

THANKS FOR ALL THE FISH

Yom Kippur study session

A FISHY NARRATIVE

Jonah 2:1-2

וַיִּמָּן יְהוָה דָּג גָּדוֹל לִבְלָעַ אֶת יוֹנָה וַיְהִי
יוֹנָה בְּמִעֵי הַדָּג שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים וּשְׁלֹשָׁה
לַיְלֹת: וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל יוֹנָה אֶל יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו
מִמִּעֵי הַדָּגָה:

God appointed a big fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Eternal One his God from the belly of the fish.

JUST A MISTAKE?

Professor Lena-Sofia Tiemeyerⁱ

In their endeavour to explain the sex/ gender shift of the fish, modern scholars have come up with a wide variety of suggestions. Beginning with text-critical options, one painless way out of the conundrum of a male and a female fish would be to postulate that the final ה on the form הדגה in verse 2 is the unfortunate result of a scribal error. Turning to redaction-critical theories, the current text of Jonah may be based on two originally independent sources. Verse 1 (which features the male fish) may belong to one textual layer while verse 2 (which features the female fish) may belong to another textual layer. The ambiguity of the fish with regard to its sex/ gender in the extant text would thus point to careless editorial work when the two sources were being combined.

ⁱ Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, “A new look at the biological sex/grammatical gender of Jonah’s fish”, *Vetus Testamentum* 67 (2017), 307-323: 309-310.

JUST A JOKE?

Professor Stephen L Mackenzieⁱⁱ

God, the micromanager, has appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah and keep him in its belly for three days and nights. The text never actually identifies the fish as a whale, though most readers have assumed that a whale is what the writer had in mind. Some have pointed out that a whale is not a fish, but that in itself well illustrates the tendency of modern readers to try to read the Bible on their terms instead of those of the Bible's authors and original audience. The latter were unaware of the scientific differences between mammals and fish, so those kinds of modern, technical issues are irrelevant as far as the story of Jonah is concerned. There is another detail in the text, however, that suggests the deliberately farcical nature of the story: the word 'fish' in verse 1 is masculine, while the one in verse 2 is feminine. There is no explanation for these changes from a historical or biological standpoint that makes any sense. The best explanation lies in the nature of the story as a satire with its many deliberately exaggerated and nonsensical features. Considering the nature of the Jonah story, the idea of someone being inside a large fish for three days is just as ridiculous as the idea that the fish changes gender. Whether such a thing is actually possible is irrelevant. The whole story is intended to be preposterous because its very purpose is to make fun of Jonah and his attitude.

ⁱⁱ Steven L McKenzie, *How to Read the Bible: history, prophecy, literature – why modern readers need to know the difference and what it means for faith today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 7.

JUST A DISTRACTION?

Ibn Ezra to verse 2

אין צורך כי דגה ודג שם המין
כמו צדק וצדקה.

There is no need for any of these elaborate explanations: דגה and דג are interchangeable words, just like צדק and צדקה.ⁱⁱⁱ

A METAPHOR

Rabbi Dr Shmuly Yanklowitz^{iv}

The Book of Jonah, in a brief but most profound way, nods to the complexity of gender. The hero of the story, the fish without a voice or a name, cannot be categorised as either male or female. Its gender refuses categorisation. What matters most is that it is a nurturing, safe space of refuge. That is what God asks all of us to provide – nurturing, safe spaces of refuge – each of us in our own feminine, non-binary or masculine way.

ⁱⁱⁱ This point is extremely questionable.

^{iv} Shmuly Yanklowitz, *The Book of Jonah: a social justice commentary* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2020): 60.

A WHOLE NEW STORY?

Midrash Jonah^v

והיה יונה שלשה ימים במעי הדג ולא
התפלל, אמר הקב"ה אני הרחבתי לו
מקום במעי הדג כדי שלא יצטער
והוא אינו מתפלל לפני, אני מזמין לו
דגה מעוברת בשלש מאות וששים
וחמשה אלפים דגים קטנים כדי
שיצטער ויתפלל לפני, שאני מתאוה
לתפילתן של צדיקים ... פלטו הדג
ובלעה אותו הדגה. כיון שנכנס לתוך
מעיה היה מצטער בצער גדול מתוך
הטינוף ומתוך זוהמתה של דגה, מיד
כיון לבו לתפלה לפני הקב"ה.

Jonah was in the belly of the male fish for three days, and he did not pray! So the Holy One, ever to be blessed, said: "I hollowed him out a decent space in the belly of the male fish so that he would not be uncomfortable, but now he is not praying to Me! So now I will deposit him inside a female fish – one pregnant with 365,000 young – so he will be uncomfortable. Then he will pray to Me! Because I covet the prayers of righteous people." Thus the male fish spat him out, and the female fish swallowed him.^{vi} As soon as he entered her womb, he became extremely uncomfortable, surrounded by the stink and filth of the pregnant fish. Immediately his heart began to pray before the Holy One.

^v Otzar Midrashim p 219. On p 220, we learn the excellent further detail that the pregnant fish's womb was so hot that Jonah's clothes and hair burnt to a crisp.

^{vi} Hence Malbim's explanation (in his commentary to verse 2) that דגה is not so much a feminine form but a collective, referring to the many young fish carried within the womb.

Dr Tamar Kadari^{vii}

The author of this midrash, although familiar with biblical language, used the grammatical oddity to account for what caused Jonah after three days to change his behaviour and take part in saving himself. According to the midrash, a physical change led to his spiritual transformation.

^{vii} Tamar Kadari, “Aggadic motifs in the story of Jonah: a study of interaction between religions”, in Kadari et al (eds), *Religious Stories in Transformation: conflict, revision and reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 107-125: 112.

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