

## ROD OF JESSE

whereas Jonah, who is impervious to the dreadful signs of Jahweh's wrath, has gone off to lie down in the ship's hold where the captain finds him *fast asleep*. This is a thumping absurdity which puts me in mind of 'the man at the wheel' who

'was made to feel contempt for the wildest blow/ Tho' it often  
appeared when the gale had cleared/ That he'd been in his bunk  
below.'

The captain says, 'What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, *call upon your god... that we do not perish!*'

Absurdity matches absurdity here: Jonah 'in the sides of the ship' and Jesus on his pillow are both asleep in a howling storm, but is it *supposed* to be funny? Or does the Hebrew narrative ask to be sounded more deeply? Given the indiscriminate wrath of a Jahweh who threatens to sink a ship because of a single guilty man, and one whose iniquity captain and crew know nothing about and can't be accused of sheltering, we may have in the biblical version an underlying folk tale which has been taken up and used to higher purpose. Or if not, then we may have in the fable as it stands the 'dramatic' use of a primitive ethic which author and audience had really outgrown, very much as in a fairy-tale.

We make no direct comparison between Jesus and Jonah, of course, because as men, as prophets, they are incommensurable. It is a point worth bearing in mind. Thus the raging waters are pacified by Jonah very differently when he gets himself thrown overboard at his own suggestion, the sailors having cast lots to find out whose fault it is that this 'evil' has come upon them. He says, 'Take me up and throw me into the sea, then the sea will quiet down for you.' Instead, they row harder! They are very reluctant to throw him into a yawning storm out of sudden regard for the god he worships, but they have no choice. After he is thrown overboard the sea ceases from its raging; the sailors sacrifice to the Lord and make vows; and the Lord 'appoints' a 'great fish' to swallow the disobedient prophet. He must spend '*three days and three nights in the belly of the whale*' until he is vomited out upon dry land. The wording in this Italicized quotation comes from Matthew's Gospel (King James and RSV) where Jonah's 'great fish' has become the fabled whale.

A certain residue of myth clings to this mere fable, then, and deepens the comedy, and I have dwelt on this because to a nicety it will bear on what is to come. One of the older scholars, Oxford's TK Cheyne,