

## "Praying from the Gut(s)"

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*Third in a series on the Book of Jonah*

Jonah 1:11-12; 1:17-2:10

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The sailors said to Yonah, "What shall we do to you so that the sea quiets down from upon us?" (when the sea was growing stormier). He said to them, "Lift me up and hurl me into the sea, and the sea will quieten down from upon you, because I acknowledge that it was on my account that this huge storm has come upon you." . . .

They lifted Yonah up and hurled him into the sea; and the sea stopped its raging. The men were in huge fear of the LORD. They offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made pledges.

The LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Yonah, and Yonah was in the fish's insides three days and three nights.

Yonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's guts:

*Out of my pressure I called to the LORD  
and he answered me.  
When I called for help from She'ol's belly,  
you listened to my voice.*

*You threw me into the deep, into the heart of the seas.  
The river surrounded me.  
All your breakers and your waves passed over me.  
I myself said,  
"I've been driven away from in front of your eyes."*

*Yet I shall again look towards your sacred palace.*

*The water overwhelmed me, up to my neck.  
The deep surrounded me.  
Reed was wrapped round my head  
at the roots of the mountains.  
I went down into the earth.  
Its bars were about me permanently.*

*But you got my life up from the Pit, LORD my God.*

continued . . .

*When my life was ebbing away from me,  
the LORD I remembered.  
My pleas came to you, to your sacred palace.*

*People who keep watch for things that are empty and hollow  
forsake their commitment.  
But I — with a voice of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to you;  
for what I have pledged I shall make good.*

*Deliverance belongs to the LORD.*

The LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Yonah on to the dry land.

Adapted from a translation by John Goldingay.

This is the side of an ancient sarcophagus.<sup>1</sup>



It's really old. It goes back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. It's got different scenes, including early Christian depictions of Jonah. First Jonah's being hurled off the boat into the fish (which looks like a sea monster). Then, Jonah's being hurled out of the fish onto land. Finally is a scene later in the story, with Jonah basking in the shade of a plant.

Now, I know what you're all thinking, the one big question. Why is Jonah naked? I figured, maybe he lost his clothes back in the fish. But I checked, and no. Jonah was naked when they threw him off the boat. Now, when the storm came up, he was

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christianiconography.info/sicily/sarcophagusJonah.html>. Photographed by Richard Stracke. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0. I've added the circles and numbers.

sleeping, and maybe he liked to nap *au natural*. Or, the sculptor just liked to put naked people on caskets. (I hope that doesn't catch on.)

Caskets . . . that's what a sarcophagus is. It's where you put a dead person's body. If you don't have one handy, though, the belly of a fish will do fine.

## II

Now, about the fish.

It was a fish . . . and maybe a whale. We classify a whale as a mammal, not a fish. But the ancients didn't use our classifications. For them, it was (in Hebrew) a *dagah*, a water-swimmy-thingy.

So Jonah's short-term B&B (without the bed, and with him for breakfast) could have been a blue whale, a great white shark, or an overgrown guppy.

But did it really happen?

Can the LORD God, Creator of all that is, Giver of life and Sustainer of breath, keep someone inside a fish for 3 days and nights? Sure, if GOD wants to.

Unfortunately, during the "battle for the Bible"<sup>2</sup> between Fundamentalists and Modernists, what you thought about Jonah became a test. Believe Jonah truly camped out inside a fish, and you're faithful. Discount it as false, and you're intelligent. Both miss the point.

Jonah's story is a satire.<sup>3</sup> Satires take real sorts of people — in this case, GOD's prophets — and give us a good laugh about them. Everything in the story is over-the-top. A satire exaggerates reality with humour, to give a message.

Theologian Phillip Cary calls Jonah "a scriptural screw up."<sup>4</sup> His story is a laugh. It's a comedy of errors by one of GOD's chosen messengers. If we're able to chuckle at him, we might drop our defenses enough to see GOD rolling His eyes at us. We are Jonah.

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<sup>2</sup> The Battle for the Bible is the title of a book Harold Lindsell, published in 1976.

<sup>3</sup> John H. Walton, "Jonah" in John H. Walton (general editor), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Volume 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 104. Similarly, Phillip Cary says the book is a comedy. Jonah. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Cary, 18.

So don't focus on the fish. Jonah doesn't. He doesn't even mention it. He's got bigger things to worry about. Like, being dead.

### III

See, I think Jonah is dead. Or, mostly dead. Or, might as well be dead.

He's squished in the confines of the fish's digestive system. (If you're claustrophobic, don't think about this too much.) He's heading to the bottom of sea, with no hint he's ever coming back. He has to be thinking "So this is what death is like. Ah Hell!"

Or, "Ah She'ol!" That's what he says. When the ancient Hebrews pictured the cosmos, She'ol (or "the Pit") was the deep, down place where we go when we die. Everyone goes there, the relatively guilty and the relatively innocent included. It's not the same as ideas of Hell as a suffering place for the wicked, or Paradise as endless bliss for the righteous. Those ideas developed later. She'ol was pictured as a netherworld, misty and murky, not a punishment but not joyful either.<sup>5</sup>

Jonah is sure he is there. Maybe he is. He has been sunk down, as low as he can go. If there is a hole in the bottom of the sea, he's gone through it. He's at the roots from where the mountains grow. He's where the gates are barred shut and there is no getting out. He is as far from life as you can get, plunged as far from GOD's Presence as you can fathom.<sup>6</sup>

### IV

He prays. Finally.

Some remarkable things about Jonah's prayer.

Jonah knows how he got where he is and he leaves no doubt Who has done it. The terrified sailors tossed him overboard, but GOD threw him into the sea. The fish gobbled him up, but GOD hired this monster of the deep. (Hebrew rabbis mused that the LORD fashioned this creature at the beginning of time, just for Jonah.<sup>7</sup>) GOD's

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<sup>5</sup> John Goldingay, Daniel & The Twelve Prophets (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 272.

<sup>6</sup> "He is as far beneath the surface of the earth as the heavens are above it, as far from the land as this mortal life as it is possible to get and even farther from the life of heaven and the throne of God." Cary, 94.

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Jonah in rabbinic literature," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jonah\\_in\\_rabbinic\\_literature&oldid=897058409](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jonah_in_rabbinic_literature&oldid=897058409) (accessed July 17, 2020).

waves are crashing over him, GOD's waters are burying him, GOD's deeps tie him up. Jonah ran away from GOD, and GOD exiled Jonah from the divine Presence. It's not some enemy, or unfortunate circumstances, or even human misdeeds that got Jonah into this. It's GOD.

Another intriguing thing. Jonah does not ask for forgiveness. He does not say, "*LORD, I was wrong. I sinned. I was faithless.*" It's all true. But Jonah does not confess. Maybe he is beyond confessing. Maybe he fears he is past forgiving. The right time was back when he was on deck, in the middle of the storm. That was the time to confess. But Jonah said nothing to GOD then. Now? It's too late for him to save himself. After all, he is dead.

Still, he calls to the LORD. He cries for GOD's help. He pleads to the highest Heaven, though he is as far away from anything Godly or Heavenly you can get.

V

Maybe the most peculiar thing about Jonah's prayer, might be the key to it all.

Jonah seems confused about the time.

These COVID-days, my time is messed up. I get confused about which day it is, or when something happened. Still, I know the difference between what has happened, what is happening, and what hasn't happened yet.

Not Jonah.

Jonah is in the fish. He is in the middle of his death. No hope. No future. No chance of survival. But he prays like it is all behind him. Pretty much everything he says is in the past tense. He's still in the fish . . . but GOD has already answered him. He's still in She'ol's guts . . . but GOD has already listened to him. He's still in the Pit . . . but GOD has already pulled him out. He's still far gone . . . but GOD has already delivered him.

Jonah is in his dead-in-a-fish present. But he's praying from the future. GOD's future.

Maybe he's not confused at all.

Jonah truly is the LORD's prophet. A disobedient one, sure. A messed-up one, no doubt. Still, one to whom GOD is speaking, and through whom GOD will speak.

Remember, Jonah knows GOD put him where he is. So only GOD can get him out. He knows GOD will.

Remember, Jonah does not confess. Maybe he knows has nothing to offer to save himself, to patch things up between him and GOD. But he knows it's not too late for GOD.

He is so confident in what GOD will do — because he knows GOD. He knows GOD's mercy. He knows GOD's power. He knows no place is absent of GOD, not even She'ol. He knows time is no obstacle to GOD, even for the dead.

He is beyond forgiving . . . and GOD forgives. He is beyond living . . . and GOD raises the dead.

Friends, it is never too late.

It's never too late to remember GOD's mighty acts of mercy and love, GOD's generous deeds of rescue and hope, GOD's saving and sending call to you.

It's never too late, to celebrate. Even buried in a fish's belly.

This is a comedy. So the fish pukes Jonah onto the shore. (Apparently, still naked.) Next week, we'll see what this ridiculous excuse for a prophet does now.

Or, better, what GOD has already done.