

Curious had heard of Jonah and the whale, so he was delighted to find the story in the Bible. Moreover it was a welcome break as it appeared to be a story about the adventures of the prophet himself, not merely a prophet's compilation of visions and warnings. Jonah's adventure could not have appeared at a better spot in the Bible, for it balanced Obadiah, whose scorching indictment of Edom was perhaps more for the benefit of his countrymen than Edom.

Jonah, now, was ordered to deliver an indictment to Nineveh in person. Would this be a more effective way to provoke respect for Yahweh in a foreign nation than preaching against it from a distance? Curious wondered about that.

*The word of Yahweh came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying,*

*“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.”*

*Instead of doing as he was bid, Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish, trying to escape the voice of Yahweh. He hurried down to Jaffa, found a ship bound for Tarshish, paid the fare, and went aboard.*

“I'm not surprised that he would object to *that* assignment,” said Curious. “Preaching to the Assyrians would be dangerous. But why didn't he say so and simply refuse to go? Also I'm curious as to why he would think he could get beyond the reach of God by going anywhere in the world. Apparently that assignment pushed him over the edge.”

Most of the prophets were half crazy anyway, Curious suspected.

“So he threw in the towel and headed offshore to get out from under his obligation to serve and obey the God of Israel. Lots of luck on that one, Jonah. You've set yourself up for an adventure.”

*But Yahweh sent a great wind over the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the water such that the ship was in danger of breaking up.*

Curious guessed how the whale would fit into this scenario: it would become the means of Jonah's return passage—an extreme measure of last resort, one would think.

“Apparently Jonah was the only prophet Yahweh had available for this duty,” he theorized. “And that's hard to believe. So if God chose to do it this way, I think there must be some purpose in getting a whale involved. I'm suspicious already”

*The mariners were terrified, each crying to his god, and they cast the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile Jonah had gone down below deck where he lay fast asleep. The captain went and roused him: “What is the meaning of this, you sleeper? Get up and call on your God! It may be that God will give us his favor and keep us from perishing.”*

“This is too unlikely,” grumbled Curious. “It's like Jonah, the captain, and the crew are parts in a scripted comedy. I wonder why this is in the Bible. Maybe it's a prophecy couched in a story.”

*They said to [Jonah], “What must we do to you to make the sea calm for us?” For the sea was becoming more and more tempestuous. He replied, “Take me up and throw me overboard; then the sea will become calm for you. It is on my account that this awful storm is upon you.”*

“That was very generous of you, Jonah,” said Curious. “Giving one's life to save others isn't something one hears about every day.”

Jonah was offering himself as a sacrifice to save the sailors who were pagans and not his countrymen, he observed.

“But why didn't you simply repent of your disobedience before Yahweh?”

Curious figured that the captain would gladly take him back to Jaffa since his cargo had been lost. The only thing that made sense to Curious was that Jonah was beset by a death wish.

“He must have been still half asleep in addition to being half crazy to say what he did,” Curious thought.

It appeared that Jonah had the nonsensical idea that it was in Yahweh’s plan that he drown before he was fit to preach repentance to Israel’s enemy. Then Curious had another idea:

“Poor Jonah was so seasick that anything was preferable to staying aboard. He had a dream in which he was swallowed by a whale, causing the whale to get sick and spit him up on the beach, and that was how he would complete his mission—but most importantly it would get him off the wretched boat!”

*Hence they cried to Yahweh: “We beseech you; O Yahweh, we beseech you: do not let us perish for ending this man’s life; do not let us suffer the penalty for shedding innocent blood—after all it was you, O Yahweh, who had the pleasure of bringing this storm about.”*

*Then they lifted Jonah up and cast him overboard into the sea. And the sea ceased its raging, which caused the men to fear Yahweh exceedingly: they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows.*

*Yahweh prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish.*

Curious noted how the pagan sailors suddenly had acquired more respect for Yahweh than Jonah seemed to have. Apparently they had set aside a sacrifice for safety at sea which they had intended to spend on their pagan gods, and now these presumed pagans supplemented Jonah’s promise with their own petition to Yahweh.

“I wonder who actually wrote this story,” Curious said. “I think it wasn’t Jonah. He was most creative in using this means to lead pagans to faith in his God, but it’s nothing to brag about. There must be a prophetic angle somewhere in this.”

*Then Jonah prayed to Yahweh his God from within of the fish’s belly:*

*In my distress I called to Yahweh,  
and he answered me.*

*Out of the depth of Sheol I cried,  
and you heard my voice.*

*For you had cast me into the deep,  
into the heart of the sea;  
the flood was all around me;  
all your waves and your billows passed over me.*

*I said, “I am cast out from before your eyes,  
yet I will look again toward your holy temple.”*

*The waters encompassed me,  
even reaching my soul;  
the deep surrounded me;  
weeds wrapped my head.*

*I sank down to the roots of the mountains,  
and the gates of the earth closed over me forever.*

*Yet you brought my life up from the pit,  
O Yahweh my God.*

*When my soul fainted within me,  
I remembered Yahweh.*

*And my prayer went in to you,  
into your holy temple.*

*Those who regard worthless idols  
forsake mercy that could be theirs.*

## Jonah

*But I will sacrifice to you while voicing my praise  
and perform what I have vowed.*

*Salvation is of Yahweh!*

*And Yahweh spoke to the fish,  
and it vomited Jonah out on dry land.*

Curious noted that the cause of Jonah's distress was not specified in his poem, except that the fish was tacked on at the end. But definitely Yahweh was responsible for casting him into the grave, which contradicts the story that came before it. Curious decided that though the poet's outlook was as bad as being in the belly of a whale, the poem was not about being submerged in a literal sea. It was about death and resurrection granted to someone who was able to pray even in the grave. To Curious it was saying that deliverance from death did happen or would happen or at least was possible. It was a poem expressing deep dark agony yet with hope and a bright outcome.

"But something is fishy about this too," Curious muttered. "That prayer doesn't belong here. Someone took a poem—maybe it was Jonah's—and wrapped it in a story. Or maybe the author liked the poem and stuck it into his story. Maybe Jonah himself did it. Regardless of how it came about, this is obviously a literary work that was considered to merit being included in their Scriptures."

Curious became more interested in the little book of Jonah after making that observation. If you haven't gathered as much already, to Curious the work of a literary artist could pack more and deeper insight into significant matters than any number of non-fiction records. (Remember that his quest to understand significant things is what got him into this Bible-reading project in the first place.) After rereading chapter two, he summarized:

"Now Jonah was cast to his grave by God and from there he prayed to God who delivered him. I've seen this before." It seemed to Curious that it paralleled the experience expressed by David in psalm twenty-two, which began, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" and then went on to say, "*I will declare your name to my brethren; in the assembly I will praise you. ... For he has not despised nor abhorred the suffering of the afflicted one; neither has he hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.*"

And the deep waters reminded him of the beginning of Psalm 69, where the same soul-reaching-waters expression was used:

*Save me, O God, for the waters reach unto my soul:*

*I sink in deep mire where there is no standing;*

*I am come into deep waters where the floods overflow me.*

The reason Curious was not tempted to put Jonah's experience down as isolated poetic hyperbole was that he had encountered a number of cases such as this where psalms and poems spoke of what seemed to be death and return to life both caused by God, which was a curious and unreasonable thing to be repeated over and over. An outstanding example was Isaiah 53:10:

*It pleased Yahweh to crush him*

*and put him to grief ...*

*he will prolong his days,*

*and the purposes of Yahweh will prosper in his hands.*

But Curious was eager to learn the rest of Jonah's adventure. He found that the reluctant missionary recovered quickly from being three days in the belly of the fish, apparently with no harm done, like one being miraculously resurrected to life from the grave. There was no mention of lasting effects, except that he was now ready to complete his mission as if the experience with death were a necessary preparation.

*The word of Yahweh came to Jonah the second time:*

*“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach the message I told you to give them.”*

*So Jonah got up and went to Nineveh in obedience to the command of Yahweh.*

*Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city of three days’ journey. Jonah entered the city, and after going a day’s journey he stopped and cried out:*

*“Forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!”*

*The people of Nineveh believed God: they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth—from the greatest to the least of them. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, laid his robe aside, clothed himself in sackcloth, and sat down in ashes. He also made a proclamation and published it throughout Nineveh as an official decree from the king and his nobles:*

*“Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock taste anything;  
let them not eat nor drink water,*

*but let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and beast,  
and let them cry mightily to God.*

*Let every one turn from his evil way  
and from violent acts.*

*Who knows? Perhaps God will put away his fierce anger  
and we will not not perish.”*

*When God saw their response, that they repented of their evil ways, God canceled the judgment he had in store for them. There was no longer any need to carry it out.*

Curious chuckled. “That’s quite the ‘what if,” he said. “So this is what Jonah was afraid would happen and why he refused to go at first and wouldn’t even discuss it.”

He remembered seeing the prophet Jonah’s name mentioned back in Second Kings, and he searched and found that Jonah was associated with Northern Israel. He imagined how the people back in Samaria (where tribute was being paid to Assyria) would feel. No doubt they feared the Assyrian army, which had the reputation of being exceedingly brutal—though God had promised he would use their current king to keep Assyria from annihilating Israel, at least while that king lasted. Thus Jonah had been sent to warn Nineveh of the divine judgment that would disable them as an immediate threat to Israel.

But now that Nineveh had repented and God had forgiven them, would Samaria be able to rejoice that God’s method had been effective though it had turned out to be different from what they had expected? As long as their commission failed to bring the knowledge of Yahweh to all people, they could claim unique status as Yahweh’s favored nation. Would they be willing share it? Would they be able to admit that their understanding of God’s purposes had been incomplete?

“I wonder...,” said Curious. “I had the feeling this story was a prophecy after all. It must represent something in the future.”

So for this story to be prophetic it had to represent some surprise turning of Gentiles to Israel’s God. But the curious thing was that if the parallel held, then Israel would be invaded by Gentiles and Jerusalem would be destroyed. He thought this because he knew from the Bible’s history that Assyria would annex northern Israel within about thirty years of Jonah’s day, and Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon some 140 years after that.

“But I wonder what that three days in the belly of the whale has to do with it,” Curious added. He would be watching for clues.

One short chapter concluded the story:

*This greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to Yahweh: "I ask you, O Yahweh, was this not what I said when I was yet in my country? That's why I rushed out to flee to Tarshish; I knew you were a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, lavishing loving-kindness, and apt to restrain your judgment and not bring it to bear. Now then, O Yahweh, take my life from me, I ask you; for it is better for me to die than to live."*

Curious shook his head. "Quite irrational once more there, Jonah. You represent your people, don't you?—spoiled children thoroughly unappreciative of the exceptional grace of your God."

*To Jonah's plea Yahweh replied with a question: "Are you doing well being angry?"*

"That puts him on the spot," observed Curious. "He knows his anger is unjustified, and now God gives him an opportunity to admit it."

*Then Jonah went outside the city and camped on the east side. He made himself a booth in the shadow of the wall, waiting to see what would become of the city.*

Curious saw the irony: Jonah had to hope they would soon revert to their pagan gods and filthy lifestyle, which is exactly what Israel had done! For if not, what would it say about Israel?

*Yahweh God prepared a gourd and had it grow up beside Jonah to provide shade over his head and deliver him from his evil mood.*

*It worked: Jonah was happy to see the gourd prosper.*

*But the next morning a worm that God had also prepared struck the gourd and caused it to wither. Then when the sun came up God sent a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head, even making him faint. So he asked [again] that he might die:*

*"It is better for me to die than to live," he said.*

*God replied to Jonah: "Are you justified in being angry for the withering of the gourd?"*

*"Yes, I do well to be angry, even unto death."*

Curious was still thinking that this must be a parable applying to Israel: Jonah rightly judged a small matter but failed to appreciate great benevolence when it ran counter to his expectations.

"It's one thing to be self centered but another to insist that you're justified in it," Curious lectured Jonah.

*And Yahweh said, "You had regard for the gourd for which you neither labored nor made it grow; it came up in one night and perished in a night. Should I not have regard for Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than 120,000 [young] persons who cannot discern between their right and left hands, not to mention the animals?"*

"Ah, so that's the moral, hanging out in plain sight," said Curious. "Still, I think there are clues to important things hidden in this curious story. If that proves to be true I will put it down as one of my favorites."

Did we hear you right, Curious? Are you becoming that affectionate toward the Bible?