

MODERN AGE

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The Cry Against Nineveh: A Centennial Tribute to Whittaker Chambers

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SOME ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO this past spring, on the first April Fool's Day of the twentieth century, Whittaker Chambers was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was a prophetic birth, as he later came to believe. An unseasonable blizzard blew through Philadelphia that day, and Mrs. Chambers had been in labor for many hours before the doctor finally arrived. "Are you afraid?" the doctor asked her, as she was rapidly losing blood. Undaunted in the face of death, she answered, "Doctor, the power that brought me here will take me away again."¹

The delivery was difficult and the infant had to be taken with instruments, while Mrs. Chambers nearly bled to death. Years later, as her son grew up, she would often recall for him the terrible circumstances of his birth, much to his despair. "But the calm with which she accepted the possibility of death was a quality she transmitted to me," Chambers later wrote. "It is part of my heritage from my mother."²

The possibility of death is something Whittaker Chambers would continue to face as a Communist, as an informer, and

as a witness. Indeed, the crisis of his birth was something of a preview of the crisis, both personal and historical, that Chambers would later face in the Hiss Case. For Chambers, life itself had an air of death about it. The Western world, though seemingly alive and progressing, was, he believed, in the last stages of death. Worse yet, the patient was unaware of the severity of its condition.

In a *Time* article Chambers wrote on Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) in 1948 ("Faith for a Lenten Age") Chambers gives what may be the best explanation of the "crisis of history" he would warn the world of some six months later from a witness stand.

The idea that man is sinful and needs redemption has been subtly changed into the idea that man is by nature good, and hence capable of indefinite perfectibility. This perfectibility is being achieved through technology, science, politics, social reform, education.... And yet, as 20th century civilization reaches a climax, its own paradoxes grow catastrophic. The incomparable technological achievement is more and more dedicated to the task of destruction. Man's marvelous conquest of space has made total war a household experience, and over vast reaches of the

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world, the commonest of childhood memories.³

Chambers credits this conception of crisis to three "God-tormented men" in particular: Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), and Karl Barth (1886-1968). Like Niebuhr, these thinkers were more impressed by man's propensity for evil than his potential for good. Each had undertaken the lonely task of dissenting from the progressive spirit of the times, warning against the increasing habit of men to assert their freedom in spite of their finiteness. They were Chambers's role models for his job at *Time* as a "witness of words."

When reading *Witness*, however, it is never really clear just what Chambers means by a "witness." In one instance, he defines a witness as "a man whose life and faith are so completely one that when the challenge comes to step out and testify for his faith, he does so, disregarding all risks, accepting all consequences."⁴ This is well enough stated, but insufficient. On the meaning of witness, there is always a sense that Chambers has something to reveal that he also wants to conceal. He clearly plays on the legal and Christian meanings of the word, often conflating the two. But still, there remains a nagging sense that Chambers is withholding what he really means by a witness, that the true meaning is a guarded one, too private for public consumption.

What is clear is that he became a different kind of witness the day a subpoena arrived at his office at *Time*. "The time for the witness of words was over and the time for the witness of acts had begun."⁵

"I have for years been fascinated by the Book of Jonah, and I said to a few at the time that that was the pattern of the Hiss Case," wrote Chambers to William F. Buckley, Jr., in 1954.⁶ Indeed, after his

death, Chambers's widow confirmed to Buckley that the Book of Jonah had a profound impact on her husband.⁷ And yet strangely, aside from a short passage in *Witness* and a handful of sentences penned to Buckley, Chambers never mentions, much less describes, any link between the Hiss Case and the Book of Jonah. (Although Chambers devotes a brief, affectionate chapter to Jonah in *Cold Friday*, he never relates it to the Hiss Case.) But if one examines Chambers's witness in light of the Book of Jonah, it becomes clear that this Hebrew prophet was the role model for the "witness of acts" and remains the skeleton key to the real meaning of the "witness."

The Book of Jonah is a curious contribution to prophetic scripture. Jonah is the only Hebrew prophet called to prophesy to the Gentiles rather than the Israelites. This may explain why the story's message of collective, or rather, national atonement is reluctantly (and unwittingly) conveyed by the prophet. Still, however odd its style, this message of atonement is one that orthodox Jews take seriously. That is why the Book of Jonah is read annually during Yom Kippur. Its message of atonement is important for two reasons: the Book of Jonah is a reminder that God's love and mercy apply not only to His chosen people, but also to all mankind. More importantly, the Book of Jonah demonstrates that it is possible for an entire nation to repent for its sins all at once. The meaning of this message had a profound impact on Whittaker Chambers during the Hiss Case.

The most important contribution, however, to the meaning of Chambers's witness is the unhappy ordeal of the prophet Jonah. No Hebrew prophet agonizes as much as Jonah in doing the Lord's will. And no other prophet has a more puzzling relationship with the Lord. This is unusual since most prophetic works emphasize the covenant between God

and man and rarely delve into a prophet's personal relationship with God Himself. But Jonah's relationship with God, or rather, his controversy with God, is crucial to grasp the meaning of witness.

"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me," said the Lord to Jonah. We are not told in what form the subpoena came to Jonah. All we know is that "the word of the Lord came unto" him. But it is clear that Jonah had been called to go to a "great city" and "cry against it." Just as Jonah must cry against Nineveh's wickedness (whatever form it takes), Chambers must cry out against the Communist conspiracy and the crisis of history. And both men were reluctant to do so because "no man decides to become a witness."⁸

Indeed, reluctance is the most salient characteristic of Chambers's witness, as it was for Jonah. "I was most truly a witness to the degree in which I was reluctant."⁹ Jonah, for some unstated reason, was reluctant to go to Nineveh and caught the next boat to Tarshish to "flee from the presence of the Lord." Chambers's reluctance, at least initially, was more spiritual than physical. Chambers was reluctant to inform on his former comrades, force himself and his family to endure public disparagement and, most of all, reluctant to perform the arduous work of the prophet he believed God had called him to be. What makes Chambers's reluctance so unusual is that it is so mixed with a sense of purpose. Perhaps no other writer better combines a sense of destiny with a sense of doom.

I believed that I was not meant to be spared from testifying. I sensed, with a force greater than any fear or revulsion, that it was for this that my whole life had been lived.... This challenge was the terrible meaning of my whole life, of all that I had done that was evil, of all that I had done that was good.¹⁰

Chambers, however, has more courage than Jonah, despite his reluctance. Unlike Jonah, he does not initially avoid his calling by taking the next boat to Tarshish to "flee from the presence of the Lord." And unlike Jonah, Chambers knows that certain important citizens of modern Nineveh will rise up against him. "I felt, with a certainty I could neither explain nor shake off, that I was doomed."¹¹

After Jonah boarded the ship to Tarshish, he fell asleep below deck. So God sent a storm to overtake the ship. The crew then roused Jonah and all on board cast lots to determine who was the cause of God's wrath "and the lot fell upon Jonah." Jonah then told the men, "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you."

After the crew tossed Jonah overboard, he is swallowed by a "great fish" which carries him in its belly to the ocean depths. Here is one of the more existential moments in scripture: the prophet's famous descent into "the belly of hell." Jonah's cry from within the whale is the anguish of the outcast. It is what St. John of the Cross describes as the darkest of moments, when a lost soul "thinks that God has abandoned it, and in His abhorrence of it, has flung it into darkness."¹²

For thou hadst cast me into the deep; in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about; all thy billows and thy waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight.

In the beginning, Jonah was obviously not a very qualified prophet. Why else would he run from his calling? It is only after the prophet passes through a dark night of the soul that he acquires the courage to heed the Lord's word. Jonah is then able to promise God that he will "sacrifice unto thee" and "pay that that I have vowed."

After the whale “vomited out” Jonah onto the shores of his homeland, the word then came to him a second time. “Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching I bid thee.” God must have told Jonah that Nineveh would soon meet His wrath because Jonah next walks through the city streets shouting, “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” The irony is that “the people of Nineveh believed” Jonah (usually prophets are not so easily believed) and quickly repented for their wickedness. Seeing this, the seemingly wrathful God showed mercy and suspended His judgment on Nineveh, much to Jonah’s chagrin.

God had promised Jonah that Nineveh would be “overthrown” but then changed His mind, causing Jonah to feel rejected. This is the root of Jonah’s anguish: that he was put through such a terrible ordeal, the flight to Tarshish, three days and nights alone in the dark belly of a whale, all for nothing. “I do well to be angry,” Jonah complains, “angry enough to die.”

The only time Chambers openly refers to the Book of Jonah in *Witness* is during a parallel moment in the Hiss Case, amid the confusion over the dating of the microfilm. This is the point Chambers’s morale reached rock bottom with a thud. “God is against me” he sighs, believing God had done in the Hiss Case just what He had done in Nineveh’s case.

Suppose that I had not misunderstood God’s purpose. But that God’s purpose itself had changed. Suppose that it had been God’s purpose to save this nation. Suppose that He had intended all that had happened until this time to be its trial and its test. Suppose, then, that He had seen in the general failure to understand what had happened a final failure of the will to live, a failure of more than intelligence, a failure of the force of life itself. Suppose He meant at last to plough it in as a man might plough in a smutted crop.¹³

Notice that Chambers believes him-

self to be a prophet, to be fulfilling “God’s purpose.” Part of this purpose requires informing against the Communist Party, but the larger purpose is to cry against modern Nineveh in order to “save this nation.” The Hiss Case, however, turns out to be the Book of Jonah in reverse. In the Book of Jonah, God has apparently changed His purpose from overthrowing Nineveh, to saving it. In the Hiss Case, Chambers believes God changed His initial purpose from saving this nation to ploughing it in like a “smutted crop.” God does this because, unlike the citizens of Nineveh, the American people fail to recognize the crisis they face and do not repent of their wickedness. And like Jonah, Chambers believes he was forced to endure a terrible witness for nothing. “God is against me.”¹⁴

It is at this point that Chambers decides to attempt suicide. “I was merely a rejected instrument, lesser, but not less abject in my rejection than Jonah before Nineveh.”¹⁵ Chambers knew that the microfilm was manufactured before 1945, in contrast to the claim of the “experts.” Chambers does well to be angry, angry enough to die, and silently speaks to himself the cry of Jonah in the belly of the whale as he walks the streets of New York City, just hours before attempting to poison himself.

The waters compassed me about even to the soul; the deep hath closed round about; the sea hath covered my head.

I went down to the lowest parts of the mountains; the bars of the earth have shut me up forever.¹⁶

Chambers’s suicide attempt, he later wrote Buckley, was motivated by his anger and sense of rejection from God. By attempting suicide while the Hiss Case was still underway, “in a sense, I fled to Tarshish with the dread words in my ears: ‘Go up unto Nineveh, that great city, etc.’ But when the tempest rose, and it became a question of myself or the

crew, I had also to say: 'Take me up and cast me into the sea, because it is for my sake that this trouble is come upon you.'¹⁷ Chambers believed it was merely for the sake of his rejected witness that his family, friends and former comrades had to endure such public suffering, just as Jonah's presence on the ship to Tarshish unjustly imperiled the whole crew. Chambers, therefore, like Jonah, would cast himself overboard. Jonah would then be swallowed by a "great fish," while Chambers would try to smother himself with poisonous gas. But both would again end up on the shores of their respective homeland, back where they started, with the same task before them.

At the end of the Book of Jonah, the rejected prophet leaves a newly repentant Nineveh and camps out on the outskirts of the city. There Jonah sat alone and "wished inside himself to die" as he waited to "see what would become of the city"—vainly hoping that God might again change His mind, return to His initial purpose and deliver wrath upon Nineveh.

The Lord then grows a gourd vine over Jonah to provide him shade and "to deliver him from his grief." But the next morning, as if to compound the prophet's rejection, God sends a worm to eat away at the vine, exposing Jonah to the harsh sun. Jonah again repeats his prayer for death. But God will not allow him to die. "Doest thou well to be angry?" asks the Lord. And the prophet again replies, "I do well to be angry, even unto death."

In the aftermath of the Hiss Case, Chambers would come to feel much like Jonah on the outskirts of Nineveh. True, the microfilm controversy was eventually solved and Alger Hiss was convicted of perjury. But Chambers was less interested in convicting Alger Hiss than in convincing the American people that they were suffering a crisis. Concerning the latter, Chambers believed he had failed. "But in the end, I did go unto Nineveh," wrote Chambers to Buckley, "and when

nothing really happened [nothing did], and when the ADA worms had eaten up the cucumber vine, and God had asked: 'Do you well to be angry?' I answered and I still answer, 'I do well to be angry, even unto death.'¹⁸

Indeed, to be, or not to be, would always remain a question for Chambers. All suicide is a confession, said Albert Camus. It is a confession that life is too much for you or you do not understand it.¹⁹ Chambers probably understood life better than most people, or at least thought about it more. But life was surely too much for him, as it was for Jonah.

In the same letter to Buckley, Chambers confesses: "I will always give my body to be burned if, by so doing, our children are given even that slightly better chance against the falling night. And the sure knowledge that that is what God is demanding of me in not permitting me to die is the seed of my private agony and the secret of my heart attacks." Just as God, for whatever reason, does not, in the end, grant Jonah his wish to die, so too He demands that Chambers live and continue his witness. "For only I know what God has said to me, and I have told no one, not even a priest."²⁰

Chambers's identification with the Book of Jonah helps to explain his most controversial statement: that "in the revolutionary conflict of the 20th century, I knowingly chose the side of probable defeat."²¹ It must first be noted that Chambers said he believed Western civilization to be on the side of *probable* defeat. He never claimed to know with certainty the outcome of the crisis, though he certainly believed the prospect for victory was grim. "The enemy—he is ourselves," wrote Chambers. "That is why it is idle to talk about preventing the wreck of Western civilization. It is already a wreck from within."²²

If Western civilization is to rise from its inner wreckage, it must respond to Chambers's witness just as the people of

Nineveh responded to Jonah. In *Cold Friday* (1964), Chambers's final, unfinished book, he includes a brief chapter summarizing the plot and meaning of the Book of Jonah (without linking it to the Hiss Case). Here Chambers places special emphasis on how the Ninevites responded to Jonah's prophecy: "Then the most extraordinary thing of all occurred," writes Chambers. "Jonah was heard, and what is more unbelievable, believed." He goes on to describe this event as "the only case of record in which a great people on the brink of disaster listened, looked into itself, judged itself, and found salvation in humility."²³ This is exactly what is required of the West if it is to come out on the winning side of history and this is exactly what Chambers believes the West has never done and *probably* never will.

It is important to remember this when considering the crisis Chambers describes in *Witness*. It is often difficult, when reading *Witness*, to distinguish between the crisis of history and the personal crisis of Whittaker Chambers. In fact, in his mind, they are inseparable. His fate as a witness is tied to the United States, "that nation on which the fate of all else hinged," to which he was sent to "cry against."²⁴ The success or the failure of America, of Western civilization, to surmount the crisis determines Chambers's success or failure as a witness. This explains why Chambers, in his darker moods, so internalizes the times in which he lives. His melancholy is both personal and historical and stems from his perceived failure as a witness. "Almost no one understands what I said in that book," Chambers complained to Ralph de Toledano about the public reaction to *Witness*.²⁵ Unlike Jonah, Cham-

bers believed that no one had heard his cry, that "the world was not ready for my testimony" and might never atone for its wickedness.²⁶

Nevertheless, even many admirers of Whittaker Chambers have said that he was wrong, that the West was never on the losing side of history.²⁷ Chambers would, of course, disagree and once again complain that no one understood what he was saying in *Witness*. The West's victory in the Cold War has not (so far) resulted in the religious rebirth of the West. It was the victory of democracy and capitalism over communism, not Christianity over secularism. From Chambers's perspective, the jury is still out on which side will win, but the verdict does not bode well, for "it is a law of history that no one can save those who will not save themselves."²⁸

It is for this reason, among others, that the temptation to suicide never left Chambers. While we do not know how Jonah died, Chambers's own death was shrouded in mystery, a fact which made some of his friends suspect that he did, ultimately, take his own life.²⁹ "Death," wrote Chambers, "tacitly seals the vocation of a witness."³⁰

During this centennial year of Whittaker Chambers's birth, it is important to acknowledge the true meaning of his witness. For though the Cold War may be past, the crisis of history he warned against is still very much present. Sadly, Chambers died believing his witness might never be understood, much less heeded. Like other prophets, he never learned if his people would make it to the promised land, or whether they would perish in the wilderness.

1. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York, 1952), 91. 2. *Ibid.*, 91. 3. *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers* (Washington, D.C., 1989), 184-193. 4. *Witness*, 5. 5. *Ibid.*, 524. 6.

Odyssey of a Friend: Letters to William F. Buckley, Jr. (Washington, D.C., 1987), 37. 7. William F. Buckley, Jr., Interview with Matthew Richer, November 15, 1999. 8. *Witness*, 700. 9. *Ibid.*, 699. 10. *Ibid.*, 533. 11.

Ibid., 533. **12.** Saint John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (New York, 1957). **13.** *Witness*, 769. **14.** *Ibid.*, 770. **15.** *Ibid.*, 770. **16.** *Ibid.*, 770. **17.** *Odyssey of a Friend*, 37. **18.** *Ibid.*, 37. **19.** *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York, 1983), 5. **20.** *Odyssey of a Friend*, 37. **21.** *Witness*, 25. **22.** *Odyssey of a Friend*, 44. **23.** *Cold Friday* (New York, 1964), 267. **24.** *Witness*, 525. **25.**

Whittaker Chambers, *Notes from the Underground: The Whittaker Chambers—Ralph de Toledano Letters* (Washington, D.C., 1997), 190. **26.** *Witness*, 774. **27.** Buckley Interview. **28.** *Witness*, 764. **29.** Ralph de Toledano, Interview with Matthew Richer, December 6, 1999. **30.** *Witness*, 702.