

JONAH CHAPTER 2 AS A PROPHETIC VISION

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LITERAL AND ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Jonah 2:1-2 reports *The LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish's belly three days and three nights. Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish.* The traditional understanding is that Jonah was literally swallowed by a very large fish and indeed was there for three days.

Already in the Classical period, it was recognized that a person cannot survive in a fish for an extended period of time. This was noted by the pagan Greek philosopher Celsus in his anti-Christian work, *The True Word*, written around 170 CE.¹ The standard rebuttal of believers was that while such a thing is normally impossible, this event was miraculous.

Abraham, in his comments to 2:1, writes, "There is no doubt that people don't have the ability to survive in the belly of a fish even for an hour, how much more so three days and three nights, since a person cannot survive unless he constantly breathes cold air from outside, but this doesn't negate believing in this miracle, and our eyes see that a fetus rests in his mother's belly for nine months without food or drink and excreting or breathing cold air from the outside, and who can negate saying that God did such a thing to Jonah during those days." He goes on to compare this case to Chananiah, Mishael and Azariya surviving being placed by Nebuchadnezzar into a fiery furnace in Daniel chapter 3.

Malbim endorses this approach and adds, "It is known that it is impossible that a person should live in the belly of a fish even for an hour, since a person needs to breathe cold air from the outside, however since death was already decreed on him and he is considered as if reborn God gave him the nature of a fetus, which is created and survives nine months in his mother's belly without drawing a breath." This explanation, comparing Jonah in the fish to a baby born from a state submerged in water, already appears in the Pseudo-

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Philonic sermon, *De Jona*.²

Other classical commentaries also take the approach that this is to be understood as a miracle that took place in physical reality. For example, Radak (on Jonah 2:2) writes, “It was a great miracle that he was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights and lived.” While it was recognized that being swallowed by a large fish stands out as being more fanciful than other miracles recorded in Tanakh, it is accepted just the same.

Some modern Bible scholars have proposed that Jonah being swallowed by a fish should be understood as an allegory rather than a miracle that took place.³ While TB *Baba Batra* 15a records the view that the Book of Job is to be understood as a parable,⁴ no such view is found in the Talmud regarding the Book of Jonah. However, this approach is found in later rabbinic literature. Famously, R. Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (the Vilna Gaon, 1720-1797), wrote an allegorical commentary to the Book of Jonah, which some have understood as reflecting a view that the story should only be considered as non-literal, while others see this as an allegorical interpretation in addition to the literal meaning.⁵ Already in the 13th century Tanḥum ha-Yerushalmi (1220–1291), in his commentary to the Twelve Prophets, warned that while one should interpret Scripture allegorically in addition to its literal meaning, taking a solely allegorical approach to Jonah would lead to interpreting all stories of prophets in Tanakh as metaphors, undermining the Jewish faith.⁶

In this article we will examine the approach that the fish episode took place as a visionary experience rather than as a miracle in observable physical reality. This is distinct from understanding that the story is an allegory or parable, as the characters existed and something happened, but it happened in the mind of the prophet Jonah.

We will begin with a search for Jewish rabbinic figures who may have understood the Jonah and the fish narrative as a prophetic vision.

IBN EZRA

Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) in his commentary to Jonah 2:1 states, “No one can survive in the belly of a fish even for an hour, so if this is the duration, it must have been a miracle.” However, Ibn Ezra on Jonah 1:1 writes “All the prophecies of all the prophets, except for Moses after the glory of the Lord passed before his face, were in visions and dreams” including the test of

Abraham with the binding of Isaac, something Ibn Ezra doesn't mention in his commentary on Genesis. Because of this it has been speculated that even though he states that Jonah being swallowed by a large fish is a miracle, this may be a case of Ibn Ezra only hinting at what his true opinion is on this matter, and he actually understood it as occurring in a vision,⁷ but this is never stated to be the case.

JOSEPH IBN KASPI

Joseph ibn Kaspi (1279-1340) was one of the scholars of Provence who was part of the tradition of philosophical exegesis, interpreting Scripture on two levels, the plain meaning of the text, and a deeper allegorical truth which reveals philosophical teachings.⁸ His approach included providing naturalistic explanations for some miracles in Tanakh,⁹ following the approach of the rationalist rabbis of Spain.¹⁰ While he does not discuss the Jonah episode in depth, in his commentary on Jonah, included in his *Adnei Kesef*, he writes on Jonah 1:1, "Know also that there are different opinions about this entire story, from here until 2:11, *and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land*. For some say that it was all in a state of wakefulness, and some say that it was all a dream and a prophetic vision." He does not elaborate, as this commentary is focused on the plain and simple meaning of the text.¹¹ It has been suggested that he was referring to Rambam,¹² as others have attributed this approach to Rambam as well.

RAMBAM

Rambam (1138-1204) writes in *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:32 regarding prophecy, "We hold that fools and ignorant people are unfit for this distinction. It is as impossible for any one of these to prophesy as it is for an ass or a frog." This has been interpreted by Profiat Duran (c. 1350 – c. 1415) in his commentary to the *Guide* as hinting to Balaam's ass "and Jonah's fish, which cannot be literal, and was all in prophetic visions."¹³

This interpretation of what Rambam wrote is also given by Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov (d. 1493) in his commentary to the *Guide*, adding that it is also possible that the fish was "awakened by the decree of God,"¹⁴ which is more in alignment with what Rambam himself states in his *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:48. There, Rambam relates to the episode of Jonah and the large fish as an

actual event, “The case that the will of an animal or its desire for some of its natural wants is the cause of some event, may be illustrated by the following instance, *The LORD commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land* (2:11). The act is ascribed to God, because He gave the fish the will, and not because He made it a prophet or endowed it with a prophetic spirit.”¹⁵

Abarbanel in his own commentary to the *Guide* demonstrates clearly that Rambam wasn’t referring to the fish of Jonah in 2:32 and indeed openly stated his position on that matter in 2:48.¹⁶ Abarbanel considered the way that Duran interpreted Rambam too radical on a number of occasions, and wrote that his commentary to the *Guide* deserves to be burned.¹⁷

Thus, while Rambam himself writes that the visit of the angels to Abraham (Gen. 18), Jacob wrestling with the angel (Gen. 32) and the ass speaking to Balaam (Num. 22) should be understood as visionary experiences, and stated that “The instances quoted may serve as an illustration of those passages which I do not mention” (*Guide* 2:42), he doesn’t ever state that the story of Jonah and the fish was a vision. Still, it has been suggested based on other statements in the *Guide for the Perplexed* that Rambam indeed believed that the fish episode in Jonah should be understood as taking place in a dream, although this is never explicitly stated.¹⁸

WHY NOT A VISION?

We have seen that the preponderance of rabbinic commentators understood the Jonah and the fish episode as a miracle that took place. Even the rationalist exegetes were very circumspect when interpreting the story of Jonah and the big fish. They sometimes stated that others claim it took place in a vision, or may have hinted that that was the case or at least a possibility, but almost never explicitly claimed that it was something other than a miraculous event taking place in physical reality. The exception is Duran, who understands that this is the view of Rambam which he appears to endorse. Although there is seemingly room to view the text as hinting to a prophetic vision, in that Jonah is described as falling asleep in 1:5, this interpretation was considered too radical by the medieval Jewish thinkers, who were very cautious about stating this view outright, even if it may have appealed to their rationalist way of thinking. Why was it considered more acceptable to interpret Abraham’s encounter with the angels, or even the binding of Isaac (as stated by Ibn Ezra),

as taking place in a vision but not the story in Jonah?

The key to answering this question is stated by Rambam in his the beginning of *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:42, “the appearance or speech of an angel mentioned in Scripture took place in a vision or dream; it makes no difference whether this is expressly stated or not.” No angels are mentioned in the Book of Jonah, so this narrative does not fall into the category discussed there by Rambam. Even the binding of Isaac involves the appearance of an angel beginning in Gen. 22:11. Rambam notes that the appearance of an angel at the end of a story indicates that it was all a vision, “That which happened to Balaam on the way, and the speaking of the ass, took place in a prophetic vision, since further on, in the same account, an angel of God is introduced as speaking to Balaam.” The appearance on an angel anywhere in an episode indicates that this was a prophetic vision. On the other hand, barring the text stating that an angel was involved, the fact that something recorded in Tanakh is miraculous does not in an of itself justify categorizing it as a prophetic experience, even by the rationalist exegetes.

Another factor may be the nature of the narrative itself. The episodes listed by Rambam as prophetic visions involve a small amount of participants, Abraham and the angels, Jacob wrestling the man, Balaam and his ass. Even the binding of Isaac has a very limited number of participants. These may all be understood as a kind of self contained prophetic experience, with one individual being the protagonist in his vision. Of course, a prophetic experience can take place in a mass setting, such as the Sinai Revelation to all the gathered Israelites, but even there every participant in the narrative was involved in that prophetic experience. Here, on the other hand, even before his arrival in Nineveh, Jonah interacts with the captain of the ship and the sailors, who exhibit their own attitudes and choices, crying out to their gods and throwing cargo overboard (1:5), deciding to cast lots (1:7), and offering sacrifices once Jonah is not even present (1:16). All these elements give the early part of the Book of Jonah a different feel than the other narratives that were understood as visions. This issue can be sidestepped by understanding that the first chapter of Jonah took place as an objective physical world occurrence, and only once he is thrown overboard and is swallowed by the fish does the prophetic experience begin. Meaning that after being thrown into the sea, Jonah had a vision of being swallowed by a fish, but in reality he was just tossed around in

the waves and was ultimately washed up on the shore.

Still, the Jewish commentators for the most part avoided explaining the Jonah story as a vision, even when the text presented a striking unnatural occurrence. Here, even rationalists preferred to explain it as a miracle.

NOTES

1. Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 3. For the view that it is indeed possible to survive inside a fish for an extended period of time, see the opinions brought in Bickerman, p.4, also in Theodor Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), pp. 654-655; Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), p. xvi.
2. Folker Siegert, "Early Jewish Interpretation in a Hellenistic Style" in Magne Ssebo, ed., *Hebrew Bible /Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), p. 196.
3. See for example, Leslie C. Allen, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 181; Billy K. Smith, Frank Page, *The New American Commentary: Amos, Obadiah, Jonah: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 1995), p. 212.
4. "One of the Sages sat before Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani and he sat and said: Job never existed and was never created; rather, his story was a parable."
5. See the discussion in Marc Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015), p. 68, note 63.
6. See Hadassah Shai, trans., *Perush Tanḥum ben Yosef ha-Yerushalmi l'Trei Asar* (Jerusalem: 1992), p. 108 and Raphael Dascalu, *A Philosopher of Scripture: The Exegesis and Thought of Tanḥum ha-Yerushalmi* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 114-115.
7. See for example the letter of the 13th century sage Zerachiah ben Shealtiel Hen in *Ozar Nechmad* vol. 2 (Vienna: 1857), p. 137, and the view of 14th century radical philosophical commentator Nissim ben Moses of Marseilles in *heHalutz* vol. 7 (Frankfurt: 1865), p. 133. See also Eliyahu Nagar, "Yonah haNavi: Metziut or Mareh Nevuah o Masahl?," in *Mesora l'Yosef* vol. 9 (Netanya: 2016), pp. 399-400.
8. On his life and approach, see Basil Herring, *Joseph ibn Kaspi's Gevia Kesef* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1982), pp. 1-75.
9. See Herring, pp. 99-122.
10. Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), p. xv.
11. Joseph ibn Kaspi, *Adnei Kesef* (London: 1912), vol. 2, p. 102.
12. Eliyakim ben Menachem, ed., *Yonah in Da'at Mikra: Trei Asar*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990), pp. 5-6.
13. *Moreh Nevukhim* (with commentaries), (Lvov: 1866), p. 68b.
14. *Moreh Nevukhim* (with commentaries), (Lvov: 1866), p. 68b.
15. Yosef Kapach, ed., *Moreh haNevukhim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977), p. 271.

16. *Moreh Nevukhim* (with commentaries), (Lvov: 1866), p. 68b. See also Marc Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015), p. 69, where he discusses Rambam's example of a frog here.

17. Abarbanel in his comments to the *Guide*, 1:5, *Moreh Nevukhim* (with commentaries), (Lvov: 1866), p. 22b.

18. See the detailed discussion in Eliyahu Nagar, "Yonah haNavi: Metzium or Mareh Nevuah o Masahl?", in *Mesora l'Yosef* vol. 9 (Netanya: 2016), pp. 411-414.



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