



JONAH

AND THE

BONY-FINNED
ASTEROID
FISH



JO SHERINGHAM

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Romans 11.29 (NRSV)

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

Psalms 139.7–12 (NRSV)

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Part One

From Within

This is it, then. The finale. The end. Curtains. My paltry little life spat out into the oblivion of timeless space. Probably most deservedly so, I suppose.

Ah, now here's the small catch, I think. Let's see if this does the trick and maybe I will still be able to slide open the viewing plate.

I know we've hit something or landed somewhere, which was the last thing I thought was going to happen when I was stuffed into this ejection capsule. But it all happened so fast, and pondering on the whys and wherefores of such a step was not exactly paramount at the time.

There, that's got it. Now I can at least see what has, only temporarily I suspect, halted my demise.

Interesting ... or, rather, quite disgusting. This is definitely organic and definitely alive!

What in all the planetary systems is this sort of black, grey slime? Just look at the size of those veins, or whatever anatomical feature they might possibly be. If I'm not mistaken, they seem to be suckering up against the side of the capsule, pulsating, oscillating ... digesting ...

We've been eaten. I don't believe it. That just about takes the biscuit. Me and my soon-to-be-digested, disintegrated capsule, we are the veritable biscuit!

I ask you: ejected into nothingness, into the vast expanse of space, and all along there was something in the nothingness and it's just had us for lunch.

Yes, thank you very much, my little small voice; look what happens when you try to run away.

Oh my word ... we're moving! This suddenly seems rather serious and suddenly rather gruesome and I don't think it's going to be a comfortably silent, swift end, either. This is a truly horrific predicament. By the looks

of those rippling membranes, we seem to be sliding further down into whatever it is that has eaten us.

I'm talking to myself, I know I'm talking to myself, I know I'm saying 'we' when it really is just 'me'; but for what I presume are to be these last few minutes of my life, this capsule has suddenly become my best and dearest friend.

Jonah Son of Amittai

He was attempting to calm his thoughts and clear away any further distractions, so that he could finish his morning meditations without any more interruptions, when the bell outside his front door rang, again. Even the deep, mellow clanging of this specially chosen bell (especially chosen for its deep, mellow clanginess) did not manage to crack the finely honed porcelain exterior of the prophet, although it was not far off. With a restrained huffiness, he clambered up from his kneeling position, grunting and muttering under his breath as he gathered up his robes and waddled across the room to answer the door.

Waddling was indeed the best word for describing his gait, especially after he'd already had to get up from the floor four times in a row that morning. First, there had been a screeching disturbance from his neighbour's Mammouthian Scarry Rat named Bongadin. Second, a consignment of fresh feed for the aforementioned Bongadin had been delivered to the wrong door – his door. Third, a query from the most anxious next-door neighbour as to the whereabouts of said Bongadin – had he seen the Rat at all since last night? And fourth, the meat vendor's red-faced wife had waved a business-class cleaver in his face, asking if he was the owner of the Mammouthian Scarry Rat last witnessed escaping from their meat transporter with a side of steak! At such an early hour in the morning (it wasn't even 10 o'clock yet) and at his time of life, it was just all too much.

On reaching his front door he cracked open the viewing plate, rather sharply, to the right, to see who this fifth caller was. Perhaps this time it would actually be Bongadin the Mammouthian Scarry Rat himself, seeking asylum in the gracious bosom of a gentle prophet.

Thankfully not; it was just a message-bot, a much more everyday, expected and innocuous caller.

'Post for Jonah son of Amittai,' the voice of the message-bot crackled.

'Yes, yes, that's me.' The prophet tried not to sound too exasperated. 'I'm not opening this door again. Just plug it into the viewing plate and I'll see what it is.'

The message-bot held up the flat rectangular screen that displayed the post and clicked it into place over the viewing plate in the door; after a few seconds the screen flickered into life and the message was visible.

The prophet shuddered, not exactly with rage or fear or pain or anticipation but with all of them and something more besides. He felt pure emotion deep in the dark caverns of his soul and it was not at all comfortable.

'Will the post be accepted or wiped, sir?' questioned the message-bot.

With a strangled spitting of words, the prophet answered, 'Wiped!' and, just to make his point, he slid the viewing plate shut with as much force as he could muster.

The bell rang again. He shut his eyes, took a breath and remembered his manners; he was a prophet after all and he had standards. It was required by law to pay for any wiping of any post one might receive, and he did not want any penalties showing on his Citizen's Account. It was getting harder and harder to keep a clean slate these days.

In a more business-like manner he slid open the viewing plate once more, apologised to the message-bot who was still waiting outside (Jonah knew it was not necessary to apologise to a roving piece of service technology but it just seemed like the right thing to do) and then held his thumb-print up to the screen to register his due payment.

'Thank you, Jonah son of Amittai, have a nice day.'

'Thank you,' muttered Jonah in return.

The message-bot put his screen back inside his well-worn postbag, which looked rather fitting slung across his rusty bodywork, and turned towards his next delivery destination. Perhaps, thought Jonah, there was some post for the Mammouthian Scarry Rat.

The prophet turned around and leant his back against the door. He shut his eyes and, with a distinct firmness, placed his head back, several times, against the door. He could not be said to be exactly hitting his head against the door, but he was, almost. A great sigh

found its way out between his clenched teeth; he just did not understand.

‘There is no rhyme or reason behind this. It just won’t do. Not at all!’ He sounded muddled and desperate.

He realised he was talking to himself again. There had been a lot of that recently; however, he was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he himself was the only one worth talking to.

‘This is madness. I need to get away, I need a holiday. When was the last time I had a holiday, eh? You tell me that.’

The prophet opened his eyes and stood up straight, away from the door. A gleam of resolution lifted his mature features, his spiky eyebrows standing to attention.

There was no time for meditation now. In fact, Jonah realised that that was the last thing he should do, because if he prayed, really prayed, he would be opening himself up to all sorts of trouble and the messages may never stop! He needed to make his move and escape.

No; he had caught himself out. He would not use the word ‘escape’, because that was not what it was. He was simply giving himself a well-earned – oh yes indeed – a very well-earned break, a rest, a bit of space, a bit of time to himself, no interruptions, no demands, no more messages.

‘It can only do me good and I know this is just what I need. If the thing, the thing that I am being asked to do, is really that important, then I’m afraid I am just not the man for the job. Not today at any rate.’

The subject had been thoroughly discussed (with himself) and the decision made. Jonah son of Amittai went off to pack a bag.



The trouble was that Jonah son of Amittai was, as we have already discovered, a prophet. He was a prophet of God and, until now, a fairly decent one. There had been moments when it could be truly said he had had his moment – a moment in history when his name had been known and the words he had said had been monumental and extraordinary and pivotal. There had been a time when he’d had the ear of King Jeroboam no less, and had spoken promises from the Lord concerning the recovery of lost territories. Sometimes his name still cropped up in the odd history lesson, in the odd school, every

now and then. In these latter years, though, things had all gone a bit quiet. He was still a prophet – one never stopped being a prophet, like one could never stop, he supposed, being a Mammouthian Scarry Rat who escaped with stolen meaty goods, although he thought to make a comparison with such a creature was not quite the done thing, of course.

Jonah son of Amittai was, from all that was visible to the naked eye, a prophet through and through; but after all these years the propheting was of such a habitual nature, such a routine garb, that it now covered and had almost smothered the very essence, the very connection that had brought about its being in the first place. There were deep, dark cellars in Jonah's soul, as well as in his house, where the dust grew thickly layered, covering all the naïve newness of those earlier, simpler years. However, all was not lost, and it never would be while he still claimed the title of prophet: he had received a call, or rather several posts, from a steady run of message-bots over recent weeks, all with the same message. God had a job for him, and (although Jonah did not think for one second it was true and neither did he want it to be true) he was, it seemed, just the man.



‘Ridiculous, a ridiculous idea! It just won’t do and I just won’t do it.’

He scurried around his small town house, collecting all the things that were necessary for a nice relaxing break away from it all. But he couldn’t really find anything that fitted the description of things necessary for a nice relaxing break away from it all, so he just packed some more robes, his ID documents, his crystal imaging device, so that at least he would be able to remind himself afterwards that he had had a holiday, a few pairs of scroll readers (he was always forgetting where he’d put the last pair) and a snorkel. ‘Well, you never know ...’ he said to himself.

There was a great urgency about this sudden need for a holiday. He told himself it wasn’t there, nibbling away at his toes, like Bongadin. He hid the puzzling and immediate nature of this new turn of events, like an old pair of pyjamas shoved under the bed when they should really go in the wash but who had the time?

Breakfast, breakfast, he hadn't even had that yet! That was OK; he reassured himself that he could always eat out. He could eat on the way, in town, when he'd sorted out a ticket for somewhere or other. That was a point – maybe he should go and eat somewhere and then decide where to go. He could decide at his leisure, over a leisurely breakfast, leisurely. Yes, that was the answer. But right now was not the time to be leisurely. He needed to go.

He took one last look at his kitchen; he had turned all the meters off and plugged up the water holes and unplugged the cooking box (the box that cooked his dinners). In his washing and dressing room everything was locked down and plugged up and turned off and bolted in. There wasn't much else to do that he could think of to make the little house secure.

'Ah,' he suddenly remembered, 'leave notes for the cleaner, the launderer, the meal deliverer, the vegetable plot attendant ...' (he was loath to leave his recently sown bean plants) '... and the roof watcher' (he had had a particularly annoying set of Trashing Storks that, if not watched out for and shooed away, would nest above the windows and dribble down the panes).

The prophet busied himself with writing notes, not in his best handwriting – he was, after all, in such a great hurry – before finally slamming the door behind him.

Jonah son of Amittai took a deep breath, hiked up his backpack, pulled down his hat flaps, fastening them under his scrawny bristly chin, unlocked his scooterer, hitched up his robes and pedalled off down the street in a fury of dust and stones.

With this all-so-sudden departure, he had failed to see the handwritten note, which coincidentally held the same message delivered to him earlier that day and every day in the preceding five days by the message-bot, and which each time he had subsequently ordered to be wiped. This fresh handwritten note, which was now attached with a tiny pin to the cord of his deep, mellow, clanging doorbell, read:

'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'