

The Book of Jonah

God's Sovereign Preservation of Jonah (1:17-2:10) Part I



The Preparation for Deliverance (1:17; 2:10) – The account of Jonah's deliverance from a watery death is bookended by two points of transition in this prophetic narrative. Chapter 1:17 (2:1 in the Hebrew text) and chapter 2:1 (2:11 in the Hebrew text) transition from the sailor's salvation (1:14-16) and to Nineveh's salvation (3:3-10). Between these two sections we find the account of God's sovereign salvation of Jonah by way of the miraculous (1:17, 2:10) and the heavily Psalms-influenced prayer for deliverance of Jonah (2:1-9). While most people are unfamiliar with the prayer of Jonah, many both inside and outside the church are very familiar with verses 1:17 and 2:10 which speak of

God's sovereign and miraculous deliverance of Jonah inside the stomach of an unidentified sea creature. It is safe to say that the story of "Jonah and the whale" is one of the most famous, most debated, and most denied stories in all of Scripture. It is also safe to say that because so much emphasis and focus is placed on the possibility of Jonah being swallowed and vomited up by a sea creature, the greater focus of the sovereignty and salvation of God ones virtually unnoticed. As Thomas John Carlisle confessed, "I was so obsessed with what was going on inside the whale that I missed what seeing the drama inside Jonah".

For those who maintain a high view of Scripture (inerrant, infallible, inspired, authoritative) defending and attempting to prove the account of Jonah seems "hardly necessary" yet "a discussion of the miracle does have value" (James Montgomery Boice). There is both internal and external evidence for the historicity and possibility of these amazing events. However the account of Jonah (not simply the miraculous ocean rescue) ultimately must be believed by faith for the unbeliever has never been convinced of the things of God without the work of the Holy Spirit opening their eyes to see and embrace the truth of God's Word.

God's Sovereign Preservation of Jonah (1:7; 2:10) – Once again God places His sovereign power on display as He "appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah". Exactly what God did in order to appoint or order this great fish to carry out His divine command is not stated though it is clear that God orchestrated all the details necessary for that great fish to be in the right place at the right time and to somehow know exactly what was required of it as determined by God. It is interesting that one of the "ancient rabbis suggested that this fish was prepared for this purpose at the creation of the world" (Charles L. Feinberg); a possibility which is certainly not unreasonable to accept.

A - The LORD appoints the fish to swallow Jonah

B - Jonah is in the belly of the fish three days and nights

B - Jonah prays to the LORD from the belly of the fish

A - The LORD commanded the fish to vomit up Jonah

God's confrontation with Jonah on the open sea was first carried out though the obedience and service of the wind and waves. Now the great sea creature is summoned to act as a vessel of salvation and, unlike Jonah, it responds to His creator's calling with immediate obedience. The whole of Jonah's sea creature experience is described in what is known as a chiasmic arrangement which presents a structure of repeated words or actions in reverse order. In this we see the entirety of the great fish's commissioning by God.

"In this brief narrative we see that Yahweh retains the initiative. Jonah's contest with God is ill-matched. The account illustrates the impossibility of escaping God's presence and the folly of attempting such a thing. It shows Jonah's dependence on God even when he is in a state of rebellion against Him"

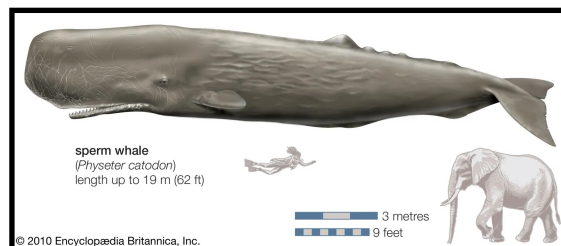
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The Natural Possibility of the Preservation of Jonah – When considering the natural possibility of Jonah being swallowed and preserved by anything in the animal kingdom, the first question to ask is “Was Jonah swallowed by a whale or a fish?” and the second is “Does such a creature exist?”. Consider the following biblical and natural answers to these questions.

Whale or fish? – Ask most people about Jonah and they will say he was swallowed by a whale. However, the words used in the text of Jonah speak of a great fish (*dag gadol*) and not a specific or technical term for whale because “Hebrew possessed no special word for ‘whale’” (Gleason L. Archer). The idea of Jonah being swallowed by a whale is traced back to the King James translation of Matthew 12:40 where the word “whale” is used. However, the Greek word in Matthew is “*ketos*, which simply means ‘sea monster’” (Frank Gaebelien). This term (*ketos*) can mean both a whale or a great fish. So to answer the question definitively is not written in black and white. Was Jonah swallowed by a whale or a fish? The answer is “Yes”, it was one of those creatures. The next questions asked is...

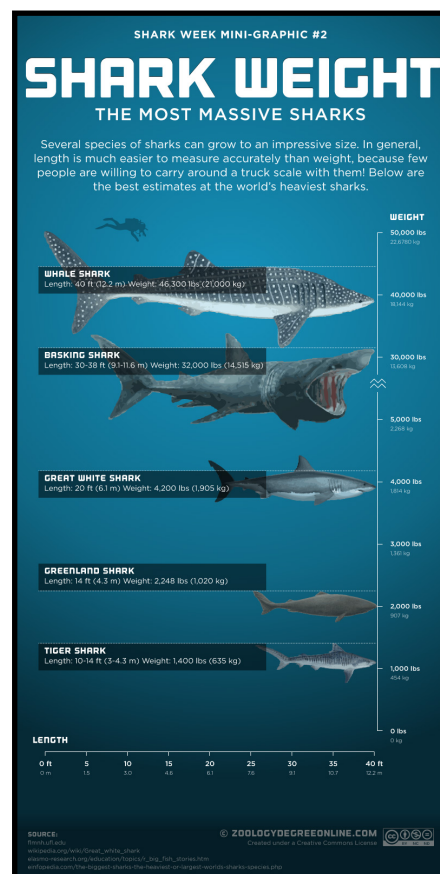
Does such a creature exist? – If the question is to be answered generally, the answer is “Yes. There are creatures in the sea large enough to swallow a man whole”. So which creatures are possible candidates as the one that swallowed Jonah.

Assuming that a whale swallowed Jonah, the sperm whale is the go to candidate. Although there are larger whales (such as the Blue Whale), only the sperm whale has a mouth and throat large enough to swallow a full grown man. The sperm whale reaches a length of over sixty feet and has a lower jaw of up to fifteen feet in length. The sperm whale is the only whale of the ninety known whale species on earth that can swallow a person whole. In fact, there are two recorded accounts of men being swallowed alive and surviving the ordeal (in 1758 and 1771) which are the subject of an article in *The Princeton Theological Review* (Oct., 1927). So is it possible that Jonah was swallowed by a whale? The evidence from nature says “Yes”.



Assuming the creature that swallowed Jonah was a fish, the whale shark tops the list of possible candidates. The whale shark is a cartilaginous fish (having no skeleton) which reaches length between thirty and forty feet making it the world's largest fish. The mouth of the whale shark is up to five feet in width (enough room for an average size person to fit inside) however, because the whale shark is a filter feeder (eats plankton, microscopic plants and animals) and has a relatively small throat (in comparison with its mouth), many do not see the whale shark as being able to swallow a person. A second option in the fish world is a basking shark. This massive shark is the second largest fish reaching a length of over thirty feet. Like the whale shark, the basking shark has a huge mouth but a small throat (being a filter feeder) so again, many do not see this shark as being able to swallow a person.

These examples in nature provide sufficient evidence that there are massive sea creatures who are capable of swallowing a person. This however does not mean that there was not a much larger species of fish alive in Jonah's day that could have swallowed him. Undoubtedly many have heard of the Megalodon (a shark said to be huge in companions with the largest great white sharks we have today – Megalodon grew up to fifty feet long where the great white reaches a length of up to twenty feet). There is also the possibility of a “prehistoric” fish that dwelled the seas centuries ago (If the Genesis account is true and there is no evolution, then dinosaurs were created on days five and six and dwelt with man on land and in the seas).



The Supernatural Necessity of the Preservation of Jonah – Even with the strong examples found in the natural world which speak in favor of the possibility of Jonah being swallowed by a giant sea creature, the unregenerate mind cannot and will not accept natural, secular, or biblical evidence as valid proof or objective truth (cf. 1 Cor. 1:14). Ultimately one must believe in the supernatural miracles of an all-powerful God to explain all the facts and details in this case (and in the pages of Scripture in general).

From Genesis to Revelation the Bible is full of accounts of the miraculous – Creation *ex nihilo* (Gen. 1), Noah’s global flood (Gen. 6-8), the plagues upon Egypt (Ex. 7-12), the manna and quail in the wilderness (Ex. 16:1-21), the sun standing still securing victory over the Amorites (Josh. 10:12-14), deliverance from the furnace of fire (Dan. 3) and the lion’s den (Dan. 6), the conception of Jesus by a virgin (Lk. 1:26-38), turning water to wine (Jn. 2:1-11), casting out a legion of demons (Lk. 8:30; Mk. 5:9), healing of Malchus’ ear (Lk. 22:50-51), raising of the dead (Jn. 11), healing the lame (Acts 3:6), and many, many other miracles. The greatest miracle, that is arguably the foundation of Christian faith, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28; Mk. 16; Lk. 24; Jn. 20; 1 Cor. 15).

Miracles are an essential aspect of the Christian faith and the account of Jonah and the great fish is no exception. Nature provides many examples of creatures large enough to swallow a man whole but ultimately faith is required to believe that God sovereignly and supernaturally prepared and provided such a creature to deliver Jonah.

Jesus’ Sovereign Testimony of the Preservation of Jonah – While it is true that there are accounts in Scripture which are to be understood as a metaphor or a parable, Jonah is understood by Jesus Himself to be accurate and true. When asked for a sign to prove His identity as the Son of God and the promised Messiah, Jesus pointed to the account of Jonah in the belly of the sea creature as an ancient sign which pointed to His coming death and resurrection. While many view the account of Jonah as an allegory or a “type” of Christ, there is no doubt that Jesus was convinced and taught that Jonah was indeed a real person and Jonah actually spent three days and nights in the belly of a sea creature. Because Jesus is the God-man, He is both divine and human and perfect in every aspect. Being divine, Jesus demonstrates His omniscience (Jn. 1:48-50; Matt. 9:4). Knowing all things, Jesus would know the truth about the person and events of and in Jonah. To doubt the testimony of Jesus concerning Jonah’s time in the great fish is to cast doubt on the deity of Christ.

“An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”

Matthew 12:39-42