

Was a Fish Big Enough to Swallow Jonah?

VOICE: If a city had a biography, Nineveh's would say, “the city of blood...”¹ “bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses...”²

PROF.: Someone called it “the part of the world where history never dies” – where grudges, animosity and hatred live forever. But God wanted to forgive that blood-thirsty city.

VOICE: To transport Jonah to Nineveh, God reportedly used a fish with a very big mouth. But did that really happen?

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

PROF.: To understand the Bible book of Jonah, we need to look at some geography. It begins, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Ammitai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.”

VOICE: I can't find those places on a map. So some of my friends think the whole story is fiction.

PROF.: We're discussing incidents from more than 2,000 years ago. So we don't see Nineveh, Joppa or Tarshish, on a modern map.

Joppa was a seaport in Israel, which is known now as Jaffa, near Tel-Aviv.

VOICE: So Joppa became Jaffa. But where were Nineveh and Tarshish?

PROF.: In diametrically opposite directions from Joppa. Nineveh was slightly under 1,000 kilometers³ *east* of Joppa. Scholars aren't completely sure where Tarshish was, but it was at least 1,000 kilometers *west* of Joppa.

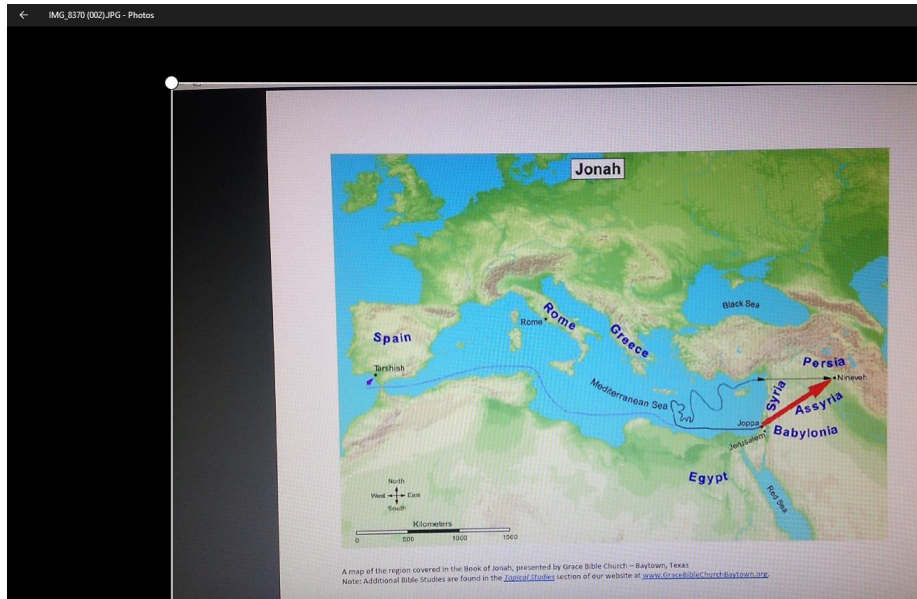
Nineveh was an ancient Assyrian city of Mesopotamia, located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, on the outskirts of Mosul in modern-day Iraq. The city itself now lies in ruins, but the province where it was located is still called Nineveh Province.

VOICE: You said we're not sure where Tarshish was. But our Bible passage calls Tarshish “that port.” So which port city could Tarshish have been?

1 Nahum 3:1.

2 Nahum 3:3.

3 Approximately 600 miles.



- Map showing 1) The red arrow is the direct route from Joppa to Nineveh,
 2) The light blue line is the route Jonah intended to go to Tarshish,
 3) The curved line in the eastern part of the Mediterranean shows
 Jonah's trip being intercepted and turning back eastward.**

Shows fish making U-turn

<http://www.gracebiblechurchbaytown.org/uploads/1/0/1/6/10165395/jonah.map.pdf>

(From *NLT Illustrated Study Bible*, p. 1569).



**Closer view of eastern Mediterranean
 (From *NLT Illustrated Study Bible*, p. 1568).**

- PROF.: Several scholars think it was probably the modern port of Cadiz, on the western coast of Spain. That was as far from Joppa as Jonah could possibly have sailed by water in those ancient days. Sailors would not have ventured farther, because the Atlantic was an almost unknown sea.
- VOICE: Yes, long before Columbus. If Jonah wanted to flee as far from Nineveh as possible, the far side of Spain would be a good choice for a prophet “on the run.”⁴
- PROF.: All we know with certainty is that Tarshish was *west* of Jonah's starting place – in blatant disobedience of God's command to go *eastward* to Nineveh.
If ancient Tarshish really was modern Cadiz, it would be nearly a 4,000-kilometer trip⁵ – almost 5,000 kilometers from Ninevah.⁶
- VOICE: So I can reassure my friends that Nineveh, Joppa and Tarshish really existed.
- PROF.: Definitely. With a population of more than 120,000, Nineveh was the largest city in the ancient world for more than fifty years in the eighth century B.C.
Historian Gwendolyn Leick notes, “Nineveh...was one of the most beautiful cities in the Near East, with its gardens, temples, and splendid palaces.” It had a carefully-planned series of canals and aqueducts to provide a steady supply of water for human consumption and to keep the public parks and gardens irrigated.
- VOICE: More than 2,700 years ago? Amazing!
- PROF.: Nineveh's library contained more than 30,000 inscribed clay tablets, the books of their day. But their technology and culture weren't the only areas where they excelled. They had a reputation for extreme cruelty to the nations that they conquered. They burned cities, cut off heads and stuck people on poles.
- VOICE: When Jonah went to Nineveh, the people listened to his message and acknowledged their sins. God forgave them. He spared the Ninevites from destruction for about 100 years.
- PROF.: But in 612 B.C., a massive flood caved the city walls, making it easy for a coalition of Babylonians, Medes and Scythians to invade and destroy Nineveh. The Bible.org website says Nineveh “was destroyed so completely by the flood and the enemies, that when Alexander the Great fought the battle of Arbela nearby in 331 B.C., he did not know there had been a city there. Nineveh was never rebuilt.” The ruins lay buried until the 1840s, when archaeologists began excavating them.

4 Trying to escape, like a fugitive criminal.

5 Approximately 2,500 miles.

6 Approximately 3,000 miles.

VOICE: Even now, the Nineveh site is in the news. Large amounts of Assyrian sculpture and other artifacts have been excavated and sent to museums around the world. The site suffered from the occupation of the area by ISIS.⁷ Iraqi forces recaptured the area in January 2017.

PROF.: The Ninevites had killed thousands of people. They deserved severe punishment. God called the prophet Jonah to go and warn them to change their behavior and ask forgiveness for the evil they had already done. But instead, he boarded a boat and headed in the opposite direction.

VOICE: Why?

PROF.: Lecturer Ravi [RAH-veeh] Zacharias points out, “Jonah lived in the part of the world where history never dies.” It was a place where grudges, animosity and hatred live forever.

Dr. Zacharias continues, “And the historic baggage of warfare and hate was abundant. ...He does not want to go to Nineveh because the Ninevites have murdered thousands of his own people.” So he wanted God to punish them, not to forgive them.

When Jonah finally arrived in Nineveh, he warned the people that God knew how evil they were and that He planned to destroy them. They acknowledged their sin and fasted. As a result, God spared the city for about a century – until they became thoroughly wicked again.

VOICE: My friends have another problem with the story of Jonah. The Bible says that during a severe storm, the sailors threw Jonah out of their ship, somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea. Then “a great fish” swallowed him and later vomited him onto dry land.

Realistically, was any fish big enough to swallow a man and deliver him alive to a destination?

PROF.: Wikipedia reports, “The whale shark is...the largest known extant⁸ fish species” and the largest living non-mammalian vertebrate. The largest confirmed whale shark had a length of 12.65 meters⁹ and a weight of about 21.5 tons.¹⁰

Whale sharks feed almost exclusively on plankton – including krill, fish eggs, crab larvae and small squid or fish. Therefore, they are completely harmless to humans.

VOICE: Those dimensions sound big enough to hold a man. But if Jonah was inside this creature for three days, wouldn't he run out of breathable air?

PROF.: Researchers at the University of Western Australia found that whale sharks can stay submerged more than two hours. But they must come up for air several times per day.¹¹

7 Also known as ISIL and “Islamic State.”

8 Still in existence, not destroyed.

9 41.5 feet.

10 47,000 pounds.

11 Why the world's biggest fish needs to swim near the surface.

<http://www.news.uwa.edu.au/201210195117/research/why-worlds-biggest-fish-needs-swim-near-surface>

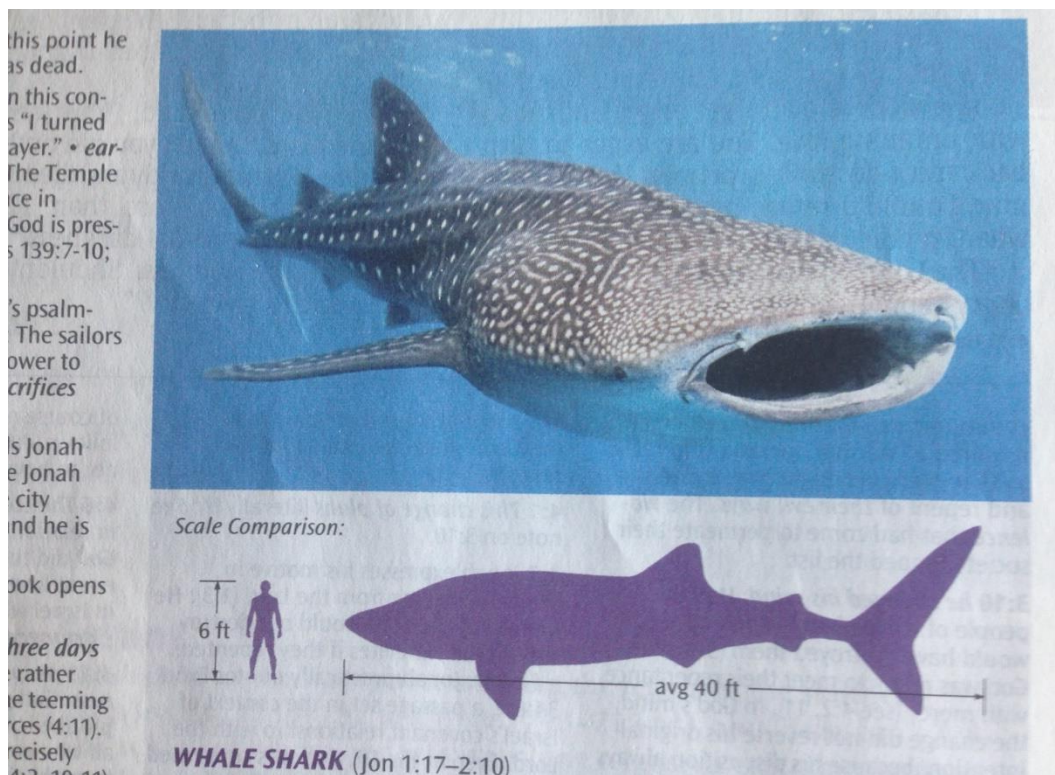
VOICE: So they would not need a body big enough to hold a 3-day air supply for Jonah's trip to Nineveh.

PROF.: Right. The *NLT*¹² *Illustrated Study Bible* says, “It is not known what kind of ‘great fish’ swallowed Jonah, but the whale shark is one real possibility. Averaging 40 feet¹³ long, the adult whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) is an enormous but docile filter feeder: it does not bite, but feeds by swimming with its mouth open, straining out the water, and swallowing what it scoops up. There are modern accounts of humans and dogs who were swallowed by whale sharks and then recovered alive between two and six days later.”

The article shows a drawing of a man less than two meters tall, standing next to a whale shark more than 12 meters long.¹⁴

VOICE: So the “great fish” more than 6 times as long as a man, could easily swallow a man.

PROF.: Apparently the animal synchronized its movements with Jonah's emergency. The sailors threw him overboard, and he was on his way to the bottom of the Mediterranean. How many minutes could Jonah survive in the water without drowning? Did this sea creature pick him up **from the bottom** and provide air? Or was it in precisely the right longitude and latitude and depth, to open its mouth and swallow him **before he hit bottom**?



12 New Living Translation.

13 Slightly more than 12 meters.

14 A 6-foot man standing next to a 40-foot whale shark.

VOICE: Either way, there was very little margin for error. It sounds as if God synchronized the movements of this huge animal.

God created and controls the universe, stretching billions of light-years in immensity. So he could easily arrange for a 12-meter aquatic animal to carry a 2-meter man.

PROF.: Philosopher Thomas Carlyle [kar-LY-ul] said, “Our problem with the book of Jonah is that we spend so much time wondering what’s going on *inside of the whale* and forget what is going on *inside of Jonah*.” It was certainly a learning experience for him – learning that when God tells you to do something, disobedience is not an option.

Bible scholar Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote, “God never allows His children to sin successfully.” Warren Wiersbe added, “...and Jonah is proof of the truth of that statement. ‘For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives’.”¹⁵

PROF.: Another lesson is that God was willing to forgive even the Ninevites. These mass murderers deserved destruction. But God pardoned them when they admitted their guilt and asked for forgiveness.

VOICE: Someone listening today has “hit bottom” and feels “under water.” God is synchronizing our words, to invite that person to let God rescue him or her from that desperate situation.

PROF.: God is “the God of the second chance.” Whatever circumstance or predicament you may be in at this moment, God is “in sync”¹⁶ with you. J. K. Rowling wrote, “Rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.”

Stop trying to swim in your own strength. Let God take charge of your life. The creator of the universe who can guide a “great fish” to intervene at a critical moment, wants to guide your life with that kind of competence and love.

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

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Sources:

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Why the World’s Biggest Fish Needs to Swim Near the Surface

<http://www.news.uwa.edu.au/201210195117/research/why-worlds-biggest-fish-needs-swim-near-surface>

NLT Illustrated Study Bible, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), pp. 1565-1570.

15 Hebrews 12:6.

16 Synchronizing, in step.