



## JONAH AND THE... SEAMONSTER?

Yahweh appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

**Jonah 1:17**

Jonah and the... ask a kid to finish this sentence with a drawing and you'll probably get a wide variety of ideas of what creature was responsible for snacking on the most famous wayward Jewish prophet. But have you ever stopped to think about the significance of a "big fish" swallowing Jonah? Why include such a detail, or perhaps, lack of detail? Was this just how they expressed a big thing swimming around in the sea or is there more going on here that actually helps us draw some relatable meaning from this familiar, and yet under appreciated story?

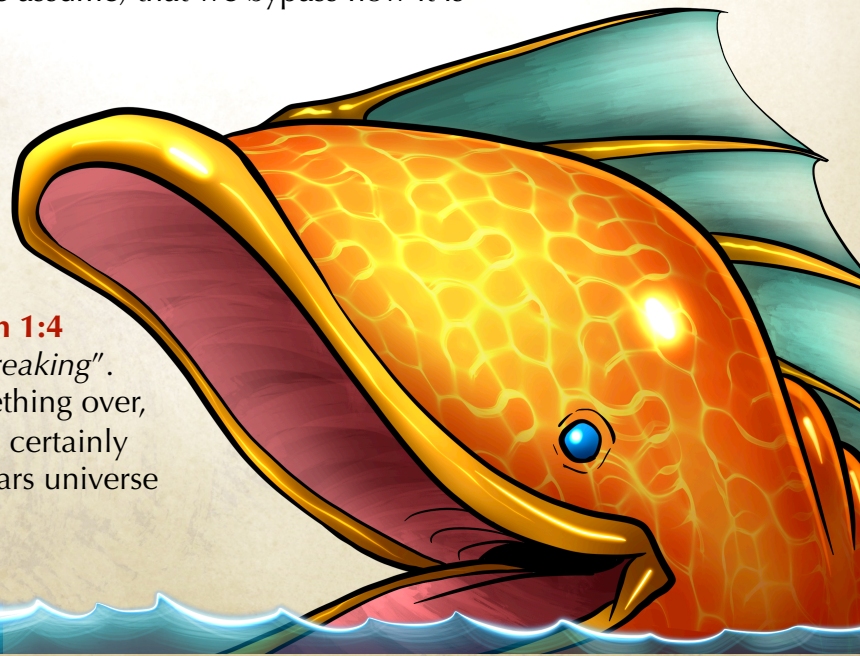
For starters, the book of Jonah itself reads very much like a satire, particularly once you move past whatever language's translation you are working in and understand the Hebrew that stands behind it. Even so, paying attention to the carefully selected wording may even lend a snort or chuckle here and there. But then, this story can be so familiar (or so we assume) that we bypass how it is saying the very things we think we know so well.

For instance, the boat itself is granted some amount of sentience. The story says:

But Yahweh threw a great wind onto the sea, and such a great storm arose on the sea that the ship **threatened** to break apart.

**Jonah 1:4**

The Hebrew reads more like "*the ship considered breaking*". The word for considered, הִשָּׁבָה, means to mull something over, think it through and consider your options. While it's certainly not suggesting the ship joined the ranks of Disney's cars universe



(though some ancient ships DID have large eyes and teeth painted on the front...), it's supposed to be a bit funny. The storm gets enough that the ship itself considered giving up and just sinking.



Another rather sarcastic bit pertains to the fish itself. The Hebrew itself is rather plain as it just reads “big fish”, or “dag gadol” (דָּג גָּדוֹל). Really, there’s nothing remarkable there, which wouldn’t be a huge surprise as the Jews weren’t exactly a seafaring people (no talk of a Navy in the Hebrew Bible) and most likely did not have a robust taxonomy of the water dwelling species. However, what they may have had in mind is teased out a bit once it translates into Greek. The LXX or Septuagint was the translation of the Tanakh commonly used in the 1st century, and their choice of word here isn’t what one might expect. The common word for fish, ἰχθυς (ichthus), is what you might expect along with a word to say it was big. But that’s not the word for the fish itself, rather you get “κητος”. Now, if you go to Greece today and talk about a κητος you will probably find yourself on a cruise out to see if you can spot a whale, as that’s the term for it. But in ancient times this was used of something much more interesting. It meant a sea monster.

Now’s the part where you pump the brakes and say, “Wow, you’ve really done it this time. Now you’ve gone and lost me”. But hold on, because there’s a good reason this word might be here. First, think about why this might be used over a more common trope. In the Old Testament, we find this in Genesis 1:21 which speaks of God filling the seas with large sea creatures (תַּיִתִּים, taninim), as well as in Job when he refers to the Leviathan (3:8 and 9:13). [side note: In Job 41:1 (40:25 in LXX), Leviathan is translated using δράκων (dragon)] This is the word used of the creature “Rahab” (not the woman who saved the spies bacon in Joshua’s conquest) in Job 9:13, 26:12.

Now I’m a bit of a hybrid being a student of the scriptures while also an illustrator, so naturally if I’m going to sit down and spend the time imagining this scene, the question (for me) will be “so what might this look like”, or perhaps the better question would be “how should I represent this thing”?



Those are actually two different questions, and the latter I believe gets more to the heart of what the text is trying to communicate. The Jews would not have cared about what kind of creature this really was if you could have taken a photograph at the time. Rather, I want to think about what kind of creature would have come to mind when they read this. To answer that question, we look into where this term was used outside the Bible to the somewhat familiar story of Perseus and Andromeda where κητος is the sea

monster called upon to take out Andromeda and whom the hero Perseus kills using Medusa's snake head to finish the thing off. So yeah, this is the Kraken. "Release the Kraken", except instead of the line being delivered by some swarthy actor, this is a choice that the God of everything made.

If you're still skeptical, maybe it's just happenstance that this word was picked. Well, Jesus himself, in referencing Jonah uses the same term (because often he and the apostles etc used the LXX as their translation of choice), meaning at least when the 1st century Jews thought of the story, they probably pictured something a bit more monstrous and perhaps scary when they thought of what ate Jonah. In fact, there are ancient

Grecian jars where the Ketos is depicted, and looked very dragon-snake like with a serpentine body, longer snout and even horns on the head (and down the back). This gives me something to work with. But we still should ask, "why"? Does it matter? Not really for any reasons of taxonomy, but other than giving an artist something interesting to work with, there may be a good theological reason to imagine it this way (which is also why I chose to move this way).

If the fish was more monstrous than run of the mill (other than size), it means that in their imagination this thing was scary, the worst case scenario for what

happens to someone who goes out on the water, and forbid, ends up overboard. This is like the movies where someone goes to space and gets shut out of the airlock floating through the void of space. But ironically (remember Jonah is full of sarcastic and straight up funny irony), the very thing they would have imagined to bring terrible death was the very thing that brought life to both Jonah and by unwilling extension, the city of Nineveh itself.

If you're still unconvinced, notice how Jesus mentions the story, and the Ketos itself:

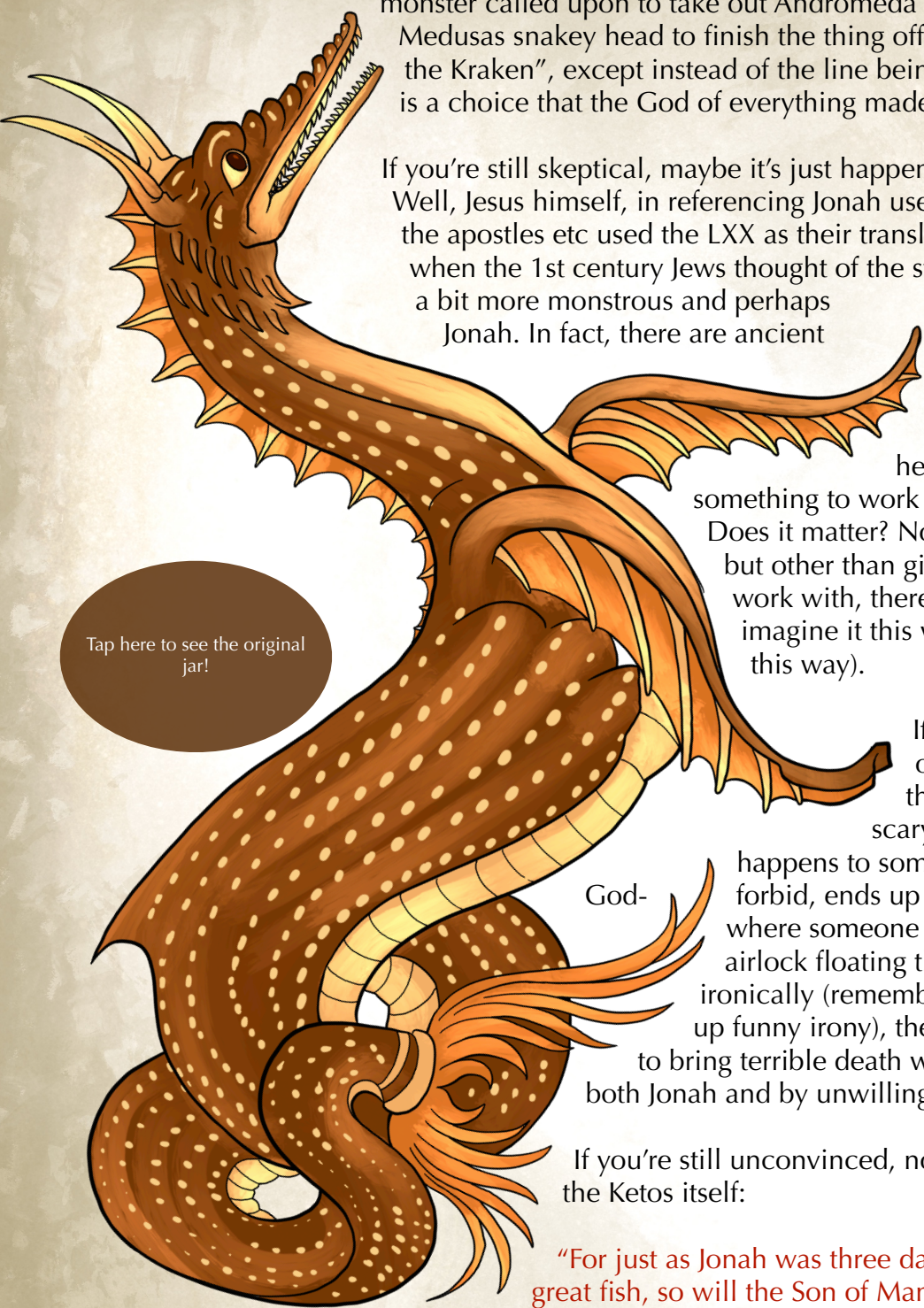
*"For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*

**Matthew 12:40**

Just as Jonah (again unwillingly) brought life through the belly of the death-creature so to speak, so Jesus spent three days and nights in the belly of the earth and so brought life to all through his death. This means that when you look at it this way, it's incredible. God used the very thing Jonah (or anybody back then) would have been most afraid of to bring hope and life where it was needed the most.

Tim Mackie, of the BibleProject, said it this way:

*"So this is his take on why the author of Jonah uses the first dragon taming strategy, which is just to downgrade the dragon to a big fish. He says it this way. He says, the great fish is a comic version of an ancient nightmare. The great monster of the deep that represents chaos and destruction, the flooding and undoing of the world, in bearing witness to the power of the God of Israel, scripture often reckons with the nightmares of ancient Near Eastern mythology and puts the image to its own*



Tap here to see the original jar!

God-

uses. In *Jonah*, the nightmare turns into a comedy... So if the sea dragon represents the disorder of creation itself, then even the undoing of creation can become a place where God's purposes are carried through to their next step. And what that next step is, actually, is the next important step in what something I'll point out. But that's the first step, like why from a dragon to a fish? Now, one of the dragon-taming strategies is that God can use the monster for his own purposes."

And lest we forget, the irony doesn't stop with the monster being depicted as just "big fish". Remember chapter 2 where Jonah waxes eloquent and delivers some Shakespeare level poetry? Here's how his waxing eloquent concludes:

**Then Yahweh commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.  
Jonah 2:10**

I would love to think, while he delivers that last line, things start rumbling, the monster's muscles convulse, and he is quite unceremoniously puked onto land, probably where he started trying to run in the first place. It's not how I imagined as a kid, where the mouth slowly opens, and the tongue rolls out like a red carpet while Jonah walks out yawning and stretching from sitting on a floating chair down in the belly. It was definitely gross and unflattering. But it means that God can and does take the very thing we may be the most afraid of and use that (not cause it) to do something we couldn't begin to imagine. That's not to say that God only gives us good things, or that He doesn't allow circumstances that we'd just as soon skip over, and that's another level of wrestling with his power and goodness altogether. For now, meditate on the monster, think and mull over those things that seem impossible or worst-case-scenario, and think about the possibility that God may be using that very thing to take you where He wants you to go, or to do something you never saw coming.

This is now getting deeper into what this all means, that the creature characterized and noted for its links to chaos and destruction, something that in the broader culture was to be defeated by gods and feared by men, is no big deal to YHWH. No matter what you think of the problem of evil or the evil spirits or a greater evil entity such as the devil, a biblical worldview says "yes, they are there, but they are truly also no match for the Most High". And so

Jonah's story is much more of a mirror than a window - we should probably see more of ourselves in his failure and misgivings than in whatever we see in the story to be his success (let's be honest, he fights God the entire time). It means that we are not the sum of our fears, or crippled by what we're afraid of, that God is still greater than all of that. There's real freedom in that understanding because it means it's not all up to me, and never has been. Even walking away from him isn't going to uproot what He's trying to do, it will only make things more miserable for me. Maybe we give ourselves too much credit, and sometimes it takes staring down a sea monster to remind us how small we are, and how great our God is.

