

Jot & Tittle

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Jonah's Whale

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Every Sunday School student has heard the story of Jonah and the whale. But did a whale really swallow Jonah? Modern critics of the Bible declare that no such event ever took place. It is too incredible to be credible. But the Old Testament presents the story as a factual event, and even Jesus referred to the Jonah story in literal, historical terms. The account of Jonah and the whale, therefore, becomes a test case for literal Bible interpretation.

A Great Fish

Jonah was a prophet of God who lived during the eighth century B.C. Second Kings 14:25 presents Jonah as a historical figure who served the Lord during the reign of Israel's king Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.).¹ This historical reference adds credibility to the historicity of Jonah's encounter with the whale. During the reign of Jeroboam II, the Assyrian Empire was in a weak condition but soon began to grow in power. In 721 B.C. the Assyrians captured the northern nation of Israel, taking the Israelites into captivity. God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capitol of the Assyrian Empire, to preach against her sins. Jonah was reluctant, either because of the Assyrian reputation for cruelty or because he really wanted the Assyrians to experience God's divine judgment.²

According to Jonah 1:3, Jonah disobeyed God's command to go to Nineveh and instead boarded a ship for Tarshish. God sent a storm that prompted the sailors on that ship to seek divine direction, and they discovered that Jonah was at the center of their dilemma. At Jonah's prompting, the sailors threw Jonah into the sea, and the storm immediately subsided. Jonah 1:17 says that God "provided a great fish to swallow Jonah." This, then, was a protective act of God to preserve Jonah's life and provide this reluctant prophet with another opportunity to obey God.

But what was this "great fish" God provided for Jonah? Are there any large sea creatures that could fit this description or was this a unique creature, provided for this one instance to rescue Jonah?

The book of Jonah uses the verb "provide" (hnm) four times, and in each case the verb refers to an already existing element of creation. God provided a vine (4:6), a worm (4:7), and a scorching east wind (4:8). So when Jonah 1:17 says that God provided a great fish, it is appropriate to conclude that this great fish was a creature that already existed rather than a newly created animal.

Identifying the precise species of Jonah's great fish, however, will be impossible.³ The words translated "fish" in Jonah 1:17 and 2:10 (gd) and in Jonah 2:1 (hgd) are general terms that can apply to a number of sea creatures including sharks and whales. The New Testament uses a similar term in Matthew 12:40 (khtov), a term that can be translated generally as "sea monster".⁴ It is possible, therefore, that Jonah's whale was any large sea creature capable of swallowing a man whole. But do such creatures exist?

Myth or Miracle?

While many modern critics write off the account of Jonah and the whale as myth, there is good reason to accept this story as historical fact. Scientific observation confirms the possibility of such an event occurring, since certain species of sea creatures are physically capable of swallowing a man whole. Archer insists

that only a marine mammal could fit the description of Jonah's great fish. "Incidentally, it should be observed that the Hebrew text of Jonah 2:1 actually reads *dag gadol*, or 'great fish,' rather than a technical term for 'whale.' But since Hebrew possessed no special word for 'whale,' and since no true fish—as opposed to a marine mammal—is known to possess a stomach as capacious as a whale's, it is reasonable to adhere to the traditional interpretation at this point."⁵ In contrast, McDowell and Stewart state that even some species of sharks could qualify as Jonah's whale. "There are certain species of whales and sharks that are perfectly capable of swallowing a man whole, including the whale shark, white shark and sperm whale. . . . It could have been a whale that swallowed Jonah, but the Bible was not specific on the species."⁶

Certain species of sea life, therefore, are capable of accomplishing the very feat described in Jonah. Torrey insists that a similar event has happened in more recent history. "In fact, it is recorded that a man fell overboard in the Mediterranean and was swallowed by one of these sea monsters, the monster was killed and the man rescued alive. A whole horse was taken out of the belly of another."⁷

But the events in the book of Jonah defy natural explanation. They require supernatural intervention. For example, it was providential that the great fish was in the right place at the right time to gather up Jonah before the sea took his life. Certainly God's intervention accounts for the fact that Jonah's life was sustained during the time he spent in the belly of the whale. It was also a work of God that the great fish deposited Jonah safely back on the shore where Jonah could resume his prophetic ministry. "No natural explanations can account for all the facts in this case. Jonah's preservation in the belly of the fish can only be explained as a miracle. Our Lord Jesus Himself calls it a 'sign' in Matthew 12:39."⁸

One Greater than Jonah

Matthew 12:39-41 records Jesus' teachings about Jonah. Jesus referred to Jonah as a historical figure, and spoke in literal terms about Jonah's adventure with the whale and his subsequent

preaching in Nineveh. Jesus also stated that just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, so also He Himself would be in the tomb for three days and three nights. The historical nature of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the historical nature of Jonah and the whale go hand in hand. To discount the supernatural in either case is to distort the Scriptures and to deny the power of God. Jesus described Himself as one who is "greater than Jonah" and warned that those who reject Him will face God's judgment. It is, indeed, a dangerous thing to reject the miraculous events of the Bible. But to embrace the miraculous power of God and accept the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to enter into eternal life (John 5:24).

¹ Thiele, Edwin R. *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, p. 75.

² Feinberg, Charles L. *The Minor Prophets*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1951, p. 135.

³ Banks, William L. *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 45.

⁴ Bauer, Walter; Arndt, William F.; Gingrich, F. Wilbur; Danker, Frederick W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 431.

⁵ Archer, Gleason L., Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1964, p.295.

⁶ McDowell, Josh, and Stewart, Don. *Answers to Tough Questions*. San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, 1980, p. 97.

⁷ Torrey, R. A. *Difficulties in the Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, n.d., pp. 92-93.

⁸ Feinberg, p. 137.
