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What Swallowed Jonah?

by Warren Krug

A ferocious storm was raging on the Mediterranean Sea one day long ago, perhaps an unusually violent tempest. The winds were howling fiercely, and, as the waves were beginning to batter a certain wooden sailing vessel caught out in the middle of the sea, its increasingly frightened sailors began looking for a way to save their lives.

The superstitious mariners figured this special storm was the work of their Phoenician gods. Someone had done something to anger the deities, so they thought, and it was time to call out for help. Perhaps they began to petition the god of rain and thunder known as Baal, or the god of the sea called Melgart, or the god of ships and sailing named Esmun.¹ In order to lighten the ship they began throwing cargo overboard. Still, the storm raged on.

¹. Cyril W. Spaude. *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, The People's Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1987), 42.

While all this was going on, there was one man on board who apparently was not concerned. In fact, the captain found him below deck, sound asleep. "How can you sleep?" the puzzled skipper inquired of the sleeper. "Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish" (Jonah 1:6).

The sailors decided to cast lots (in those days a common practice using stones, balls, or pieces of wood) — a method which they hoped would identify the person on board who might be the target of the storm. Indeed, the one true God did direct the lot to fall on the sleeping man, correctly identifying him as the culprit.

That man's name was Jonah, and he was a prophet of the one true God. The sailors wondered what Jonah might have done to offend his God, which offense they reasoned must have caused the storm. Jonah admitted to them that he was running away from the LORD, but apparently he had not given them the reason why. As the sea continued to get even rougher, they inquired of Jonah what they could do to calm the storm and save their lives.

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you" (1:12).

So, what had Jonah done and why was he running away? We are told that God had ordered him to go to the great and ancient city of Nineveh to "preach against it" (1:1). Nineveh, a city of more than 120,000, was located on the bank of the Tigris River some 220 miles north and slightly west of present day Baghdad, Iraq. It was a wicked city known for its detestable idolatry and frequent murders, and God wanted Jonah to warn the residents about their sins and the city's imminent destruction.

Jonah, however, had other ideas. He chose to disobey the LORD and flee. Why? The reason he later gave to the LORD for fleeing was that he knew that God would end up sparing Nineveh. That thought made him angry, angry that God would not destroy such a wicked city. In fact, he was so miserable thinking about God's decision that he wanted the LORD to take his life (4:1-3).

Back on the ship, the sailors were hesitating to throw Jonah overboard as he had suggested. First they tried rowing back to land, but the storm only got worse. When this didn't work, they surprisingly abandoned their deities and turned to Jonah's God, the LORD. After praying that the LORD would not hold them accountable for killing Jonah, they did finally pick him up and throw him over the side of the ship. Just as the prophet had predicted, the raging sea now suddenly became calm (1:13-16).

Jonah didn't flounder in the Mediterranean Sea for long. As he sank into the depths, suddenly a giant fish appeared, opened its big mouth and swallowed him. For three days Jonah had to sit there in the fish's belly in great distress, giving him time to think and to pray. Now he seemed like a different person. He poured out his anguish to God, prayed for deliverance, expressed confidence in the LORD, and concluded his prayers with thanksgiving and praise (2:1-9).

God heard Jonah's pleas. After three days he directed the fish to approach the shoreline where it proceeded to vomit Jonah out onto dry land (2:10). The new Jonah was willing now to obey the LORD when he came to Jonah a second time with the same command: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you" (3:1). Still, the prophet had a lesson to learn about God's mercy before his adventure would end.

For many people the story of Jonah is merely the story of a man being swallowed by a great sea creature. Yet there is much more in this Old Testament book which bears Jonah's name than his encounter with the great fish! In this book God reveals himself as a truly merciful God, sparing the wicked city of Nineveh when he for good reason could have struck it down. The LORD also displayed considerable patience with his rebellious prophet who had shown anger at the thought that God would spare Nineveh and rebelled by trying to flee from the LORD in a fruitless attempt to foil God's plan.

Skeptics often jump on this Bible "story" of Jonah and the fish, rejecting it as an absurd story rather than a record of historical events. The account of Jonah surviving for three days in a fish's belly seems to them an easy target for them to discredit the holy Scriptures. But for those of us who believe that the Bible is the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God, there is no question that a great miracle took place when the great fish swallowed Jonah and then spit him out alive on the shore three days later.

There are other miracles recorded in the book of Jonah:

- the immediate calming of the sea
- the sudden growth of a vine
- the appearance of a worm which chewed on the vine and caused it to wither at once
- perhaps best of all, the sudden conversion of the citizens of Nineveh which moved God to spare the city.

But what exactly swallowed Jonah?

Although we will never know with certainty, there seem to be three possibilities:

1. It may have been a whale.

Yes, we know that according to the modern taxonomy of classifying biological creatures a whale is not considered to be a fish but rather a mammal. However, the modern classification system was not in effect when the Bible was written. Since whales live in the sea just as fish do, they were almost certainly created on the fifth day of creation along with the other sea creatures (Genesis 1:20-23). The biblical writers might have considered whales to be fish and, if so, whales would certainly be considered “great fish” (Jonah 1:17 niv)

On the other hand, we should not be led astray by the King James Version’s translation of Matthew 12:40: “For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly....” “Whale” is not an accurate translation for the Hebrew words “*dâgh gâdhôl*” which means “great/big fish” (Jonah 1:17). Is “whale” a correct translation for the Greek word “*kehtos*” which the New International Version translates “fish” (Matthew 12:40)? “*Kehtos*,” according to Bauer’s *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, means “sea-monster.”² Thayer’s *New Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* defines “*kehtos*” as “sea-monster, whale, huge fish.”³

Not all whales have mouths large enough to swallow a man whole, but at least blue whales and sperm whales do. Sperm whales don’t chew their food and have an esophagus that is as wide as 20 inches. Whales also have multi-chambered stomachs like sheep and cattle, and if Jonah had remained in the first chamber, he would not have been exposed to digestive juices — though he would have faced the danger of being crushed.⁴ Whales are mammals and need to surface periodically in order to breathe. This may explain how Jonah was able to get air while he was inside the whale. Despite some claims to the contrary, whales — including sperm whales — do indeed inhabit the Mediterranean Sea.⁵

2. This is William F. Arndt’s and F. Wilbur Gingrich’s translation and adaptation of the 4th revised and augmented edition of Walter Bauer’s monumental *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur*, 2nd edition, revised and augmented by Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), 431.

3. Joseph Henry Thayer’s translation, revision and enlargement of Grimm S. Wilke’s *Clavis Novi Testamenti Philologica*, 2nd ed., 1851 (Lafayette, Indiana: Christian Copyrights, Inc., 1981), 346.

4. Don Landis, “Jonah and the Great Fish,” *Answers*, September 5, 2006, <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/am/v1/n1/great-fish> (accessed August 21, 2010).

5. According to the website of CIBRA (Centro Interdisciplinare di Bioacustica e Ricerche Ambientali), “The Mediterranean Sea” (Pavia, Italy: Università Degli Studi Di Pavia, August, 2005), http://www-3.unipv.it/cibra/edu_Mediterraneo_uk.html (accessed August 21, 2010).

2. It may have been a true fish.

Obviously we would not be thinking of minnows or goldfish if we were considering a fish big enough to swallow a man. However, great white sharks and whale sharks have large enough mouths to swallow a person. Whale sharks at up to 60 feet in length are the largest fish in the world. Their mouths can open as much as 5 feet in width.⁶

Great white sharks are reportedly the largest predatory fish on earth, growing more than 20 feet in length and weighing up to 5,000 pounds. They have an exceptional sense of smell and are known to beach themselves on shore just as whales do. Great white sharks are able to swallow animals as large as sea lions and small whales. **7**

6. Landis, *loc. cit.*

7. According to the website of the National Geographic Society, "Great White Shark," n.d. <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/fish/great-white-shark.html> (accessed August 21, 2010) 2010).

3. *It could have been a special one-of-a-kind creature.*

This possibility is raised by the reference in Jonah 1:17 in which the Lord was "preparing a great fish" (KJV) or "provided a great fish" (NIV). Obviously, a special fish could have been designed just for this one occasion in such a way that any questions regarding Jonah's survival for three days inside it might be satisfactorily answered. We might speculate that a specially created fish might have been planned by God to live only a few days and not need a digestive system because it would not be eating. Maybe it could also have had a special internal organ that would produce oxygen like a scuba diver's aqualung.

However, even if God had chosen an existing creature, He would have had to give it instructions regarding where to find Jonah and how to keep him alive until it was time to cough him up. God also would have had to prepare the fish's innards so Jonah would not be seriously injured.

Two other questions are sometimes raised when considering Jonah's story. First, are there other accounts, in recent times, of people being swallowed by animals and surviving? Yes, but none of them can be verified. One story involves a James Bartley, a whaler on the *Star of the East*, who it has been said survived being swallowed by a whale, but it must be stressed there is no proof for the accuracy of this legend. **8**

8 Landis, *loc. cit.*

Second, is it possible that Jonah actually died inside the fish and was afterwards resurrected? Reasons for entertaining this (perhaps novel) idea include the words which Jonah prayed from within the belly of the fish: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry" (2:2). Also, consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:40 (previously cited in the King James Version): "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (NIV)." Of course, it is pure speculation to think that Jonah also died and was raised to life just because Jesus later died and was raised back to life. Besides, Jonah must have remained alive inside the fish at least as long as it took for him to offer his fairly lengthy prayer (all of Jonah chapter 2).

So, what swallowed Jonah?

As for the type of creature, we cannot be assured of anything beyond that it was a large marine creature — probably a fish, sea monster, whale or shark. However, something else had swallowed Jonah, something that swallows all of us — sin. His pride, disobedience, lack of respect for his own life, and his lack of compassion in not wanting to see the wicked people of Nineveh spared by God or even converted to faith in the LORD made it necessary for him to be the subject of another of God's lessons.

After God had spared Nineveh, a disgusted Jonah built himself a shelter for protection from the hot sun and then sat down. To offer him even more protection, God caused some type of vine, perhaps a gourd or a castor oil plant (also known as the palmcrist and *palma christi*) which has large leaves, to pop up overnight so that by the next day he had considerable shade.⁹ The following morning God sent a worm to chew on the plant, which quickly withered. He also provided a scorching wind and a blazing sun to beat down on Jonah's head to the point where the prophet began to faint. "It would be better to die than to live," Jonah moaned (4:3). The LORD explained to Jonah that his concern for the vine should have caused him to have had even more concern for the 120,000 citizens of Nineveh "who cannot tell their right hand from their left" (4:11) and who were spiritually dying. If "120,000" refers only to young children, then the total population of the city would have been considerably larger. ¹⁰ It is to be hoped Jonah took to heart the lessons which God was teaching him. *LSI*

9. Spaude, 84.

10. Spaude, 88-89.