

Why did the Lord use a great fish?

God could have saved his wayward prophet by other means, such as with a floating log and divinely directed wind. Alternatively, God could have sent an angel to protect Jonah like he did for Daniel. So why did he use a great fish?

Jesus' words in Matthew 12:40 show that one of God's purposes in putting Jonah in the tomb-like belly of the great fish for three days was to foreshadow the resurrection. Surviving three day at sea with the help of a log would not have foreshadowed the resurrection as well.

In addition, the connection between the great storm (1:4) and the great fish (1:17) shows that the Lord is God rather than Baal, the so-called storm god, or Dagon whose name in Hebrew sounds much like the word for fish. In line with this, it is significant that idolatry is strongly condemned near the end of chapter two (2:8-9).

Was it a great fish or a whale?

We do not know, since it is not described in detail and because the terms used could refer to either. A sperm whale is often suggested since its throat is wide enough to swallow a man whole. Various filter feeders such as humpback whales and whale sharks have large mouths but their throats are too narrow to swallow anything very large. In addition, the great fish may, of course, have been a large sea creature which is now extinct. If so, it may have been somewhat like Leviathan (study #5).

Why isn't the great sea creature described in detail?

The main reason is probably because the focus was primarily on Jonah and the Lord. There may be another reason, however. By limiting the description, the key Hebrew term "dag," meaning fish or fish-like creature, stands out more. This, in turn, may have pointed to *Dagon*, the god that was worshipped by many in the Euphrates valley as well as by the Philistines.

Dagon could not save anyone (2:8), but the Lord who made all things could use a *dag*, a fish or a whale, to save Jonah if He chose to do so. The great fish was God's fish rather than a fish god.

What kind of false god was Dagon?

Some point out that the Hebrew term for grain also sounds much like *Dagon*. So many scholars believe that *Dagon* was an agricultural god rather than a fish god. Ok, but why couldn't *Dagon* have been both? Most idolaters mix various ideas lest they overlook something that would help them in some way (Acts 17:23). In addition, in chapter four, the Lord is the One who makes plants grow (4:6) and the One who cared about livestock (4:11). So the Lord is to be worshipped rather than *Dagon* or any another idol, including those shaped like a calf that Jeroboam sat up. (See Second Chronicles 11:14-15.)

How should we apply this study?

First, the main message of Jonah is against idolatry, which is associated with covetousness (Col. 3:5). So we should not lust after things. Second, like Jonah, we should point to the Lord through his testimony in creation. Storms, great fish, helpful plants, livestock, and even lowly worms (4:7) all still point to the Lord today. Third, we should speak of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the greatest of all miracles.