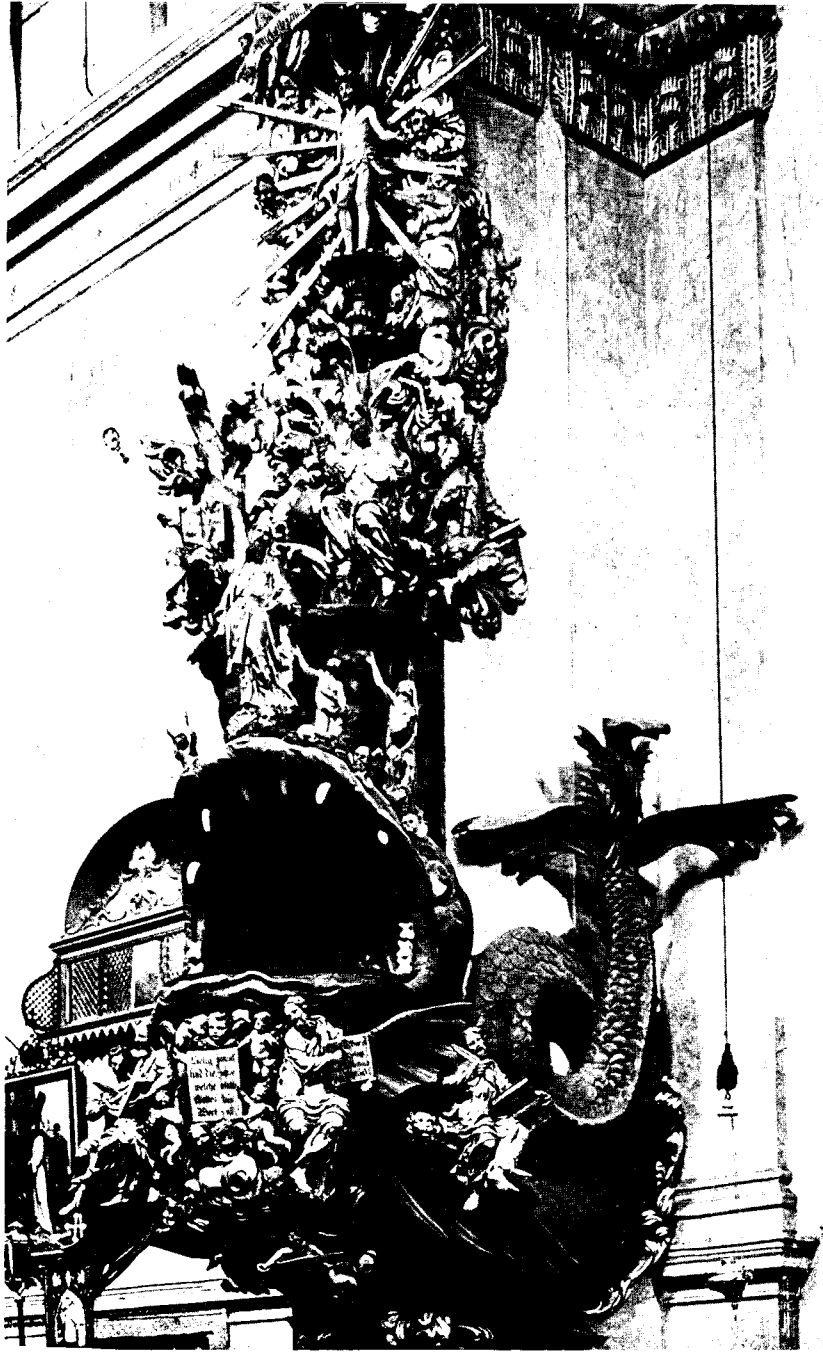
Only after God's power play does Jonah finally pray. That means only after "*three days and nights*" (2:1b) of being cooped up in unusual darkness. "And Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish" (2:2). Please note the timing! After three days and three nights in the belly of that fish there was just no hope left. We recall the disciples on the Emmaus road who had hoped that Jesus would redeem

Israel. Now that three days had passed really an about-face? The Psalm (2:3-10) since his death (Luke 24:21), they too — perhaps interpolated later on — says: had run out of hope. Jonah can now hope yes! At all events, through such hard for a new lease on life only from God schooling he should have gained the himself. So he cries out painfully, understanding that God feels pity for evil drowning in doubt and distress. His own Nineveh and that, in spite of its guilt, he naked existence flashes before his eyes. wouldn't allow it to go to its destruction This is the way in which he is personally without warning.

outfitted by God for his great mission in Whoever has to warn and to save people in this world — people, it may be,

After the first reception of his call, all whose danger is the result of their own Jonah had in mind was getting out of the guilt — must indeed learn this hard lesson Lord's sight fast. During his escape he for himself. In the twelfth century had to be shaken forcefully out of his cathedral at Ravello, the left pulpit sleep, but he never gave one thought to staircase shows Jonah being swallowed calling to his God as did the heathen. down, and the right staircase shows him Perhaps even his advice "Throw me into being vomited up again. Extremely the sea!" was more defiance than self-remarkable are a few such "whale-sacrifice, for we heard only the prayer of pulpits" found in Silesia and Bohemia. At the sailors, who were afraid of making the front of the church stands a themselves culpable. Not a syllable monstrous creature — very artistically suggests that Jonah might have brought carved — rearing up with his jaws gaping his guilt before God. What a difficult wide open towards the congregation. person this Jonah is! Psychically a most There between his powerful teeth appears complicated man! Only modern men the preacher before the congregation (for could be as fouled up as was Jonah. He example, in Reinerz/Silesia from the refuses his mission, he flees, he sleeps, period around 1730, see illustration). he confesses only under pressure, he Occasionally the pulpits are so built that wants to die — and then, when in the the preacher must climb up through the most extreme danger, he screams out to entire belly of such a "whale-pulpit" (as the Lord from whom he never wanted to in Dobrischau, near Strehlen). This hear again. should be a powerful reminder for every

Ancient church sarcophagus engrav- preacher, as well as for every Christian, ings from the third century after Christ that only he who has come to an insight of picture this crying out from the belly of his own about-face through bitter the fish as Jonah's about-face. He is helplessness and fear and who has swallowed head-first and is also coughed experienced the liberation of his God, up head-first. Thus it was in the stomach only he who has learned to expect of the fish that he executed his about- renewed life from God's act and guidance face. Was his cry of distress alone, only he is



really able to speak to his congregation and to the world around him. He who has recognized a deserved death sentence but who has experienced in his own cry of anguish God's liberating acquittal has experienced something more than what is purely private, although it has primarily affected no one but himself. He, like Jonah, has been prepared for the great task ahead.

Whether or not Jonah experienced true reversal remains yet to be seen, in the light of God's word which comes to him "a second time" (3:1). The repetition testifies to God's patience with his rebellious messenger as well as to the power of his forgiveness, which again gives him a job to do, as if nothing had ever happened. Now as a matter of fact Jonah does set out for Nineveh "as *the Lord had said*" (3:3). Jonah is not painted in completely negative colors. He is as complicated as are we or the church. There is much disobedience and resistance, but even so a way is traveled in obedience, and with that the consequences are immeasurably great. This should encourage us to walk in obedience.

What Jonah does is certainly anything but extravagant. According to the primary text, his sermon consisted of five Hebrew words. (Just as in his confession before the sailors [1:9], so also here he remains terse and crisp.) "Forty more days and Nineveh shall be destroyed" (3:4). Jonah neither wallows in Nineveh's wickedness nor does he eloquently seek to persuade the people to a better life. He neither paints a

picture of apocalyptic world destruction, nor does he mention the name of God in so much as a syllable. In terse objectivity he proclaims that the time of this grand capital city has all but run out. If we were to ask him how he came to this conclusion, he would of course have to answer that his God had entrusted to him this knowledge.

Every one of us should equally be certain of one thing: one's days of wickedness are always numbered. The experts have already calculated for us, the generation of environmental pollution, how little time we have left at the present rate of exploitation, until all of our natural resources are exhausted. Progress along the path of wickedness is strictly limited. The only progress which is limitless is that which is in "the good", as when genuine love never comes to an end. It has become obvious to our age of nuclear physics, biology and research for the future, as for no earlier generation, that evil is always busy digging its own grave, particularly when we seek to secure our power to absurd limits, or when we desire to continually increase our "gusto" in life by means of mindless industrialization. This is true in little things as well as in big ones.

"Yet forty days!" Even the days left for our world are numbered. It is of essential importance for the life of today's Nineveh that modern Jonah not be silent. The days of the ruthless application of force, of self-gratifying grasping after security, of hate-filled longing after retribution, the days of



mismanaged management of creation, are in every sense extremely limited. The sands are running out. To awaken this insight is the goal of Jonah's about-face. A single staunch resolve, an act boldly taken, a word clearly spoken accomplish more in the world than do the masses who spinelessly and mutely mark time only thinking on themselves. So the entire book of Jonah strives for the insight and decision of the single individual, even if Jonah himself is complicated and questionable. To this day, nothing has become more urgent.

Nineveh's About-Face

2. The result of these few obedient steps and words of Jonah is nothing less than *Nineveh's about-face*. We saw in the first chapter that Nineveh is the extreme case of grossness and wickedness among all the centers of world power. Nineveh is there where we see suffering — suffering from war and terror, in educational systems and in care for the sick, in technology and industry. Verse 3 underlines once more its staggering dimensions: "Nineveh was a large city even for God himself, a three days' journey in breadth." For a Palestinian at the time of Jonah, this would have been a city of absolutely fantastic proportions. It is necessary for Christians, as it was for old Israel, to force down their apprehensions about size and about quantity. Religious thought, like middle-class self-satisfaction, prefers to confine itself to small, private circles. However, the message of the church and its mission

are misunderstood when it shrinks back from the world centers upon which the fate of the masses depends.

Our narrator wants to sweep away all our timidity about these centers of power and wickedness. He challenges us to hope. He already put us to shame with the heathen sailors, who at the end stood there looking much more exemplary than did Jonah. And now, with Nineveh, he sweeps aside even more our objection that all our efforts would be in vain. On the whole, the words in "vain" are used in the Bible only in reference to human spite and obstinacy.

What the narrator reveals of Nineveh is once again not an historical report, but rather poetic fiction in prophetic guise. One can look through the annals of Assyrian kings in vain for any reference to Jonah's prophetic activity. It is certain, however, that the view of the capital city in the book of Jonah has, in the meantime, become history to an overwhelming degree — since the days when the message of Jesus subjugated the Nineveh of his days, Rome and its world empire, through Constantinople, Moscow, South and North America up to the growth of the young churches in Asia and Africa in our own century. Yes, we must never lose sight of the fact that the history of the development of all modern mankind would be incomprehensible if divorced from the proclamation in the name of the God of Israel, the father of Jesus Christ. Yet it is no less necessary for us than it was for each and every generation before us that we challenge ourselves to a new

hope for this world, a world which lives on the brink of disaster, not least because of the treason displayed by Christians in regard to their Lord Jesus. It is to living hope that we are called, hope for the new danger-centers, hope for the determinative influence of the message entrusted to us concerning the reconciliation in Christ, without which all of the world's days are numbered. The true message is the word which changes *everything*.

The totality of Nineveh's about-face is portrayed by the narrator from three sides. "Everyone, from the greatest to the least", is caught up in the movement (3:5). It doesn't stop merely with the children or only with the adults; it isn't satisfied with just the educated or with merely the illiterate; it's not concerned only with those who conform to the majority or only with the leading individuals who judge discerningly. Our Jonahs today should never forget that "the greatest and the least" are meant. The church all too easily forgets the one or the other.

We see secondly that a "people's movement" is set in gear (3:5), but that even the king and his ministers are involved, too (3:6). Indeed Jonah's preaching results in official governmental edicts. One might say that we have before us here the model of an exemplary community church, or perhaps even a state-church. But nothing yet in this model is ossified; rather everything is on the move and full of expectation. The biblical message certainly touches the life of the nation as

a people, but it also inevitably affects the ordinances of the nation as a political *state*. It doesn't stop short of the responsible politicians; nevertheless in this matter the state governments cannot act on behalf of their peoples, for the decision of every single person is called for (3:8).

The third fact relating to the extent of Nineveh's about-face sounds extremely fanciful. Not only the people but even the *animals* are absorbed into the repentance movement (3:7f). The cattle and the sheep too are to fast, to don the penitential garments of humility, and to *cry* aloud to God. Behind this stands the certainty, seen ever more clearly by us today, that the decisions made by mankind, whether they be for evil or for good, also draw dumb creatures into the ensuing disaster or salvation. The rites of penance in particular, not only for animals but even for man, seem strange to us today. Consider! It wasn't first the modern behavioral research in biology which spoke of symbiosis; Paul (Romans 8:19-23) already has called our attention to the community of eager longing and anxious anticipation for liberation. It is this community which binds human kind together with the rest of creation. That all of life on earth is knit together into a "community of common fate" must be clearly impressed into our consciousness. This is part and parcel with that which the conclusion of verse 8 calls the "evil way" and the "violence which is in man's hands."

We have observed in Nineveh a total



about-face which encompasses great and small, people and state, man and beast. This portrayal seeks to arouse new confidence for all those circles which we suspect to be sunk in incorrigibly wicked conditions of the grandest style. Whenever we become skeptical we should think about Jonah. He, too, never guessed that his few words, which were "according to the word of the Lord", would ever have such an effect.

We might ask further *how* the about-face in Nineveh is accomplished. The first remark is that it was exceedingly swift and uncomplicated. Immediately after Jonah has preached Nineveh's downfall we are told (3:5): "And the people of Nineveh believed in God." How much more laborious it was for God to reach his goal with Jonah! The command to go to Nineveh finally came to completion only by route of the wide detour of the flight, by the intervention of the storm, by the cross-examination of captain and crew, through the toss into the sea, by being carted around in the "giant fish", after a prayer being forced out of Jonah, after finally being coughed up by the fish and commissioned anew; finally! In Nineveh, however, with the crazy heathen, the word immediately gave way to faith. Obviously they understood fully that the days of wickedness are quickly running out.

Jesus called to mind the ensuing consequences of this exemplary action: "On the Judgment Day the people of Nineveh will stand up against this

generation and accuse it; for they turned from their sins when they heard Jonah preach; I tell you something greater than Jonah is here!" (Matt. 12:41). Not infrequently it appears in our century as if humanistic atheists could rise up in judgment against western Christendom. Instead of looking to the one who is more than Jonah, Christians all too often bury their heads in the sand of obscure theological reflection which serves only as a poorly disguised side-stepping maneuver. On the other hand, there are Communists who see much more clearly that one's push towards power prepares only for one's own collapse. In any case, we should face the fact that we Christians, like Jonah and like the contemporaries of Jesus, could be put to shame and even brought to trial by Nineveh. Nineveh draws rapid conclusions from its knowledge of the approaching end.

Secondly, this turn-around points to the fact that the events in time cannot be seen apart from God. In Jonah's sermon the word "God" appears absolutely nowhere. (Perhaps it appears in the church too often!) However, the people believed *in God!* (3:5). Later the edict of the king states (3:9): ". . . perhaps *God* will repent of this." How difficult, on the other hand, it was for Jonah to grasp that the word which had come to him and the storm at sea likewise went together. We, too, must learn the same lesson: all that happens about us, even the crucial threats which hang over the world powers and over the lives of us all, are to be seen together with the

message which has been given to us; it must be seen together with the simple and clear word of Jesus concerning reconciliation with which we have been entrusted. This connection between the messenger's word and world events can only be recognized when we accept that the message and the events are both sent by God in a similar way. It is this that the heathen had grasped. Christians as well as heathen must freshly understand this for today. He who is proclaimed Lord is at the same time the Lord of all powers; and vice versa: he who is the Lord of all powers is the Lord who is preached. The ominous disaster, the possible world catastrophe, should cause us once more to seek refuge in the proclaimed Lord. He who takes notice that the Biblical word and these events stem from the same Lord is executing an about-face. He who tears apart the word and the events, whether out of pious or out of pretended rational considerations, in effect tears to pieces the word, the world, and his life, and enlarges the world danger which threatens us all. We must be absolutely clear about one thing: essential thought processes are missing when we divide ourselves from the affairs of the community. For this reason we should all learn from these Ninevites and at the same time study theology, political science, and practical wisdom; and we do this when we simultaneously think about the proclaimed word, the future of mankind and our own obedience to God.

Thirdly, we see here not only recognition and reflection but also

action: faith and action, worship of God and work in the world go hand in hand. Again Jonah serves as a perfect antitype, as an example of how not to behave. He certainly knew that his Lord is the God of the sea, but nevertheless fled across the sea. In Nineveh we hear about faith, but at the same time we are told about every single person's renunciation of his evil behavior and of the violence of his hands (3:4). It is important to see that the service of God and the service of humanity are neither to be divided from one another, nor are they identical.

We are told in detailed form about the rites of penance which take place in Nineveh (3:7f). To them belong above all fasting, the donning of very plain, crude mourning dress, and praying. The liturgical forms may vary, but whoever acknowledges before God that his wickedness is a dead-end street will be brought to a similar internal posture. Fasting can show the honest perception that the life one has been living up to now deserves no further nourishment or support; it must be left to die, or be starved out; new life can only be expected from God. In stripping off one's stylish clothes — according to verse 6 even the king climbed off his throne and removed his purple robes — and in donning the plain robe of mourning, one's humility can bear witness to itself, a humility which can no longer be all dolled up but which now hopes in God's new act of creation to be made beautiful. "To cry mightily to God" (3:8) really means to know that all future life depends totally upon his free



mercy, and to expect that life from him. The forms of a humble confession of guilt, of humility and of expectation before God change. But when they become formless, then they cease to exist. When they are real, a confession of guilt, a humble attitude, and an expectation of the new life from God require time, and they strive after forms of expression and determine one's behavior, if they are honestly felt. For they are related to everyday life. This ritual of penance according to verse 8b goes hand in hand with the turning aside from the road of wickedness which had been travelled up till now. It runs parallel with the abandonment of violence and self-assertion, with a rejection of former life styles. The radical renunciation of self-gratifying methods is the flip side of the listening prayer which expects new life from the word and action of God. One should notice that the action of the state taken in Nineveh is explicitly addressed to every single *individual* (3:8) precisely out of regard for the new attitude. Without the individual, absolutely nothing should be expected from the crowd. We have already witnessed this in the trouble God went to for the sake of Jonah's about-face; this was the prerequisite for the about-face of many individuals in Nineveh and, consequently, for the deliverance of the community as a whole. For this reason not a single person among us can ever be cognizant enough of the fact that one's belief and action, one's service to God and service to man, take effect together.

God's New Start

3. Such a sincere new start lives in the expectation of *God's own new start*. At the end of the king of Nineveh's edict he states: "Who knows? God may yet regret and turn away from his fierce anger so that we do not perish" (3:9). Similarly the captain in 1:6 had said to Jonah: "Perhaps the god (namely your God) will give a thought to us that we do not perish." Nineveh hopes — in spite of the threat of destruction. Nineveh hopes — and not in vain. "God regretted his evil plan which he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (3:10). It is this very inconsistency which becomes excruciatingly difficult for Jonah's theology, and not only difficult but, as we will see in chapter 4, unbearable. Likewise this talk of God's "regretting" is a great problem for modern man's ideas about God. *Can* God be like this? Isn't he bound to be true to himself? *May* God do this? Is he to be permitted to retract a just verdict? Doesn't he then prove his own word to be a worthless lie? Is he not making a fool of his own emissary if he allows Nineveh to live?

In fact, the God of the Bible shatters our idolatrous veneration of our own ideas of perfection. This idolatry is unmasked, in Feuerbach's view, as the "religion of man": it is nothing but the projection of our human dreams and desires on heaven. We are forced here to speak once more of the freedom of the living God. *His word shows itself to be the instrument of his freedom*. It does not

aim to be absolute truth, but rather is markedly relative, that is to say, it is related to the person who hears it. It is understandable truth only when seen in the context of God's relation to man. The stern saying, according to which the days of wickedness are numbered, isn't concerned with insisting on its fulfillment, its aim is only to save man. God's greatest worry is *not* to remain true *to himself* but to remain true *to man*. It is precisely in this way that in the Old as well as the New Testament God does also remain true to himself. He persistently dialogues with us in order to move us to his redemption. For this reason, Nineveh's prayer made good sense. God's consistency is this alone, that in his living dialog with us he acts in our best interests. That is why even God makes about-faces. Through all the meanders of our lives God stays on our tracks.

It is on the basis of this *freedom of God* that Nineveh lives, that Jonah lives, and that we live. As opposed to our demands for perfection and as opposed to every pressure for consistency he is absolutely free. That which he had proclaimed — as a just verdict — "he did not do it" (3:10). He fulfilled the expectation, "that we do not perish" (3:9). It is exactly this to which God has set his seal in the cross of Christ. His cry "Father, forgive them!" (Luke 23:34) has been graciously heard. He desires that those who are to blame might go free. He is free to give his acquittal. Our lives are thus renewed and we are delivered from death's grip. It is

because of this liberty of God to make an about-face that we exist, and not only we but also the entire world, in the midst of the forty days time-limit that is set for our about-face.

God's Compassion

The dominating will of this freedom is called compassion. The traditional Biblical translation "to repent", only touches on one aspect of the Hebrew word *niham*; that is, that God is free with regard to his promises — he can change his mind. But this word in the Hebrew text also has an undertone of "compassion". With this in mind, one might better translate verse 9: "Perhaps God might once again have compassion", and verse 10: "Perhaps he will be sorry for the evil which he had announced."

The depth of this tender-heartedness is especially well recognizable in our text. When did God begin to feel sorry for Nineveh because of his threat? Verse 10 says: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way." We might question whether this really was conversion. Was it not rather forced on them out of naked fear for their lives? (Similarly we criticize "conversion experiences" in world politics or with individuals.) Indeed, the God of Israel had absolutely no status in Nineveh. In his edict the king said (as similarly did the heathen captain in 1:6): "Perhaps *the God will* have compassion." In modern terms the sentence implies little more than this: Perhaps our fortunes will improve once again!



Scarcely more. The men of Nineveh know nothing about the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Jonah and Israel. Their theology is as paltry as is possible. But it is highly significant that our Israelite narrator himself echoes in verse 10 that same heathen talk about "the God": it corresponds there exactly word for word with verse 9: "When *the God* saw what they did, . . . *the God* was sorry for the evil ..." We couldn't possibly see more clearly the compassion which demands no perfect perception, no polished confession of faith; it only asks that men should listen to his word, act accordingly, and hope in the unknown. Here we find Israel outside Israel, the church outside the church, the people of hope who become the reprieved people of God. Is it possible to call this prophetically viewed Nineveh anything else? It is here that the church becomes world wide.

Whether Jonah mirrors Israel or the church, whether Nineveh embodies the heathen peoples or the world, in any case they both live by the exact same kindness shown by God. Jonah's about-face was the act of God's turn

around. By means of Jonah's word, Nineveh's about-face is set in motion. Nineveh's change leads to the goal of new life through God's compassionate decision not to vent his justified wrath and his turning toward pity and sympathy. Perhaps there is no better understanding of the real theme of our lives too, and the life of our world: it is God's turning away from severity to compassion, from well-deserved death to the new gift of life. Thus the free Lord of our life who is not at our disposal, deals with us in the sending of Jesus in the midst of world events. His word is the power which changes all things. We have really understood the mercy of his about-face when we ourselves put into practice this great turn-about, a turn-about which no longer sets its hopes on wickedness, whether obvious or veiled, a turn-about which nonetheless is all the more willing and quick to receive Jesus' word and work, his warning and his invitation. This is the grand opportunity for Jonah and for Nineveh, for the Church and for the world, for Jews, for Christians, and for all mankind.

