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# An Altar in the Sea



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# An Altar in the Sea

Jonah offered us his wonderful prayer and his unique prophetic praise, not in moments of comfort, not in the temple like a Rabbi would do, but in the midst of suffering as in the tomb of the crucified Christ as **Saint John Chrysostom** says: [If only we do not care about the place, but rather the Lord of the place for Jonah was in the belly of the whale and the Lord listened to his prayer. And you, if you were even in the washroom, pray. Everywhere, wherever you may find yourself, you can set up an altar to God in your mind by means of prayer.]

## Jonah as a Type of Christ

**Saint Jacob of Serugh** believes that Jonah was subject to the condemnation of death that he issued against himself by his own will, so that the Gentile mariners would not perish. The Messiah the Savior was transfigured before him, who will come to the world to die by His own will for the sake of humanity. Death did not trouble Jonah for he became a type for the Giver of Life who will die to raise humanity.

He heard the prophetic voice in his depths, granting him reassurance and peace, for as he was a type of Christ, the Giver of life, he was confident that he will die with Him and rise again with Him. Corruption would have no reign over him. He became a type of the dead while being alive and incorruptible. He was like Christ who was placed in the tomb, having tasted death according to the flesh while being immortal according to His divinity and thus His flesh saw no corruption.

By Jonah's descent into the sea, the waves were calmed just as the crucifiers rested with the death of the Son of God. The mariners wanted to return to the shore but were unable to save Jonah from drowning. Likewise, the ruler (Pilate) also defended our Savior but was not able to help that Righteous One. The mariners cried out to God so that they may not be charged with Jonah's innocent blood. Likewise, the righteous ruler washed his hands, so that he would not be charged with His pure and righteous blood. He saw himself being thrown into the waters, as a symbol of the soul of Christ that had gone out preaching to those who were in Hades. Jonah became a precious treasure that was kept







in the whale's belly. When he could not find hope, the hope in the Lord was manifested in front of him, and when he found death, he experienced the new, resurrected life!

## A New Wonderous Ship!

Porphyry mocked the story of Jonah and thought it was a funny joke. Hence, **Saint Augustine** wrote that **if Christians paid attention to the mockeries of the pagans, they will not be able to accept the resurrection of Christ after three days.**<sup>1</sup>

As for **Saint Jacob of Serugh**, he saw the unique whale that carried Jonah in its belly as a beautiful portrait for God's amazing mercies.

The whale became an **amazing, new ship** for Jonah that God surrounds and keeps. Its passenger, Jonah, was not harmed. The winds cannot move it, but the Spirit of the Lord who grants human-kind the new birth in the waters of baptism.

The whale became a **unique house**. Its foundation was not the earth, as it was swimming in the midst of the waves, swaying back and forth without dropping any of its cargo as it was a truly wonderful house.

He saw it as a **new tomb**, which houses a dead man and a live man, both at the same time. It was kept by the power of God who grants life.

He saw it as an **abyss** that carries the dead but grants life.

He saw it as a **mother's womb**, which conceived without the seed of man (like Jonah entered through the whale's mouth).

He saw it as a **royal palace**, which shelters a king and Bridegroom.

He saw it as a **jail that imprisons but does not harm**, housing along with the prisoner, his life as his companion.

Finally, the saint makes a comparison between those who were buried: **Jonah and his Savior Jesus Christ**, as being both placed in the tomb, they offered life to others.

❖ The two dead men became a cause of life by their actions: Jonah for Nineveh and the Son of God for all humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter 170:6



They became like divers who brought out the treasures from the deep, and from whom, a new life has sprung out.

Jonah dived and rescued Nineveh from the depths, and our Lord also dived and rescued Adam from Hades.

Have you ever seen someone who was buried pray to the Lord aside from Jonah?

Have you ever seen someone who was murdered granting life to the dead aside from our Lord?

**Saint Jacob of Serugh**

### **A Holy Temple, a New Monastery, and a Hidden Heaven!**

Jonah was in a strange place, which no foot has ever trampled upon. He left the temple in Jerusalem yet found the whale as a holy temple where he could offer the sacrifice of praise. He left those of his race to dwell alone in a monastery and practising the life of worship where nothing concerns him but God his beloved. He was elevated as though he was in heaven to praise with the Cherubim and Seraphim!

❖ From the depths of the sea, my tongue shall praise You richly, and at the seabed I shall sing to You. I left you, O Lord, at Jerusalem in front of the ark, but I found You underground managing my life. You made me reside in a new monastery underground. I shall sing to You with the hymns of glorification because of Your great glory.

From within death I shall praise You O good Lord and my mouth shall weave You a crown of glory in my affliction.

As though he were in heaven, he prayed to the Lord from within the belly of the whale and as though he were among the Cherubim, he offered his prayers.

**Saint Jacob of Serugh**

How did Saint Jacob of Serugh See Jonah? In one instance, he sees him as the captain of an amazing ship. On another, he sees him dead lying in a tomb accompanied by a new life. Again he see him as a bridegroom whose wedding carriage is constantly moving as he enjoys a unique and joyful banquet, and an infant in a virgin's womb, a king that resides in a dazzling palace, a prisoner who is imprisoned yet not harmed. Now, he sees him as a priest coming from the land to pray in the depths of the sea on an altar that was not built by human hands.





## A Prayer that Ascends to the Lord Most High!

**Saint John Chrysostom** believes that God taught Jonah to be compassionate with others because if the whale was able to swallow and vomit him without hurting him, shouldn't he also be compassionate with his brothers even if they were from the gentiles? The waves received him but did not strangle him, and the whale carried him without hurting him. Hence, the prophet should have been merciful and compassionate, or else he would be crueler than the predatory animal, the ignorant sailors, and the raging waves.

How strange! When he prayed in the whale's belly, his prayers rose without anything hindering it. The fruit that Jonah sent from the whale's belly was beautiful: a prayer that ascended as a first fruits offering to the Lord Most High.

It came from a place far away, but was beautiful because who has ever prayed from beneath the ground aside from Jonah?

It is a song that alone rises from the depths, and there has never been or will ever be anything like it.

It is a hymn that was sung by a Hebrew in the heart of the earth, and it miraculously reached the highest place.

It is a cluster of glory, which Jonah snatched from the belly of the whale and sent, and the heavenly hosts were astonished at its sweet taste.

Jonah did not put the sweet incense on live coal but on water, and the heavenly hosts marveled at its smell.

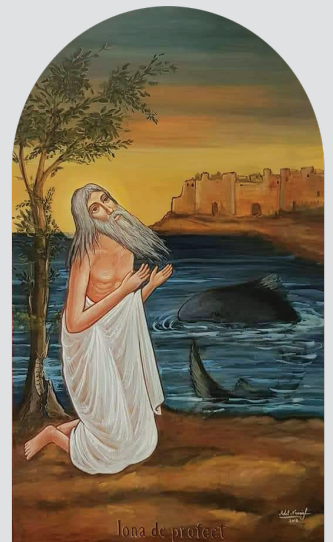
A pure prayer whose aroma was sweeter than incense and a burning love far more than live coal.

The prayer ascended and came out with great compassion bringing out hope to the one who had no hope. The prisoner came out of darkness and saw the light, and he became a new man who was unusually born from water.

The whale gave birth to him as a child who came from darkness, and the land received him as a newborn child from his nurse.

He ascended as he descended and was not corrupted in the belly of hades. He came out of death and was full of life without being harmed.

Resurrection has shone on the prophet and it sprinkled on him life, so he opened his eyes and saw the light, and he longed to encounter Him.



**Saint Jacob of Serugh**



“So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” (Jonah 2:10)

**Saint Jerome** believes that the word “vomit” refers to the triumphant life that has emerged from the deepest and most impenetrable parts of death.<sup>2</sup> It was impossible for hell to take hold of Jonah or for corruption to afflict him as the psalmist says, “For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption” (Psalms 16:10). He rose as a first born from among those who had fallen asleep to raise us with him and as Saint Jerome states, “For those who were beforehand captives in death, He brought them to life again.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Jonah stones Nineveh with the sounds of his preaching!**

**Saint John Chrysostom** says, [The Ninevites when they heard the prophet vehemently declaring, and plainly threatening but even then, they did not lose heart but, although they had no confidence that they should be able to move the mind of God, or rather had reason to suspect the contrary from the divine message even then they manifested repentance saying: “Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?” (Jonah 3:9) Now if barbarian and unreasoning men could perceive so much, how much more ought we do this who have been trained in the divine doctrines and have seen such a crowd of examples of this kind both in history and actual experience.<sup>4</sup>]

He says, [In the days of Jonah, if God had not threatened with destruction then he would have not removed destruction... if he did not threaten us with hell then we would have all fallen into it.<sup>5</sup>]

And again he says, [Threatening one with danger rescues him from it... threatening death creates life. He stopped the judgement after he announced it unlike what happens with the current judges, for if they make a judgement it must be done... but in terms of God, he does the opposite. He announces the judgement in order to stop it.<sup>6</sup>]

**Saint John Chrysostom** often explained that God’s threats with death and corruption was not to kill His people but to lead them to the life of repentance. Threatening by death gives life, and that is why God threatened by hell, so that no one may be led to hell.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Commentary on Jonah

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Theodore

<sup>5</sup> On 1Tim. Homily 15

<sup>6</sup> Conc. Stat. 5:16



**Saint Jacob of Serugh** saw the words of Jonah as arrows that he pointed towards the people of Nineveh because he did not give them any hope and he did not show them the mercies of God who embraces those who repent. Jonah only told them the scary events that would take place. Hence, they did not doubt his threats, and believed him and acted instantly.

### The King's Wisdom was Demonstrated By His Actions:

- 1 In humility, he did not underestimate an unarmed man, who was poor and looked so despicable.
- 2 He instantly left his throne and offered sincere repentance.
- 3 He gathered all the people, even the children, and had them all participate in the battle.
- 4 He realized that the children and infants were stronger than any weapon. With them, they could win any battle and earn the mercies of God.

In wisdom, the king realized that his life and the lives of his people are in the hands of God, the God of this prophet. Therefore, if Jonah locked the door of his heart before them, repentance is capable of opening the doors of God's mercy.



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