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The LORD Prepared a Great Whale to Swallow Jonah
1:17 to 2:1

The LORD prepared a great whale to swallow Jonah DIG: What is significant about the phrase . . . But the LORD? What did it mean for Jonah? What does the word prepared mean? What does the word swallow imply? Why? What is paradoxical about the great whale fulfilling it commission? What does the Jewish expression three days and three nights mean? Does the Bible say that Yonah was alive inside the whale? How do the Jews explain the whale experience?

REFLECT: What was the meaning of Jonah's entombment for Jesus? For you? In a sense, this story isn't about Yonah, or a great whale. It's about a God who is omnipotent and can do anything He wants. And He chooses to give us a second chance. How has He given you a second chance? What did you do with it?

And Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights.

Short description of scene three: As **scene two** concluded**, Jonah** had disappeared into the waters of the Mediterranean and an eerie calm had settled over the sea. The sailors worshiped **ADONAI** with words, sacrifices and in their attitude in general. The story could have come to an end right there, making the point that one ought not try to run away from **God**. The narrative, however, goes on. **But the LORD . . .** The cat and mouse game continues like a chess game **(1:3, 1:4, 1:17, 4:1, 4:7)**. Here **the Grandmaster** has outmaneuvered **Jonah**. Check mate. Game over. **Scene three** consists of a narrative introduction **(17:1** to **2:1)**, a prayer **(2:2-9)**, and a narrative conclusion **(2:10)**.58

Commentary on scene three: In the Hebrew text, **1:17** is the first verse of **chapter 2**, introducing **Jonah's prayer from the belly of the whale. God prepared a great whale,** which showed up at exactly the right place and at the right time **to swallow Jonah (1:17a). ADONAI**, who had called **Yonah** and who had sent the storm, acts again, this time **preparing a large whale** to carry out a special assignment. The Hebrew word for **prepared** means *to assign*, *to count*, *to appoint* or *commission.* **The great whale** was *appointed* or *commissioned* **to swallow Jonah.** The word **swallow** often implies danger, used as it is of the exile **(Jeremiah 51:34)**, of **God's** judgment **(Psalm 21:9)**, and of enemies' threats **(Psalm 35:25)**. It's a paradox that **the son of Amittai**, a rational being, failed **his** commission, but **the great whale**, an irrational creature, fulfilled its *commission*. It **swallowed Jonah** as it was *assigned* to do. **The rabbis teach that this whale was created in the six days of creation and held in readiness for Yonah.**

What sort of **a great fish** did the author have in mind here? The Greek translations have *ketai megalo* (*ketous* in **Matthew 12:40)**, which may be translated **a great fish.** However, the Hebrew word for **big fish** does not refer to a specific species but leaves room for the imagination of the hearer or reader.59 Let's not major in the minors and get caught up (no pun intended) on what kind of **great fish** this is. **The man** inside **the fish** is far more important. We will call it **a great whale**.

And Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights (1:17b). The reluctant prophet wanted to go to Tarshish but **he** ended up **in the belly of a whale** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Eo – The Sign of Jonah**). The Hebrew expression **three days and three nights** does not require **three** full twenty-four hour periods. It is a common Jewish expression, simply meaning any period of time that touches three days. In Jewish reckoning, part of a day counts for a whole day.60 Notice that the Bible does not say that **Jonah** was alive inside **the whale**. By the end of **chapter 2** everything will

be stripped from **him** except **his** dependence on **God**.

Some of the Rabbis describe Jonah's stay in the whale in imaginative detail. According to the *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Yonah saves his host fish from being devoured by the sea monster Leviathan. In return for this, the fish takes Yonah on an extensive tour of the suboceanic world. In the *Zohar*, Jonah's sojourn in the belly of the great fish and his subsequent ejection is understood as an allegory of death and resurrection. Most interesting is the account in *Midrash Jonah*, apparently developed to account for the variation between the masculine and feminine words for fish in these verses. Yonah found himself quite comfortable in the great fish, was not worried, and failed to pray. Then the LORD arranges for Yonah to be spit out of the original (male) fish (1:17, Hebrew: *dag*) and to be swallowed by another (female) fish (2:1, Hebrew *dagah*) that was pregnant with 365,000 baby fish in its womb. Jonah was very much afraid because of the dirt and refuse from all the fish" and immediately began to pray.61

From the belly of the great whale Jonah prayed to ADONAI his God (2:1). The Hebrew word for **belly** in relation to **the whale** means *the abdomen*. The identical verb form **prayed** occurs in **4:2**, where it introduces **Jonah's** bitter complaint to **the LORD**. The verb **prayed** can designate praying for help in a situation of acute distress **(First Samuel 1:10; Second Kings 4:33, 6:18** and **20:2)**, or it can introduce a psalm of thanksgiving as in **First Samuel 2:1** and as we see next in **2:2-9**.

*Dear Great Heavenly **Father**, There is no place that anyone can run from **You**,* ***Whenever I sit down or stand up, You know it. You discern my thinking from afar. You observe my journeying and my resting and You are familiar with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, ADONAI, You know all about it . . . You hemmed me in behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. If I take the wings of the dawn and settle on the other side of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, "Surely darkness covers me, night keeps light at a distance from me," even darkness is not dark for You, and night is as bright as day – darkness and light are alike (Psalms 139:3-5, 9-12). Your*** *watchful care is wonderful!* ***You*** *are a joy and a comfort to trust, love and obey. How wonderful it will be to praise* ***Your*** *great and holy name in heaven forever! In* ***Yeshua's*** *holy name and power of* ***His*** *resurrection. Amen*