

Did Jonah Really Swallow the Whale?

It was a crisp spring morning as I left my hotel in Tel Aviv and walked the several hundred metres down to the beach. The Mediterranean Sea sparkled blue/green as I turned south towards the ancient port of Jaffa. Although it has now been subsumed into what is called *Tel Avi-Jafo*, the ancient city known as *Joppa* in the Bible, has a rich history as a sea port - a harbor within a natural outcrop of rocks.

It was here that Peter raised the widow Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:36–42) It was also the home of Simon the Tanner where Peter had the vision of meats lowered from heaven on a sheet, and was immediately sent to preach the gospel to the Roman centurion Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10:10–23).

As I wandered the maze of narrow streets, with old men sitting at rickety tables, drinking dark, gritty coffee from small cups, and playing a board game I had never seen before, I wondered if things had changed much over the centuries – indeed over millennia. Maybe Jonah had walked similar streets when he fled to Joppa looking for a passage to Tarshish.

I sat on the rocks eating *Chicken Shawarma and Homous* purchased from a stall in the famous Jaffa *Flea Market* and as I looked across the gently rippling turquoise and sapphire, I wondered if Jonah had been similarly enchanted as he sat in the bow of his Tarshish bound ship.

Walking back along the beach that afternoon, I thought about the modern scholarship that has relegated the Book of Jonah to mythology, or at best allegory, to illustrate the mercy (and inescapability) of God. And I wondered why Jonah has fared so poorly at the hands of contemporary biblical academia. Certainly the notion of a man being swallowed and regurgitated by an enormous fish *and surviving*, may seem somewhat bizarre, but there are records of this *actually* occurring, in modern times, albeit with the fish being opened up on the deck of a ship.

Jesus is quoted as referring to the Jonah story nine times in the gospels. So *He* clearly took this “myth” to be actual history, and if we trust the Gospels as a reliable account of what Jesus said, we would seem to have confirmation of the Jonah episode by the Lord Himself.

When the Bible is using a parable form of teaching, it either says so up front, or else makes it clear from the context. But the story of Jonah is

presented as straightforward historical narrative – indeed none of the ancient Jews or early Christians ever doubted the authenticity or historicity of the Book of Jonah and its story. Even the secular historian Flavius Josephus, whose works are otherwise regarded as reliable, recounts the Jonah story as Jewish history.

Jonah appears elsewhere in the chronicles of Israel as the prophet who predicted Jeroboam II’s military successes against Syria in the 8th century BC (2 Kings 14:25). This account agrees with Jonah 1:1 that he was the son of Amittai, and it provides the additional information that he was from the town of Gath-hepher in lower Galilee. A fair bit of consistent and detailed information for a mythological figure!

Sitting on the beach in Tel Aviv late that afternoon, and still somewhat under the spell of Jaffa’s antiquity, I thought Jonah had probably been a real person. But I wondered if it would matter all that much if he *did* turn out to be just a fable. Then I recalled the words of Jesus in one of the Gospel references. “*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*” (Mat 12:40). God has chosen to hang the record and process of His redemptive work through Christ, on the historicity of Jonah.

In subsequent study I learned that the opening phrase of this statement from Jesus is the Greek adverb ὅσπερ (HOSPER) which is translated *indeed just as, just exactly like* (HELPS Word Studies). And so it follows that if Jonah’s three days and nights in the fish are myth, then so is the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. This then is a matter of *eternal* importance.

So why do scholars today dismiss Jonah so readily? These are not the enemies of the Church – they are its intellectual leaders. In many cases these are the people to whom we look for Christian teaching. But it seems that both Adam and Jonah have suffered more at the hands of those who should be their friends, than from the enemies of the Gospel.

I leave open that question of *why* for the moment, because to these two much-maligned biblical figures, we must add a third - Noah. And in so doing I will, in my next essay, attempt to identify what lies behind the academic persecution of these three biblical figures.