



I Apologize for the Big Fish—A Fish?

Jonah 1:17

TO: NEBRASKA STATE SENATORS

FROM: REV. PERRY M. GAUTHIER

DATE: JANUARY 27, 2010

A friend of mine sells T-shirts that I really like. They are 100% cotton preshrunk tees with a singular theme: I Will Not Apologize! I recently grinned when I saw some in a capital city coffee shop. "I Will Not Apologize for having Coffee Breath"...as I stood in line. "I Will Not Apologize for Being Patriotic" "I Will Not Apologize for Going Green" "I Will Not Apologize for My Roots" And my favorite, since I bought my Kawasaki 800 Vulcan cruiser: "I Will Not Apologize for My Loud Pipes!"

In everyday English, to apologize means to verbalize that you are sorry for something. I do feel apologetic taking my bike through the quiet residential streets of Lincoln. But I still like the T-shirt.

APOLOGETICS--THE BIG FISH, IS IT TOO HARD TO SWALLOW?

In everyday English an apology means "I'm sorry". However in Biblical Greek and in Biblical theology, to make an apology is to "make a defensive argument from logic and reason."¹ Put another way, apologetics is using logic and science to support the facts of what the Bible already says. Biblical apologetics assumes that the Bible is true and entirely sufficient. Apologetics endeavor to help believers and unbelievers alike realize that God's Word and God's world are entirely consistent with each other.

Our time today will be a mixture of Bible study and Biblical apologetics. We will look at what the Bible does say about the Big Fish. We will also look, apologetically, at the first of three options of what the Big Fish could have been. Was it a "fish"?

First, Biblically:

Jonah 1:17 *And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.²*

A BIBLICAL SUMMARY OF JONAH 1:17

Biblically, we can summarize several truths that we see in verse 17:

God was carefully and miraculously **involved** in Jonah's life. The text says the LORD "appointed" a great fish. As we saw last week, The Hebrew verb

"appointed"³ means "to carefully select and meticulously designate." God meticulously selected this exact fish to become Jonah's designated driver and his very own private organic submarine for "3 days and 3 nights".

God's appointed fish was *so* big, it did not find Jonah too "hard to swallow".

God is intimately **involved** with His creation and totally in control of it.

God is a merciful God (saving Jonah's life from drowning in the Great Sea).

God is a **miracle** working God, able to orchestrate the facts of, as well as the timing of, the swallowing of Jonah just seconds before his death.

God is a **communicating** God. He hasn't successfully communicated with the stubborn human Jonah. But He has been able to successfully communicate with the rest of His creation, leading to their obedience. He has been able to communicate with all aspects of His created world—animal, vegetable and mineral. He talks to the waves (in the mineral kingdom) and the whale (animal). They obey Him perfectly. We see in chapter four that He communicates with a gourd (vegetable) & another animal, the famous worm. God communicates well with all creation—except for this man!

So, Biblically, we learn much about God but not much about the Big Fish.

ALL WE KNOW FROM THE BIBLICAL TEXT ABOUT THE BIG FISH IS THAT IT WAS A HUGE "SEA CREATURE" PROWLING THE DEPTHS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN (OR GREAT) SEA.

The Hebrew words for "great fish" are "dag gadol". "Gadol" means huge. "Dag" simply means sea creature (not a fish, not a whale, not a shark). It simply meant a huge thing living in the sea. Jesus Christ called Jonah's organic submarine a "sea monster" in Matthew 12:40 ⁴. I think the English translation there captures perfectly the original and inspired meaning of our Hebrew words "great fish" in the text of Jonah 1:17.

So why do we call it a fish? In the 5th century, when Jerome translated the Bible from Hebrew into Latin (in the Vulgate) he translated the Hebrew words "dag gadol" as *piscis granda*. A thousand years later, in 1534, William Tyndale translated this phrase into the Olde English Bible of his day using the words "**greate fyshe**". Ever since that day most English

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translations call Jonah's sizeable sea creature a "fish".

So did the ancient Hebrew author of the Book of Jonah mean that Jonah was swallowed by what we call "a fish"? The term "dag" used here in Jonah in 778 B.C. had none of the distinctions that were to be developed in the Linnaean system of taxonomy around 1778 (A.D.)—over 2500 years later. The Swedish biologist Carl Von Linne set the foundation for today's classification of living things. He came up with categories like Kingdom, Genus and Species.

But the Bible's Book of Jonah and the Biblical Hebrew language are devoid of terms that would distinguish a fish or shark from a whale. So from Biblical word studies we cannot definitively conclude just what this "fish" is.

APOLOGETICS—SCIENCE AND LOGIC TO HELP OUR THINKING

Apologetically, I offer these options for Jonah's great sea creature:

I. A FISH (SHARK) HAVING GILLS TO BREATH WATER

Fish and whales both need air to survive. But whales have lungs. They breathe air by surfacing. Fish and sharks also need air, but get it by breathing water through their gills. These gills breathe the water and extract from it the needed air.

The distinction between air-breathing sea creatures and water-breathing sea creatures is entirely absent in our words "dag gadol". The Hebrew word is broad enough to allow for both great "fish" and great "whales".

I've spent dozens of hours researching what marine biology could teach me about Jonah's big fish. I'll share with you a few of my findings:

I-A. A BIG FISH CALLED THE WHALE SHARK:

One great fish that possibly could have swallowed Jonah is the whale shark. Although it is larger than some whales, the whale shark (*Rhinocodon typus*) is 100% fish. In fact, it's the world's largest fish. At 65' long, it weighs a whopping 21 tons. It has a tail as big as 3 grown men. That reminds me of a preacher who joked about the fact that Jonah was forced to check into "The Fish Tail Motel" for a three-night stay.

The mouth of the whale shark gapes at 6' wide. The average Semite in Jonah's day was probably about 5' tall. Years ago at 6'-2" and 200 pounds, I still recall sliding repeatedly through the 2' diameter hard plastic tubes at McDonald's Playland with my boys. That was not necessarily my idea of great fun as a full grown man. That always made me a bit uncomfortable since I'm a bit claustrophobic, but I made it through.

By comparison, a five foot man could have easily fit into the 6' mouth of the largest living fish on earth.

Modern scientific facts like these cause some to guess that this was "the Biblical behemoth that swallowed and spit out Jonah."⁵ Did God use the world's largest fish to ingest Jonah?

AT 65' LONG THE WHALE SHARK IS THE WORLD'S LARGEST FISH

One objection to the idea that God used a whale shark to entomb Jonah is that the whale shark is a fish. Fish are cold-blooded and the Mediterranean Sea is cold. This is true. The question that then arises is "how could Jonah stay alive for three days in the cold sea in a cold-blooded fish"?

Interviewing a medical doctor about this issue, I was fascinated to learn how a person in shock could survive such cold cramped conditions. He told me that the human autonomic nervous system can automatically shut the body down to a near coma-like condition. It can then automatically regulate the trickling supply of blood and precious oxygen to the vital organs. To sustain life it will deprive blood and oxygen from the extremities like fingers and toes.

Jonah's body would have responded to this shock and cold with what doctors call "the diving reflex". In such cold conditions, the body's processes automatically slow down. Physiologically related to this are the facts that hearts opened for surgery are packed in salty ice, and donated blood is cold (but not frozen). Physiologically, Jonah's bodily processes would have reflexively slowed down.

JONAH'S BODILY PROCESSES WOULD HAVE REFLEXIVELY SLOWED DOWN TO AN ALMOST COMA-LIKE STATE

On the date of that interview (September 24, 1999) this medical doctor asked me if I'd seen the story about the boy from Taiwan. He said it was "just on today's news!" I had not seen it but he informed me that the poor 6 year old lad had been trapped in cold water for nearly 4 days (87 long hours). But he lived. The doctor wanted to mention that as a current real-life illustration of the body's ability to survive in nearly paralyzing and cold conditions (and even without water).



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I-B. A BIG FISH CALLED THE GREAT WHITE SHARK

Next week we'll continue our apologetic thinking with a look at another fish that could have swallowed Jonah—the great white shark.

We'll also explore several fascinating possibilities of sea creatures that are not “fish”. But they are what a marine biologist told me were “the first creatures mentioned in the Bible”. He was referring to the creatures of the order Cetacea. We commonly call them the great whales.

CONCLUSION—I APOLOGIZE FOR THE FISH BUT THEN AGAIN, “I WILL NOT APOLOGIZE!”

Until next week, let me encourage you “to apologize”. I mean that in the ancient Greek sense of the word. Be willing to think and use your very best mental faculties to synthesize the facts of our modern scientifically-intelligent world with the inspired words of Holy Scripture.

But on the other hand, I would encourage you to put more faith in the Bible and the God who wrote it than in your own mental abilities. The Christian walk is a walk “of faith”. We walk by faith in the God of the Bible and faith in the Bible as written infallibly by God Himself, a God “who cannot lie”⁶.

One Presbyterian preacher greatly impressed me when I was a brand new Christian, my freshman year in college. One of the first sermons I ever heard him preach was entitled “Jonah”. In that favorite sermon I still recall him saying “If God said, if *GOD SAID* not that a whale swallowed Jonah but that JONAH swallowed A WHALE, I'd believe it, my friends!” God does not specialize in lies. This preacher had such absolute confidence in God, His miracle power and His infallible Word.

He believed in absolutes—absolutely! He did not waver in faith or shrink back from taking God at His Word. He absolutely did not!

It's in this sense that I'd encourage you to have an attitude like the ones consistently expressed in my friend's many T-shirts. Those pre-shrunk 100% cotton tees have one singular theme—“I Will Not Apologize”.

Allow me to leave you with one more message from my friend's T-shirt collection:

“I WILL NOT APOLOGIZE FOR BELIEVING IN ABSOLUTES!”

¹ Apologize comes from the Greek word *Apologia* (Ἀπολογία (apo (from) + logos (logic, reason, argument)). In a preliminary trial, Paul was glad he could make his “*apologia*” (logical and legal defense) before the king Herod Agrippa II in the important political center of Caesarea (Acts 26:2).

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Version 1995 Update unless otherwise noted.

³ The Hebrew word *manah* (Hebrew (left to right) מנח = mah'-naw')

⁴ Matthew 12:40—“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.”

⁵ Nature Conservancy, January/February 1999, page 38.

⁶ Titus 1:1-2—“Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God...in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago,” (*italics mine*).