

## Jonah and the “Whale”?

Dave Miller, Ph.D.

Skeptics frequently have railed against the allusion to a “whale” in Matthew 12:40 in the King James Version. They have insisted that the very idea that a person actually could be swallowed by such a creature and survive is preposterous. Yet this charge has been shown to be impotent for two reasons: (1) historical precedent exists for the possibility of just such an occurrence; and (2) the text of Jonah insists that the sea creature in question was orchestrated supernaturally by God for the purpose intended (see Thompson, 1996, 16:86). God specifically “**prepared**” (*mahmah*—appointed, constituted, made ready) a great fish (Gesenius, 1847, p. 486). The same term is employed in the same book to refer to additional direct manipulations initiated by God. He also **prepared** a plant (4:6), a worm (4:7), and a vehement wind (4:8) [see Wigram, 1890, p. 733]. George Cansdale was correct in concluding: “[T]here is no point in speculating about the full physical explanation of an incident that primarily is **metaphysical**, i.e., **miraculous**” (1975, 5: 925, emp. added). McClintock and Strong agree: “[T]he transaction is plainly **miraculous**, and no longer within the sphere of zoological discussion” (1881, 10:972). Jonah’s survival after being inside a sea creature is no more remarkable than Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego surviving the “burning fiery furnace” (Daniel 3:27).

In addition to the evidence that may be deduced for (1) the credibility of a **whale** swallowing Jonah and (2) the miraculous preparation of the creature by God, a third clarification is in order that pertains to **translation**. The actual text of the book of Jonah states that “the Lord had prepared a great **fish** to swallow Jonah” (Jonah 1:17). The Hebrew term (*dahg*) that underlies the English translation “fish” (1:17; 2:1,10) is a **broad** term that “al-

ways has the collective meaning ‘fish’ ” (Botterweck, 1978, 3:135). William Gesenius, whose lexicographical labors in the Hebrew language were without peer, defined *dahg* merely as “fish” (p. 189). Eminent Hebrew scholar, C.F. Keil, insisted strongly that “[t]he great fish, **which is not more precisely defined**, was not a whale” (Keil and Delitzsch, 1977, 10:398, emp. added). We conclude, therefore, that the word used in the book of Jonah to refer to the sea creature that swallowed Jonah, refers indiscriminately to **any type of fish**—without regard for the technical taxonomic, classification schemes developed by the scientific community in the last few centuries. It has the same generic latitude that inheres in the English word “fish” has, which can refer to any number of cold-blooded aquatic vertebrates—from a trout, bass, or crappie to sharks, rays, jellyfish, and crayfish (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000, p. 665).

However, a point of clarification needs to be sounded even here. According to the present zoological nomenclature, a “whale” is not a “fish”—it is classified as a **mammal**. Hebrew linguistic experts note no such distinction in the terms used in the Old Testament. The ordinary term for “fish” (*dahg*) would not necessarily **exclude** the whale in its application.

The Hebrew uses three additional terms that are germane to this discussion. Two of the words are closely interrelated: *tan-neem* and *tan-neen*. The first term generally is translated (though erroneously) as “dragon” in the KJV. Newer translations typically use “jackal,” except in Ezekiel 29:3 and 32:2, where the creature’s habitat is obviously aquatic, so “monster” generally is employed (Day, 1939, 2:873). The second term is treated more loosely in the KJV, and variously translated as “whales” (Genesis 1:21; Job 7:12), “serpent,” archaic for “snake” (Exodus 7:9,10), “dragon” (Jeremiah 51:34), and “sea monsters” (Lamentations 4:3). The third relevant term is “leviathan”—a transliteration of the Hebrew term *liv-yab-thahn* (Job 41:1; 104:26; Isaiah 27:1). This “very large aquatic creature” (Gesenius, p. 433) was unquestionably a now-extinct, dinosaur-like reptile that once inhabited the oceans (Lyons, 2001). Whereas the term “leviathan” undoubtedly refers to a specific type of animal, the previous two terms (*tan-*



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*neem* and *tan-neen*) are generic and non-specific like *dahg*. [Interestingly, Isaiah 27:1 refers to leviathan as both a “snake” (*nab-ghabsh*) and a “monster,” or “reptile” (NKJV) (*tab-neen*)].

What is particularly noteworthy is the fact that on the fifth day of Creation, God created sea life. He used two terms to specify these inhabitants of the “waters.” The first was “souls” (Genesis 1:20,21b)—the ordinary term for living “things,” or “creatures” (*nephesh*). The second was “sea-monsters” (Genesis 1:21a)—the plural of *tan-neen* (*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 1967/77, p. 2). This latter term is important for understanding the **generic** nature of the Hebrew language in its reference to the animal occupants of the sea. The word is translated erroneously as “whales” in the KJV. The NKJV has “sea creatures,” the ASV, NASB, RSV, and NEB have “sea monsters,” while the NIV has “creatures of the sea.” These latter three renderings are accurate representations of the Hebrew. They illustrate the in-built ambiguity that characterizes the Hebrew designations of animal species in the Old Testament. [NOTE: The term translated “birds” (Genesis 1:20,21, 22,26,28,30) doubtless possesses the same latitude and indiscriminate flexibility in meaning, thereby designating any creature that has the capability of flight, including mammals (e.g., bats), insects, and reptiles (e.g., pterodactyl).]

Moving to New Testament Greek, and the verse under discussion in this article (Matthew 12:40), did Christ refer to the great fish of Jonah as a “**whale**”? Matthew records that Jesus employed the Greek term *ketos* to refer to Jonah’s sea creature. The Septuagint translators used the same term in their rendering of Jonah 1:17. Greek lexi-

cographers are decisive on the meaning of this word. The highly respected Greek scholars Arndt and Gingrich offer only one definition for *ketos*—“sea-monster” (1957, p. 432). The dictionary that was designed for use with the United Bible Societies’ prestigious Greek New Testament text (*A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*) defined *ketos* as “large sea creature” (Newman, 1971, p. 100). Thayer listed three terms—“sea-monster, whale, huge fish” (1901, p. 346), with the reference to “whale” being merely **one possibility** among many others within the broader sense of the term. Renowned Bible commentator Albert Barnes insisted: “It is well known that the Greek word translated as *whale*, in the New Testament, does not of necessity mean a whale, but may denote a large fish or sea-monster of any kind” (1949, 1:134, italics in orig.). He speculated that the creature was a species of shark. McClintock and Strong elaborated further by noting that the term “is not restricted in its meaning to ‘a whale,’ or any cetacean; ...it may denote any sea-monster, either ‘a whale,’ or ‘a shark,’ or ‘a seal,’ or ‘a tunny of enormous size’ ” (10:973). Respected Bible scholar J.W. McGarvey wrote: “The Greek word here translated whale is ‘sea monster’ ” (n.d., p. 306). Lenski also preferred the rendering “sea monster,” stating that “[t]he ‘whale’ of our versions is **only an effort** at translation” (1961, 1:493, emp. added).

The **versionary** evidence is surely confusing to the average English reader of the New Testament. The KJV, ASV, and RSV all render *ketos* in Matthew 12:40 as “whale.” Their rationale behind this unjustifiable linguistic decision, which Lewis maintains has created “an unnecessary problem” (1976, 2:178-179), remains a mystery. Ironically, all three versions translate Jonah 1:17 as “fish.” On the other hand, the NASB, NEB, and REB all have “sea monster” in Matthew 12:40. Three translations that handled the matter in a comparable fashion to each other include the GNB (“big fish”), the NIV (“huge fish”), and the NKJV (“great fish”). It also should be noted that, as a matter of fact, the generic word in Greek for “fish” is *ichthus*—not *ketos*. The latter term varies from the former in that *ketos* refers generically to a **sea monster**, or perhaps, a **huge fish** (cf. Vine, 1952, p. 209).

What conclusion is to be drawn from these linguistic data? Both the Hebrew and Greek languages lacked the precision to identify with specificity the identity of the creature that swallowed Jonah. As Earl S. Kalland affirmed, “[t]he identity or bio-

logical classification of this great water monster is unknown” (1980, 1:401). Both *dahg* and *ketos* “designate sea creatures of undefined species” (Lewis, 2:178).

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The call was just like many others that we receive at our offices in Montgomery. On the other end of the line was a Christian mother who had sent her son away to college, only to discover he was abandoning his faith in the Bible in favor of “science.” During our conversation, the mother related to me some of the material that her son said “proved” that humans had evolved—claims like human embryos having gill slits and evolutionary tails while they are growing in the womb. “Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” is the mantra so often heard in freshman biology classes—a concept which, simply stated, theorizes that human embryos replay the steps of evolution as they develop.

The cover story of the November 11, 2002 issue of *Time* magazine detailed the latest findings in human fetal development. Juxtaposed between the illustrations and the article are photo-captions that contain throwbacks to this outdated embryonic recapitulation theory: “32 days: ...The brain is a labyrinth of cell-lined cavities, while the emerging arms and legs still resemble flipper-like paddles. 40 days: At this point, a human embryo looks no different from that of a pig, chick or elephant. All have a tail, a yolk sac and rudimentary gills” (Nash, 2002, 160[20]:71).

The article itself presents a “marvelous,” seemingly “miraculous,” and “vastly complicated” embryonic process. But those glossy pictures—the ones people tend to remember—have captions that paint an entirely different picture.

Is it correct that the human embryo goes through various stages during its development that resemble its evolutionary ancestors? No, it is not. As Jonathan Sarfati noted: “A human embryo never looks reptilian or pig-like. A human embryo is always a human embryo, from the moment of conception; it is never anything else. It does not **become** human sometime after eight weeks” (2002, p. 202, emp. in orig.). **The scientific community has known for decades** that Ernst Haeckel—the man responsible for conjuring up this theory and then falsifying drawings to support it—purposely misled the public during the late 1800s. Embryologist Erich Blechschmidt regarded Haeckel’s “Great Biogenetic Law” (as it came to be known) as one of the most egregious errors in the history of biology.

So why do *Time* magazine and modern-day professors still perpetuate this falsehood—a theory that was debunked over a century ago? Many individuals use this “principle of embryonic recapitulation” to justify the idea that embryos are not human. After all, at various stages, they say, the fetus is no different from a fish or reptile. As an example, consider the case of the late evolutionist, Carl Sagan, and his wife, Ann Druyan. In an article titled

“The Question of Abortion: A Search for the Answers” that they co-authored for the April 22, 1990 issue of *Parade*, these two humanists argued for the ethical permissibility of human abortion on the grounds that the fetus—growing within a woman’s body for several months following conception—is not a human being. Thus, the killing of this tiny creature is not murder. Using the antiquated argument of embryonic recapitulation, Sagan and Druyan suggested that an embryo is first “a kind of parasite” that eventually looks like a “segmented worm.” Further alterations, they suggested, reveal “gill arches” like that of a “fish or amphibian.” Supposedly, “reptilian” features emerge, and later give rise to “mammalian...pig-like” traits. According to these authors, by two months the creature resembles a “primate but is still not quite human” (1990, p. 6).

Imagine, then, scientists’ surprise when the new Bush administration research guidelines **classified embryos as “human subjects”** (see Kass, 2002). In this report of the President’s Council on Bioethics, the statement is made: “We hold that the case for treating the early-stage embryo as simply the moral equivalent of all other human cells is simply mistaken” (p. LIV). Erika Check, a staff writer for *Nature*, sounded the battle-cry for scientists in an article titled “U.S. Biologists Wary of Move to View Embryos as Human Beings,” which appeared in the November 7, 2002 issue. For the first time in U.S. history, scientists are facing a new definition of human beings that may force them to rein in some of their experimentation on human embryos. With embryos now being classified as humans, they no longer will be subjected to experiments that result in their death. Nor can they any longer be “conveniently” washed down the drain. And scientists aren’t very happy about it! So, prepare to see **more** of Haeckel’s hoax promoted—as uneasy U.S. researchers decry this classification of embryos as human, and try to shift the focus away from human life and back toward “worms and reptile-like creatures.” Call it a reptile, amphibian, or pig, but that does not change the fact that it is, and always will be, a human being.

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**Brad Harrub**