

Literally Transgendered
Rev. George M. Schwab, Ph.D.
May 2, 2016

Jonah 2:1 – 2 (BHS)

Jonah 1:17 – 2:1 (NIV)

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| וַיִּמַן יְהוָה דָּג גָּדוֹל לִבְלַעַ אֶת־יוֹנָה | 1 | Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, |
| וַיְהִי יוֹנָה בְּמִעֵי הַדָּג | 2 | and Jonah was in the belly of the fish |
| שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים וּשְׁלֹשָׁה לַיְלֹת: | 3 | three days and three nights. |
| | 4 | From inside the fish |
| וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל יוֹנָה אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו | 5 | Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. |
| מִמִּעֵי הַדָּגָה: | 6 | |

The Hebrew is pretty linear with English, except that lines 4 and 6 go together. *Jonah*'s name is readily distinguished. NIV glosses *me'eh* ("intestines") as "belly" and "inside." "Fish" in Hebrew is *dāg* (so you can say that Jonah was swallowed by a great big dog!). It is masculine in lines 1 – 2. But look! Once the *dāg* swallows Jonah (lines 4/6), it becomes *dāgāh*—a female fish. (After it vomits out Jonah, the fish turns male again.)

Taken literally it was a transgendered fish. But I suggest this is simply the rabbis' creative way of saying that the fish was "pregnant with Jonah." Note that to accept this explanation you must accept the presence of non-historical elements in the story. Its genre includes a figurative/rhetorical dimension.

What other examples of artistic license could be found? Well let's see. "Jonah" in Hebrew means "dove," like the *jonah* that Noah released twice from the ark. The first time it was sent out, its foot did not touch dry land. The second time, it accomplished its mission (Gen 8:8 – 11). Wow! Either this is an amazing coincidence ... or literary shaping is going on in Jonah. I count over a dozen such connections between Jonah and Noah.

Consider the motif of the sea. Unlike today, it used to be feared. God restrains it (Job 38:4 – 11). Once, it engulfed the world and all terrestrial life ended. God also held it back for Israel, then flooded the Egyptians. (BTW, like Israel, Jonah also passed through the waters to emerge on dry land.)

The dead are beneath the sea (Job 26:5). Jonah ventured into their domain. In Sumerian myth, Inanna journeyed far into the chthonic depths for three days and nights. Such a journey as Jonah's thus follows a very old literary pattern.

In Dan 7:3, four great hostile powers arise from the turbulent sea. In the New Testament, there is a connection between the sea and the diabolical realm. Jesus rebuked the wind and waves, and then immediately rebuked the demonic Legion, who preferred the sea to the abyss (Luke 8:22 – 37). The dragon-energized world power in Revelation 13 is the "beast that rose out of the sea." And in the new heavens and earth, there is no "sea" (Rev 21:1).

To stop the demonic threat, Jesus was swallowed by a greater "sea" than Jonah. He actually died. We are "buried with him in baptism"—that is, we also experience a water ordeal (Col 2:12). Christians are immersed in the medium of principalities and powers (Eph 2:2), that energize world powers to persecute the saints. Thus Jonah's story connects with the Flood, the Exodus, Jesus' death and resurrection, baptism, and the church enveloped by the world. Since Israel was swallowed by Babylon, I could add the Exile as well. And much more.

Note that these insights do not arise from asking historical questions of the book, but by reading it as theology and literature. That is where the good stuff is. Rhetorical shaping is everywhere. (Jonah composed the fine poetic

lines of 2:2 – 9 while being digested?) Want to see something amazing?

Compare Jonah 1:4 – 16 with Mark 4:37 – 41.

1. A great storm threatened the ship.
2. Jesus/Jonah was asleep in a particular part of the ship.
3. They woke him up, questioning why he slept.
4. Jesus/Jonah caused the sea to become calm.
5. The sailors exceedingly feared.

Mark shaped his account to look like Jonah, actually lifting some of his language right from Greek Jonah. We are supposed to think of Jonah when we read this account of Jesus.

Jesus' ministry looked like Jonah's. "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt 12:40). This is sometimes cited to straightjacket the interpreter into a literalistic reading. But remember: Jesus died late Friday afternoon and was raised very early Sunday morning. "Three days and nights" itself is a formulaic way of speaking. So reading Jonah in a nonliteral way is par for the course. Try it out! Read it over looking for symbolism and connections. Have fun! Be amazed! Discover Jesus and the gospel in it!

The alternative is to confess a transgendered fish.

Your choice.