



I Apologize for the Big Fish—A Whale of a Tale? • Jonah 1:17

TO: NEBRASKA STATE SENATORS

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DATE: FEBRUARY 3, 2010

His eyes were as big as his smile. His face lit as he told me, “It took me a lot of years of golfing to get mine!” Sitting in his Capitol office, I was happy for that government official when he said he had obtained what every golfer longs for—a hole in one.

We enjoyed swapping golf stories that day. I had just told him about my first hole in one. I achieved it the second time I ever walked onto a golf course. My eyes were as big as my smile on that manicured tee of a Grand Island golf course. A hole in one!

Immediately after that golf game, I “retired” from golf. I doubt I’ll ever come out of retirement. I don’t want to spoil my record. I like to say “every other time I go out to golf, I get a hole in one”.

Sometimes we wonder if the people in our lives are telling us “tall tales.” Exaggerated stories are told more often after fishing excursions than golf outings. We use the expression “that’s a real fish tale” to express how often we hear the exaggerated stories of the fish that certain anglers claim to have tugged out of the water and into their proud possession.

I. THE BIG FISH, IS IT TOO HARD TO SWALLOW?

Today we’ll continue looking at what many consider to be nothing more than a fish tale. The Bible tells us little about the big fish. So last week we plunged deeply into a study in Biblical apologetics. Apologetically, I am making a logical defense for the biological possibilities of what the big fish could have been.

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.¹*

BIG FISH ONE—THE WHALE SHARK

Last week we dropped into the water world and looked at the world’s largest

fish, the toothless Whale Shark. We saw that the Whale Shark could have stomached our prophet in its 65’ long body. Entering its 6’ wide mouth our drowning preacher probably went into a nearly comatose state of shock.²

Let’s look at another big fish that is literally a fish (a cold-blooded sea creature using gills and breathing water to extract air).

BIG FISH TWO—THE GREAT WHITE SHARK....“JAWS”

The Great White, whose Latin name (*squalus carbarias*) means “the shark with jagged teeth”, has gotten a bad rap as a malicious and vicious killer since the movie Jaws. Author Peter Benchley (Jaws) spent the later years of his life trying to dispel the idea that these cold-blooded fish were cold-blooded killers of warm-blooded men.

These 20’ long sharks are common in the Mediterranean. The Great White can willingly cause its hundreds of teeth, bound in flexible cartilage, to lie down and retract. Inside Great Whites have been found things like an entire 1500 pound horse, and 12 massive and undigested tuna weighing 300-400 pounds each.

GREAT WHITES CAN SWALLOW OBJECTS WHOLE (SEALS, DOLPHINS AND SHARKS) UP TO HALF THEIR BODY’S SIZE.

The intense Old Testament scholars Keil and Delitzsch are confident that this was the fish that became Jonah’s organic submarine. Popular American preacher Charles R. Swindoll notes in his sermon “*Mr. Jones, Meet Mr. Jonah*” that in the Mediterranean, near Beirut, such a shark swallowed an entire horse. Another swallowed a sea cow the size of a lion.³

BIG FISH THREE—THE JEWFISH GROUPEE

Perhaps requiring more of God’s miracle power to swallow Jonah would be the Jewfish Groupie (also known as the Goliath Groupie). Large-jawed and living in the water world where Jonah was dropped, this is the largest and best known of the grouper fish.

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Weighing in at nearly half a ton, the Grouper's belly and swim bladder would have been pressed by Jonah's body. But smaller creatures (like giant crocodiles) have swallowed humans whole.

An interesting fact about the Jewfish Grouper that relates to Jonah 2 is its hermaphroditic nature. This Grouper can reverse its sexuality and even be both sexes at the same time.

The senators attending last week's study heard me explain the fact that, grammatically, the great fish (Hebrew "*dag gadol*") changes genders⁴ within the text of chapter two, beginning as a male, changing to a female and then back to a male as he swims away from the freshly vomited Jonah.

The Hassidic rabbi's and Masoretic scholars are those Hebrews who cared most deeply about the careful study of every inspired word and letter of Scripture. They went to great lengths to explain this obvious (to the reader of the Hebrew Scriptures) change in gender. Whole books have been written by these rabbi's and are filled with possible explanations of this gender change.

II. IS THERE A WHALE IN THIS TALE?

Genesis 1:21 *God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind...and God saw that it was good.*

Some believe the great sea monsters (Hebrew: *tanniyim gadoliym*) mentioned in Genesis 1:21 on the 5th day of creation are the great whales.⁵ The largest creatures on earth, not excluding the dinosaurs, are of the order Cetacean (pronounced sit-A-shun). Apologetically speaking, I find the great whales to be fascinating candidates as sea-swimming saviors of our prophet Jonah. The great whales fascinate me due to their enormity. I think God has glorified Himself particularly in their creation.

Stubb is the confident and articulate second mate in the novel by Herman Melville Moby Dick (or The Whale (1851)).

IF GOD WERE TO BE ANY FISH HE WOULD BE A WHALE I TELL YOU...HE'D BE A WHALE!—STUBB IN MELVILLE'S MOBY DICK

Whales share with humans "a great urge to travel".⁶ Did God use a great whale to re-route the travel plans of the geographically challenged Jonah?

The great whales are fascinating in many regards and prime candidates in our discussion because of their sheer size, inside and out. Some of the things that have come out of these great whales include a knight's armor, a moose and a 400 pound giant squid.

WHALE ONE—THE KILLER WHALE—"SEA WORLD"

Commonly referred to as the orca, this whale is famous for its clicking noises and playful athleticism in aquatic theme parks like Sea World in Orlando. This is the smallest of the four whales we'll consider in our study.

The black and white Killer is of particular interest since it has never been known to eat a human being. With a 6' dorsal fin and 26' long, it has 50 teeth that interlock at the upswing of its muscular jaw.

Voraciously eager to fill their stomachs, the orcas are poised at the top of the food chain. But they often swallow their food whole when tearing is not required. Fortunately for Jonah, or anything else that could be swallowed by it, the Killer's teeth are not for chewing (but tearing apart large prey).

WHALE TWO—THE SPERM WHALE—"MOBY DICK"

Underwater cameramen tell us that "the submarine" of the great whales is the Sperm Whale. It can dive almost a mile deep. Abundant in the Mediterranean, Sperm Whales are able to hold their breath in their massive lungs for a full 75 minutes.

The rare sperm oil found in this leviathan's head and its accompanying wax (called spermaceti) give this creature its name. Sperm oil lit the lamps of the world in the days of Herman Melville's Moby Dick. In the novel, Moby Dick was an 80 ton albino Sperm Whale. He's described in the novel to be "like a mountain of snow...scarred like the hills of Jerusalem" and "as old as Genesis". Moby Dick plunged and resurfaced in and out of the waters below Captain Ahab's whaling vessel filled with anxious harpooners.

Weighing in at 20 pounds, the Sperm Whale has the largest brain of any animal with whom we share the planet.⁷ Gliding gracefully through the ocean's dark depths, the 50-ton Sperm Whale eats about a ton of squid per day.



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Abundant in the Mediterranean, the Sperm Whale's nasal passage is huge.

THE SPERM WHALE'S NASAL PASSAGE IS 7' X 7' X 14'

As I mentioned last week, the Hebrew word for belly does not mean stomach, but simply “the inside parts” or “innards”. One possibility for Jonah's survival is getting lodged in the sinus cavities of a Sperm Whale. Because of the large supply of spermaceti wax and this immense sinus cavity, the monstrous head of this whale is actually its most buoyant part.

While one Sperm Whale was being cut open (or “flensed” with huge cutting tools called flensing blades) a barking dog jumped from the nasal cavity and its abundant supply of air. As we saw in our study of the Whale Shark, Jonah would not have required this 700 cubic feet of air to survive. But sharing the air supply with the Sperm Whale, refreshed every 75 minutes or less, would have allowed Jonah more time of conscious awareness.

Skeptics may want to put Jonah's 3-day submarine ride high on their list of fairy tale nominations. In Disney's classic cartoon *Pinocchio*, Geppetto is seen safe and sound in the cavernous ribcage of a whale. He is seen deep in thought and busily writing at a wooden table by candlelight. Of course, Jonah would not have been even close to that comfortable. Nor did he require paper and pen to record his prayer and praises that we will study in Jonah chapter 2. But when you consider some of the alternatives, the sinus cavities of a Sperm Whale would have been a relatively comfortable place for his journey through the underwater world.

WHALE THREE--THE SONG OF THE HUMPBACK WHALE

The Humpback Whale is known for its haunting songs that sound like the moans of drowning sailors. By God's grace Jonah was saved from the sea and delivered from drowning.

As such, did Jonah temporarily become human sushi for the Humpback Whale? If we could zoom alongside a Humpback in a motorized rubber raft we would realize just how tiny we are compared to this titanic creature. This marine mammal's fins alone are 15 feet long—almost as long as three Jonahs laid end to end.

The Humpback has expandable throat grooves (or pleats) that run from its chin to its navel. Its throat is able to expand to a size large enough to hold a

school bus. Unlike the Killer, the Humpback is a toothless whale. After swallowing huge portions of the sea, it uses a straining structure called baleen to filter out its food from the thousands of gallons of unwanted seawater. It then takes its massive tongue (weighing over a ton) to swipe the remaining contents of its mouth into its throat.

Jonah would certainly have been in a school bus of hard knocks if God had used this creature to gulp him down. It's possible that Jonah learned lessons about the emptiness of disobedience to God amidst the gastric gurgles in the pitch black belly of a huge Humpback Whale.

WHALE FOUR—THE BLUE WHALE—“A 727 JET”

When I think of first mate Stubb's comments “If God was to be a fish He'd be a whale I tell ya'...”, I think of the Blue Whale. Blue Whales are found in every ocean of the world and seem to be more mountain than mammal.

Skeptics who believe there is not a sea creature big enough to swallow Jonah could learn humbly before the Blue Whale. The enormity of this creature is hard to fathom. Baby Blue Whales are 23' long and well over 4,000 pounds at birth. These marine mammals grow rapidly. Their mother's rich milk with a cottage-cheese like consistency causes these little baby whales to gain 4,000 more pounds in 7 days. Daily they gain 200 pounds and a full 4" in body length.

Fully grown adult Blue Whales are equally astounding. They weigh 4 times more than the biggest dinosaurs that ever lived. An adult male has a body weight equivalent to 34 elephants. Their massive lungs (since they are air-breathing mammals and not water breathing fish) can inhale enough air to fill a van in 1.5 seconds. Their powerful exhalation shoots a column of pressurized air 50 feet into the sky.

THE BLUE WHALE HAS A HEART AS BIG AS A VOLKSWAGEN AND ARTERIES AS TALL AS A TODDLER. LARGER THAN ALL DINOSAURS INCLUDING BRONTOSAURUS, IT IS AS BIG AS A 727 JET. COULD OUR PRODIGAL PROPHET HAVE FIT INSIDE?

Could a mammal as big as a 727 hold our tiny little prophet? Consider that an African bull elephant could stand in the middle of the tongue of the Blue Whale. That tongue weighs 8,800 pounds (as much as two dozen men).



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The adult Blue Whale eats more fish in a year than are caught by all the fisherman in the world, combined!

The Blue Whale can grow to 100 feet in length and 200 short tons in weight. Indeed the Blue Whale is king of the ocean and “more mountain than mammal.” God has glorified Himself in this mighty creature.

CONCLUSION—THE GOD OF CREATION AND GOD OF MIRACLES

Next week we’ll conclude our apologetics study about the great fish. We will explore one more possibility of what the great fish could have been that God carefully appointed to swallow Jonah to save him from certain death.

Until then I trust your faith has been strengthened as we’ve considered these possibilities. Through this brief study we can see how God’s world is so often readily seen as consistent with God’s Word.

Having used our minds to think about God’s created world, I’ll ask you to use your spirit now, throughout this 19th Day of the 101st Legislature, to meditate on God’s Word. By faith, ask a question today.

THE QUESTION IS NOT “IS THERE A FISH BIG ENOUGH?”

THE REAL QUESTION IS “IS THERE A GOD BIG ENOUGH?”

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Version 1995 Update unless otherwise noted.

² See last week’s notes for further information on Biblical Apologetics and the Whale Shark, the world’s largest fish. Online notes are available every week. Click on <http://www.capmin.org/Ministries/Nebraska/Studies.aspx>

³ Radio program Insight for Living. April 11, 1991, KGBI radio.

⁴ Hebrew: Jonah 1:17--*dag gadobl* (masculine). 2:1--*Dagah gadolah* (feminine). 2:10--*dag gadobl* (masculine). Confer the Spanish: *Señor* => *Señorita* => *Señor*.

⁵ Other scholars believe the *tanniyim* were a group made up of the now extinct dinosaur *plesiosaurus*.

⁶ National Geographic, December 1976, Volume 150, Number 6, “The Imperiled Giants” by William Graves, page 759.

⁷ The elephant who never forgets has 10 pounds of memory muscle in its brain. Humans have 3 pound brains and the Tyrannosaurs Rex had a brain the size of a walnut!