
Christian Evidences

JONAH

Many people feel that the account given in the Bible of Jonah is legendary, since even if there were a fish big enough to swallow a man, certainly no man would be able to survive three days in its digestive tract and then escape to the outside world.

However, again and again, Jesus referred to this as a historical event, and even pointed to it as a foreshadowing of his own death and resurrection.

There are, however, several documented accounts of people who have been swallowed by whales and large fish, and have lived to tell about it, even after several days. One species of fish, the "Sea Dog" (*Carcharodon carcharias*), is found in all warm seas, and can reach a length of 40 feet. In the year 1758, a sailor fell overboard from a boat in the Mediterranean and was swallowed by a sea dog. The captain of the vessel ordered a cannon on the deck to be fired at the fish, which vomited up the sailor alive and unharmed after it was struck.¹

Sperm whales can swallow lumps of food eight feet in diameter. Entire skeletons of sharks up to sixteen feet in length have been found in them. In February of 1891, James Bartley, a sailor aboard the whaling ship "Star of the East," was swallowed by a whale in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands. He was within the whale for more than forty-eight hours, and after he was found inside the whale, which had been harpooned and brought aboard the whaling ship, it took him two weeks to recover from the ordeal. Sir Francis Fox wrote as follows about this:

Bartley affirms that he would probably have lived inside his house of flesh until he starved, for he lost his senses through fright and not from lack of air. He remembers the sensation of being thrown out of the boat into the sea. . . . He was then encompassed by a great darkness and he felt he was slipping along a smooth passage of some sort that seemed to move and carry him forward. The sensation lasted but a short time and then he realized he had more room. He felt about him and his hands came in contact with a yielding slimy substance that seemed to shrink from his touch. It finally dawned upon him that he had been swallowed by the whale . . . he could easily breathe; but the heat was terrible. It was not of a scorching, stifling nature, but it seemed to open the pores of his skin and draw out his vitality. . . . His skin where it was exposed to the action of the gastric juice . . . face, neck and hands were bleached to a deadly whiteness and took on the appearance of parchment . . . (and) never recovered its natural appearance . . . (though otherwise) his health did not seem affected by his terrible experience.²

Another individual, Marshall Jenkins, was swallowed by a Sperm Whale in the South Seas. The Boston Post Boy, October 14, 1771, reported that an Edgartown (U.S.A.) whaling vessel struck a whale, and that after the whale had bitten one of the boats in two, it took Jenkins in its mouth and went under the water with him. After returning to the surface, the whale vomited him on to the wreckage of the broken boat, "much bruised but not seriously injured."³

There is a great deal of historical and archaeological evidence for the ministry of Jonah in Nineveh. Prominent among the divinities of ancient Assyria was Dagan, a creature part man and part fish. This was sometimes represented as an upright figure, with the head of a fish above the head of a man, the open mouth of the fish forming a miter as the man's sacred head-dress, and the feet of a man extending below the tail of the fish. In other cases, the body of a man was at right angles to the conjoined body of a fish. Images of this fish-god were found guarding the entrance to the palace and temple in the ruins of Nineveh, and they appear on ancient Babylonian seals, in a variety of forms.

Berosus, a Babylonian historian, writing in the fourth century B.C., recorded the early traditions concerning the origin of the worship of this fish-man. According to the earliest tradition, the very beginning of civilization in Chaldea and Babylonia was under the direction of a person, part man and part fish, who came up out of the sea. During Jonah's time, the people of Nineveh believed in a divinity who sent messages to them by a person who rose out of the sea, as part fish and part man, and they would undoubtedly have been very receptive to Jonah's ministry if he had been vomited out of a fish. H. Clay Trumbull wrote of this as follows:

What better heralding, as a divinely sent messenger to Nineveh, could Jonah have had, than to be thrown up out of the mouth of a great fish, in the presence of witnesses, say, on the coast of Phoenicia, where the fish-god was a favorite object of worship?

. . . The recorded sudden and profound alarm of the people of an entire city at his warning was most natural, as a result of the coincidence of this miracle with their religious beliefs and expectations.⁴

Berosus gives the name of the Assyrian fish-god as "Oannes," while he mentions the name "Odacon" as that of one of the avatars of Oannes. Since the name Dagan appears frequently in the Assyrian records from earlier dates, and no trace has been found in them of the name "Oannes," it is possible that this name is a reference to Jonah, as the supposed manifestation of the fish-god himself. The name Oannes for Jonah appears in the Septuagint and in the New Testament with the addition of I before it (Ioannes). However, according to Dr. Herman V. Hilprecht, the eminent Assyriologist, in the Assyrian inscriptions the J of foreign words becomes I, or disappears altogether. Hence Joannes, as the Greek representation of Jonah would appear in Assyrian either as Ioannes or as Oannes. Therefore, in his opinion, Oannes would be a regular Greco-Babylonian writing for Jonah.⁵

The preservation of the name "Yunas" or "Jonah" at the ruins of Nineveh also confirms the historicity of the Jonah story. As soon as modern discoverers unearthed the mound that had been known for centuries by the name of "Neby Yunas," they found beneath it the ruined palaces of the kings of Nineveh.⁶

¹ Ambrose John Wilson, "The Sign of the Prophet Jonah and Its Modern Confirmations," *The Princeton Theological Review* 25 (1927): 638. footnote 20.

² Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 636.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 636-637.

⁴ H. Clay Trumbull, "Jonah In Nineveh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 11 (1892): 10-12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 18.

Apologetics of Jonah and the Great Fish

by Don Landis

For many, the supernatural events recorded in the Bible seem too impossible to be true.

Such was the case for Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. He actually took scissors to the Gospels and cut out all references to anything supernatural.¹

One such "apparent incongruity" is the account of a reluctant prophet named Jonah who was swallowed by a fish and yet remained alive in its belly for three days ([Jonah 1:17–2:10](#)).

To defend the Bible, some people have gone hunting for scientific explanations. What fish is big enough to swallow a man? How could Jonah breathe underwater? How could he survive the digestive juices?

There are plausible explanations for each of these questions (see below), but we must look at this event with knowledge of God's complete power and sovereignty.

Could God have prepared a great fish to be in the vicinity of the foundering ship, to scoop Jonah out of the raging sea, transport him to shore and vomit him up? Absolutely! If He is the all-powerful Creator God, preparing a fish and timing the whole event was not a great drain on His power or ability. He is in no way limited by what He created.

In [Matthew 12:40](#), Jesus used Jonah's experience as a basis for giving His disciples information about the circumstances of His own time in the grave. The historical fact of the account of Jonah and the fish is linked to the historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When witnessing, we may feel pressure to try to prove the truth of the account of Jonah, but let's never forget that the lost are saved by grace through faith ([Ephesians 2:8](#)), not by our arguing abilities.

Apologetics is a tool God may use, but we can never argue someone into the Kingdom of God. We must simply present the truth of God's Word and let the Holy Spirit bring conversion.

To deny the event is to cut out the supernatural, just like Thomas Jefferson did two centuries ago.

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Jonah: A plausibility study

1. Are there "great fish" large enough to swallow a man whole?
 - Of course! Keep in mind that modern animal classification systems weren't exactly in use at the time of Jonah. Any aquatic creature could be referred to as a "fish." And we know that there are whales (blue and sperm) and even sharks (great white and whale sharks) that can swallow a man whole. The sperm whale grows to a length of up to 70 feet. Its esophagus is approximately 50 cm (20") wide and "sperm whales don't have to chew their food - so Jonah could have been swallowed whole."² Two marine scientists from Sea World in San Diego hypothesize that it was a great white shark that probably swallowed Jonah.²
2. Could someone survive three days and three nights in a whale's belly?
 - This is the difficult part of the question. There are fish species that surface from the sea and gulp down air into their lungs, like the lungfish for example. But there is no explanation for how air might have been transferred to the stomach.
3. What about the digestive juices?
 - The *Encarta Encyclopedia* reports, "When whales swallow food, it travels through the esophagus to a multi-chambered stomach that resembles the stomachs of ruminant hoofed animals such as cattle, sheep and deer. In the first stomach chamber, a saclike extension of the esophagus, food is crushed. In the second chamber, digestive juices further break down food."³ If Jonah remained in this first chamber, he only needed to be worried about being crushed rather than digested! Sharks, however, have a much slower metabolism and a human body could last three days without deterioration.²
4. What about other stories?
 - There are a number of stories that have been around for over 100 years about whales swallowing men whole. Perhaps the most famous is the story of James Bartley, a whaler on the vessel *Star of the East*, who reportedly was swallowed by a whale and survived. However, there are a number of questions as to the authenticity of this story, and it should not be used as a "proof" of any kind (just Google "James Bartley" and you'll see what we mean).

The bottom line:

1. God needed to discipline a runaway prophet.
2. God did prepare a "great fish" aquatic creature.
3. God brought the runaway prophet and the "great fish" together for His glory and the salvation of a large city.

Footnotes

1. *Jefferson Bible*, Potter, 1964. [Back](#)
2. www.jewishstudies.com/usa/california/san_diego/general_stories/sd9-13-02jonah.html. [Back \(1\)](#) [Back \(2\)](#) [Back \(3\)](#)

encarta.msn.com/text_761565254_1/Whale.html [Back](#)