

In Search for a Modern Jonah

By Edward B. Davis, Ph. A

"A sailor swallowed by a whale," proclaimed the tract that fell out of *Winona Echoes*, an old volume on my shelf. The tract recounted the following remarkable story:

*The whaling ship **Star of the East** was in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands, searching for whales, which were very scarce. One morning the lookout sighted a whale about three miles away on the starboard quarter. Two boats were manned. In a short time one of the boats was near enough to enable the harpooner to send a spear into the whale, which proved to be an exceedingly large one The whale ... beat about with its tail in the maddest fashion. The boats attempted to get beyond the reach of the animal, which was apparently in its death agonies, and one of them succeeded, but the other was less fortunate. The whale struck it with his nose and upset it. The men were thrown into the water, and before the crew of the other boat could pick them up, one man drowned and James Bartley had disappeared. When the whale became quiet from exhaustion the waters were searched for Bartley, but [he] could not be found; and, under the impression that he had been struck by the whale's tail and sunk to the bottom, the survivors rowed back to the ship. The whale was dead, and in a few hours the great body was lying by the ship's side, and the men were busy with axes and spades cutting through the flesh to secure the fat. They worked all day and part of the night. They resumed operations the next forenoon, and were soon down to the stomach The workmen were startled while laboring to clear it ... to discover something doubled up in it that gave spasmodic signs of life. The vast pouch was ... cut open, and inside was found the missing sailor, doubled up and unconscious. He was laid out on the deck and treated to a bath of sea water, which soon revived him*

During the brief sojourn in the whale's belly, Bartley's skin, where it was exposed to the action of the gastric juices, underwent a striking change. His face and hands were bleached to a deadly whiteness, and the skin was wrinkled giving the man the appearance of having been parboiled

The whaling captains say that they never remember a parallel case to this before. They say that it frequently happens that men are swallowed by whales who become infuriated by pain of the harpoon and attack the boats, but they have never known a man to go through the ordeal that Bartley did and come out alive.

There the account ends. The rest of the tract is devoted to upholding the credibility of the Biblical story of Jonah and Christ's reference to it in the Gospel of Matthew. Was the story true, in which case there ought to be reliable records to support it, or was it just a really good fish story?

On a hunch, I thought I'd try checking a reliable source, the *New York Times*, just to see whether it might have picked up a story like this one, which was certainly news fit to print. The tract gave the story's date as February 1891.

In the *Times* Index for that year I found quite a few entries about whales and whaling, but nothing even remotely like the Bartley story. Ditto for the next year, the one after that, and so on, until I got to the volume for 1896. Then, all of a sudden, there it was: "Whale; man swallowed by..."

Credence to the Story

With growing excitement I retrieved the relevant roll of microfilm, found the issue for Sunday, November 22, and found exactly what I was looking for on page 16, an account nearly identical to that in my little tract, attributing the original story to *The Mercury* of South Yarmouth, England, in October 1891. A perusal of the other issues of the *Times* from the same roll turned up several other entries related to the Bartley story, from which I learned that a Harlem preacher had verified the existence of a barque of 734 tons called *Star of the East*, built in Glasgow, based in London, and commanded by a Captain J. B. Killam

All this was good news, as it lent credence to this wild story that I was now starting to believe, but the best news came a bit later. I had been awarded a grant to study the unpublished papers of Robert Boyle, housed at the library of the Royal Society in London. I would be spending the summer in London, just when it looked as though my whale story was taking a British turn. As I packed my bags, I made sure to include copies of everything I had found thus far, hoping to do a little whaling in my spare time.

In the British Library I quickly found copies of two accounts of the Bartley story: an article by Ambrose John Wilson in the *Princeton Theological Review* from 1927, and the autobiography of the great British engineer Sir Francis Fox, *Sixty-Three Years of Engineering*, published in 1924. Ambrose John Wilson, a schoolmaster from South Africa who went on to become a Fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge, was also an Anglican rector who opposed evolution and deplored the growing secularization of British society. He saw in the Bartley story a ray of hope, accessible historical evidence to turn against the skepticism of the higher critics. His article was chock full of interesting information and useful references. But his version of the Bartley story came straight from Sir Francis Fox.

Professionally a well-known engineer, Fox was full of evangelical fervor that led him to start a series of lectures and demonstrations on scientific subjects for soldiers wounded in World War I. These lectures had an overwhelming apologetic bent that tended to trivialize both the science and the theology it was employed to serve.

His treatment of the compound nature of white light is a typical example. The fact that a prism divides a ray of light from the sun into three primary colors is used to show "not only the possibility but the existence of One in Three and Three in One, the most perfect illustration in nature of the doctrine of the Trinity." Drawing out the analogy further, Fox notes that "violet is the chemical and actinic ray; *yellow is the lighting ray*; red is the

heating ray; and these correspond more or less closely to the functions of the three Persons of the Trinity."

Finding Additional Facts

Fox's version of the Bartley story, which gets a whole chapter in his autobiography, was no less apologetic than his treatment of the primary colors. He used it just as Ambrose Wilson later did, to defend the credibility of the Jonah story. As for the account itself, it was the same as the tract except for one important detail: On the return of his vessel to England, Bartley was treated at a London hospital for the injury to his skin. That was a fact I might be able to verify by checking some hospital records.

What interested me most was Fox's statement that the whole matter was "carefully investigated by two scientists---one of whom was the late M. de Parville, the scientific editor of the *journal des Debats* of Paris, well known as a man of sound judgment and a careful writer." Although de Parville had died during the war, Fox added (I later learned he actually died in 1909), the man who succeeded him on the staff of the *journal* had sent Fox an English translation that de Parville himself had used summarizing the results of his investigation and concluding with the statement (quoted by Fox) "that the account given by the captain and the crew of the English whaler is worthy of belief."

Who was de Parville? And what had he learned from his investigation?

The Search for Medical Records

Before exploring these questions I looked for medical records that might have survived pertaining to the treatment of Bartley's parboiled skin. As a start, I paid a visit to the library of the Royal College of Surgeons, where I would be able to get some information about London hospitals in the 19th century. I was soon ensconced in a corner with all the histories of London hospitals I could possibly want. But none of the hospital histories mentioned treating such a case, which would surely have been unique.

So I turned to the only really "hard" evidence I thought I possessed: the information in the *New York Times* allegedly taken from an issue of the South Yarmouth *Mercury* from October 1891. A bit of checking at the British Library soon showed that no such newspaper had ever existed. A weekly called the *Yarmouth Mercury*, however, had been printed at a port called Great Yarmouth in the 1890s, which is where I went next.

The Gorleston Whale

At the library there I was shown a series of newspaper clippings that related the following story:

In June 1891, a 30-foot whale came near the shore and ran up against a pier off the town of Gorleston, just south of Great Yarmouth. It was soon pursued by several boats and, after numerous attempts to harpoon it with fishing gear, it ran aground and was killed. Hung up by a rope around its tail, the whale was placed on exhibit for two days, drawing 2,200 folk curious enough to pay an admission charge

Subsequently it was decided to milk the whale for all it was worth. The bones were ground for fertilizer, and a taxidermist was hired to stuff the skin, which was mounted on a timber dray and taken to the London Westminster Aquarium where it was put on display--all of this very much in the tradition of P. T. Barnum. After repeat engagements in Norwich and other East Anglian towns, it was returned to Great Yarmouth, where it remained for some time before disappearing into the veil of history--and, no doubt, going the way of all flesh as well.

Clearly this was not my whale--or was it? Two clippings, one written within days of the event, mentioned that the Gorleston whale had inspired a number of exaggerated tales. I had to wonder: Was it possible that my whale was just the Gorleston whale in another guise? I was almost convinced that I would not find the Bartley story when suddenly there popped up on the microfilm reader the headline: "Man in a Whale's Stomach, Rescue of a Modern Jonah. " The story agreed in every particular with the little tract that had sparked my expedition.

Star of the East's Records

Having brought my research to what I considered a satisfactory conclusion for the time being, I returned home to the States. Here, as time allowed, I pursued some smaller fish. I made an inquiry to the Maritime History Archive at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland, where the Lloyd's Register is now kept. Their records showed three vessels under British registry bearing the name *Star of the East* that could have been in service in 1891: a 734-ton barque (mentioned above), and two other boats, each less than 20 tons, that could not possibly have been whalers. No log book for the barque was found, but the crew agreement showed that in February 1891 she was en route from London to Wellington via New York, a finding that impressed me since it was not inconsistent with the claim that she was off the Falkland Islands. However, I was advised by an archivist, "Whaling in the Falkland Islands did not commence until 1909, and I have not been able to locate a whaling vessel named *Star of the East*. "

Another fish I sought to land was found in the book the original tract had fallen out of, the *Winona Echoes*. Thus far I had not paid much attention to a sermon on Jonah in the book. It was by Harry Rimmer, a prominent anti-evolutionist, and was an exact reprint of a tract Rimmer printed in 1927 under the auspices of his one-man operation grandiosely called the Research Science Bureau. Rimmer gave a very different story involving a whale shark in the English channel and said he found the story of the whaler in the *Literary Digest*, a popular magazine from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that was something of a cross between *Reader's Digest* and *Newsweek*.

Courbet Writes About the Whale

What I found in the *Literary Digest*, however, was just another incarnation of Bartley's whale, in the issue for April 4, 1896, when Rimmer was not yet six years old. The bulk of the article was an English translation of an account attributed to "M[onsieur]. P. Courbet in *Cosmos* (Paris, March 7)," which I read on my next visit to London. *Le Cosmos: Revue des sciences et de leurs applications* was a conservative Catholic weekly, edited by the Abbe Moigno. It sought to maintain strong connections between Biblical statements and modern scientific theories, and Pierre Courbet was the author of several apologetic works.

Courbet was led to write his article by news communicated at a session of the Academy of Sciences in late December 1895 (and covered briefly in *Cosmos* on January 11), in which the Prince of Monaco had reported the capture of a sperm whale near the Azores. Just before it died, the animal vomited up several large cephalopods, including specimens of three new species. When the whale's stomach was opened, it contained the remains of more cephalopods, at least one of which was judged to have exceeded two meters in length.

Proof Positive?

After relating this information, Courbet jumped as if by invitation to the exegesis of Jonah. Although the church has never condemned an allegorical interpretation, Courbet observed, there is no longer any need to resort to it, since this discovery has proved that the sperm whale can easily swallow creatures larger than a man. More than this, it is even possible that a man could live for a day or so inside a whale's stomach. "If we are to believe the English papers," he continued, "there has recently occurred a striking demonstration of such a possibility."

What followed was the Bartley story, much as it was found in the tract that had started this adventure for me and in the Yarmouth *Mercury*, except that his treatment in a London hospital was mentioned, and the portion of the story that represented Bartley's experiences inside the whale was quoted (apparently directly) in the first person rather than related summarily in the third. The presence of this first person account indicated that another "original" version of the story probably existed that I had not yet located, but Courbet offered no specific clues about his sources so I could not follow it up.

Back to de Parville

Then I had another hunch: Suppose Courbet influenced de Parville, the man named by Fox and others as one of two eminent scientists who had investigated the Bartley story and had found it "worthy of belief"? I had already verified that Henri de Parville was for much of the late 19th century the scientific editor of the **journal des de bats, politiques et litteraires** a short daily published in Paris since the French revolution.

In one of de Parville's columns, he summarized Bartley's adventures and then offered his own assessment of the story. As improbable as it might seem, he argued, the captain of the English whaler is "worthy of belief [*digne de foi*]."

"I won't allow myself to deny the reality of the adventure," he continued with some hesitation, "indeed I would have been even more convinced if, in support of this story, one had provided certificates of authenticity" signed by appropriate authorities. "Never mind," he concluded, "after this entirely modern example, after the sperm whale of the prince of Monaco, I ended up believing, this evening between ten and eleven o'clock, that Jonah really did come out of the whale alive!"

The similarities in detail and in wording between Francis Fox's account and de Parville's column were striking. The hesitation found in de Parville's original, however, is significant by its absence; whether de Parville or Fox is responsible for this I cannot say. In any case, Fox proceeds without faltering to quote de Parville's overall conclusion:

"After this modern illustration I end by believing that Jonah really did come out of the whale alive as the Bible records." Fox made a point of stating that "the incident was carefully investigated by two scientists," one of them de Parville and the other not named. Surely the other person Fox had in mind was Courbet. Neither, of course, was really a scientist--de Parville was one of the first science journalists, and Courbet was a theologian. And it isn't the least bit clear from anything I have found that either one made what could be described as a careful investigation of the incident.

I will state this more strongly: No one, repeat, no one, has given the story the kind of careful investigation it warrants if it is to be used as evidence for the reliability of Scripture. Yet this is precisely what everyone citing the story assumes--that its authenticity has been established beyond a reasonable doubt, at least by de Parville if not also by others.

A typical example comes from Ambrose John Wilson, whose account of the incident has probably been read more widely than any other. In a subsequent defense of his own purportedly thorough investigation Wilson claimed that the episode had been "elaborately investigated by M. de Parville, accepted in the *journal des Debats* and earlier by the Abbe Moine [sic] in the scientific journal *Kosmos*," where Courbet's article had appeared. But Courbet did no more than cite an account in the English papers, and de Parville did no more than cite Courbet. Why hadn't anyone dug any deeper than this? I was beginning to harbor doubts about the authenticity of this whale of a tale.

A Great Sea Yarn

I soon had some hard evidence to support my suspicions. My pastor alerted me to a footnote in L. C. Allen's commentary on Jonah that cites a letter printed in the *Expository Times* in 1906 and 1907. A reader named Williams reported that he had inquired of Mrs. John Killam, wife of the captain of the *Star of the East*, concerning the Bartley story. Mrs. Killam stated flatly, "There is not one word of truth in the whale story. I was with my husband all the years he was in the *Star of the East*. There was never a man lost overboard while my husband was in her. The sailor has told a great sea yarn."

This was an interesting revelation, to say the least. I wrote again to the Maritime Archives, asking for copies of any documents they might have, and received the crew agreement from the *Star of the East* for the voyage described above. She had been a barque of 733 net tonnage, owned by Sir Roderick Cameron of London and registered in that port. She left New York on June 25, 1890, bound for Wellington with a crew of thirteen officers and men under the command of Captain John Killam of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia (not Great Yarmouth in England, where the *Mercury* was printed). The date of her arrival in Wellington is not recorded, but she left there in early November, stopping first in Lyttelton and then in Auckland, from whence she sailed to New York, arriving on April 17. The agreement lists every member of the crew, including a few who signed on in Wellington and deserted just six days later in Lyttelton. No James Bartley is listed, nor is anyone of similar name, either for the entire voyage or any part of it.

I realized then with finality that there simply was no whale at the end of my line. The Bartley tale was no more than a fish story, albeit a dandy. It had been good enough to fool apparently sophisticated people like the authors and editors of some highly respected Biblical commentaries. But no one had carefully investigated the story.

Before going further, I want to clarify an important point. Just because this story turned out to be bogus does not mean that the Biblical story of Jonah is not true. Most of us have heard claims that someone saw Elvis Presley at the local mall. Just because we don't believe these silly reports does not mean that we doubt the resurrection.

Each report has to be judged on its own merits-and the Bartley story, as I discovered, had none. In the end, when traced back to the source, each reported sighting turned out to be just another chimera, just another version of the original spurious newspaper account. Precisely how the story began, and who started it, may never be known. Nevertheless a plausible scenario comes to mind-a scenario that actually does start with a whale, though not Bartley's.

It is, of course, the Gorleston whale, that unfortunate creature killed near Great Yarmouth in June 1891 and subsequently dragged about the country on exhibition. Suppose there was at that time an imaginative young man, let's call him James Bartley, who happened one day to see this whale and to read a newspaper account of its capture and disembowelment. As he reflected upon this monster from the deep, his thoughts moved to consider the plight of Jonah, and an idea occurred to him-an idea that might enable him to share in the publicity generated by the Gorleston whale.

Jonah of the Twentieth Century

Having been graced by nature with an unusual complexion, he might easily pass for Jonah himself, so much so that he becomes a circus side show in the spirit of the Gorleston whale, billing himself as "Jonah of the Twentieth Century." He also spins yarns, complete with a real ship that was in the South Atlantic in February 1891 in case anyone should make inquiries. These yarns are printed by at least one provincial newspaper just two months after the story of the Gorleston whale. Perhaps he even has a friend pose as the captain of this vessel (who is, conveniently enough, not named in the original accounts) to attest to those facts that a man who spent thirty hours inside a whale's belly could not have known about.

Never mind that the ship he chose wasn't a whaler, and that British whalers didn't fish off the Falklands in 1891. Only a suspicious person would ask those sorts of questions, and a suspicious person wouldn't believe the story anyway. Having told his fish story, Bartley could sit back and enjoy the bit of fame it brought him without risk to his reputation (presuming that this would have concerned him). If pressed, he could always claim that he had done no more than invent an entertaining tale, exactly what Mrs. Kellam later said he did.

If there is no truth in the Bartley story itself, there is still much to be learned from the uses made of it by conservative scholars and preachers, such as evangelist Harry Rimmer. Bartley becomes for them an almost heroic figure, living proof of the veracity of Scripture against the onslaught of the scientists and the higher critics.

The tendency to muster pseudoscientific "facts" to defend the reliability of Scripture against Biblical critics was characteristic of much conservative religious literature of the period between the two world wars. This was an important change from the late 19th century, when a number of highly respected Christians harmonized solid, respectable

science with the faith of the lay believer. Written in many cases by men with legitimate scientific expertise, these works forged a creative synthesis between the best theology and the best science of their day. They were not intended to defend a particular view of the Bible or to "prove" the Bible against skeptics—something that science cannot really do without ceasing to be good science. However, as Bernard Ramm lamented nearly forty years ago in the preface to *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, "The noble tradition which was in ascendancy in the closing years of the nineteenth century has not been the major tradition in evangelicalism in the twentieth century. A narrow bibliolatry, the product not of faith but of fear, buried the noble tradition."

Folk Science

Rimmer and others stand revealed as practitioners of what social philosopher Jerome R. Ravetz has called "folk science": the use of science to promote one's personal belief system. Professional scientists are no less prone than anyone else to the practice of folk science; Carl Sagan immediately comes to mind.

But amateurs like Rimmer and others who used the Bartley story to further apologetic goals were also involved in folk science while invoking the authority of science. Rimmer never obtained an earned degree, yet declared himself an expert in scientific matters and sought the trappings of the professional. He joined the American Association for the Advancement of Science, was a fellow of the American Geographical Society, and founded his one-man operation, the Research Science Bureau. He went on archaeological digs. He published and spoke on scientific subjects. And he challenged recognized scientists to debate him.

His skills as an orator only heightened his credibility with the audiences of students and amateurs he normally addressed. When challenged by a professional, he had a knack for stumping him or making him look silly by citing a particular fact, often obscure, that seemed to fly in the face of the particular theory Rimmer scorned. A few good, hard facts, a fish story from the newspapers -- these were all Rimmer thought he needed to debunk the theories of the scientists and Biblical critics. It didn't seem to bother him that his sources weren't exactly the most reliable, nor his conclusions the most careful. He preached to all who would listen, filling with folk science a void that professional Christian scientists were apparently unwilling to fill with the real thing.

Even today a gap exists between professionals and lay people that is all too rarely bridged from the professional side. This state of affairs was even more acute in evangelical scholarship during the first part of the century, which led to a whale of a tale, a false story that has been repeated for decades, giving people the wrong reasons to believe.

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Dr. Davis invites correspondence from interested readers. Reasons To Believe:
<http://www.reasons.org/resources/apologetics/jonah.shtml>