

Was Jonah Swallowed by a Fish or a Whale?

by Eric Lyons, M.Min.

The book of Jonah reveals that “[t]he Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (1:17, emp. added). About 800 years later, Jesus alluded to this amazing event (Matthew 12:39-41). According to the King James translation of Matthew 12:40, Jesus referred to Jonah being “three days and three nights in the whale’s belly” (emp. added). Since fish and whales are different creatures, skeptics accuse Jesus and the Bible writers of making a mistake (cf. Wells, 2012). Longtime Bible critic Dennis McKinsey alleged that Matthew 12:40 is “[p]robably the most famous scientific error by Jesus” (1995, p. 142). “Apparently Jesus hadn’t read the Old Testament very closely... Anyone with even a minimum of biological knowledge knows that a whale is not a fish and a fish is not a whale” (pp. 142-143).

Such a criticism of Jesus and the Bible writers epitomizes the impotence of skeptics’ attacks on God and His Word. McKinsey bases his criticism solely on an English translation made nearly 1,600 years after Jesus spoke these words. The skeptic never bothered to compare translations. He never asked about the word that Jesus originally spoke or that Matthew recorded. He did nothing but make a cursory criticism that might sound sensible on the surface, yet with only a little investigation, is easily and rationally explained.

What was the underlying Greek word that is translated “whale” in the KJV (as well as a few other versions)? A brief look in various respected Greek dictionaries quickly reveals that the word is *ketos* and is defined broadly as a “large sea creature” (Newman, 1971, p. 100), “sea monster” (Danker, et al., 2000, p. 544), or “huge fish” (Vine, 1952, p. 209). Jesus indicated that Jonah was swallowed by a “large sea creature,” which was not necessarily a whale, but may have been.

Nearly 300 years before Jesus spoke of Jonah being swallowed by a *ketos* (Matthew 12:40), translators of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) used this same Greek word (*ketos*) to translate the Hebrew word (*dahg*, fish) found in Jonah 1:17, 2:1, and 2:10. The fact is, as Hebrew and Greek scholar Jack Lewis concluded, both *dahg* and *ketos* “designate sea creatures of undefined species” (1976, 2:178). In no way did Jesus, the Creator of all things (John 1:3), make a mistake about what kind of animal God “had prepared” to swallow Jonah. The animal was a great sea creature, and not necessarily a great “fish” according to our modern, more limited, definition of the word. It may very well have been a type of fish (e.g., shark), water-living mammal (e.g., whale), or extinct, dinosaur-like, water-living reptile. We simply cannot be sure. As Dave Miller concluded: “Both the Hebrew and Greek languages lacked the precision to identify with specificity the identity of the creature that swallowed Jonah” (2003).

Finally, one crucial truth that many (especially the Bible critics) miss in a discussion about God and the Bible writers' naming and classifying of animals is that God did not classify animals thousands of years ago according to our modern classification system. As far back as Creation, God divided animals into very basic, natural groups. He made aquatic and aerial creatures on day five and terrestrial animals on day six (Genesis 1:20-23,24-25). Just as God sensibly classified bats with "birds," since they both fly (Leviticus 11:13-19; see Lyons, 2009), He could classify whales as "fish," since they both maneuver by swimming. To accuse Jesus or the Bible writers of incorrectly categorizing an animal based upon Carolus Linnaeus' 18th-century classification of animals, or any other modern method of classifying animals, is both illogical and unjust.

[NOTE: For more information on the Hebrew and Greek words dahg and ketos, see Miller, 2003.]

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