

Was Jonah Happy to See the Fish?

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One of the Tanakh's most dramatic scenes takes place when, amid a raging storm, Jonah is tossed overboard and swallowed by a great fish. This story plays out every Yom Kippur at *Minhah*, when the Book of Jonah is read aloud in synagogues around the world.

The Dutch Renaissance painter Dirck Barendsz (1534–1592) captures this horrific moment by depicting sailors feeding Jonah to the great fish as the waves toss their vessel violently.





There are other ways in which the terror of the situation is emphasized. In the stained-glass window attributed to the studio Atelier Lorin of Chartres (c. 1887), Jonah barely escapes from the razor-sharp bite of the terrifying fish. Every stage of Jonah's journey appears tumultuous.

When we studied the Book of Jonah in the JTS Biblical Hebrew Certificate Program, we explored the story of Jonah in a very different light.

We began by looking at Jonah 1:15, וַיַּעֲמֵד הַיָּם מִזְעָפוֹ (and the sea ceased its raging). This is significant because the sea has calmed before the great fish appears. The storm has already subsided. Next we examined the verses that describe Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish. There, Jonah says his troubles

have already passed (2:3): קִרְאתִי מִצָּרָה לִי אֱלֹהִים וַיַּעֲנֵנִי ("I called out in my distress to the Lord and He has answered me"). Jonah is not terrified and he is certainly not hopeless. Instead, he is confident that he will make it out alive (2:10): וְאֲנִי בְקוֹל תוֹדָה אֶזְבְּחָה לָּךְ אֲשֶׁר נִדְרָתִי אֲשַׁלֶּמָּה ("I myself will sacrifice to you with a voice of thanksgiving, I will pay that which I vowed [to sacrifice]").

According to this analysis, Jonah was happy—not terrified—to see the great fish. The fish was his heaven-sent "ride" back to dry land where he would be able to carry out God's wishes. This may explain why the anonymous illuminator of the Bible of Hainaut (c. 1280) depicted Jonah in such a relaxed manner. In this scene there is no storm, no teeth, and no terror. The fish is smiling, and Jonah rides it as easily as one might ride a horse.





Continuing in this tradition of interpretation, in his 1983 work *Leviathan*, Michael Sgan-Cohen depicts Jonah sitting on a chair and reading a book inside the whale as though he were traveling first class.

Was Jonah glad to see the great fish? The Book of Jonah doesn't say so explicitly, but there are hints that Jonah was not only ready, but eager to return to dry land and carry out his God-given mission to the people of Nineveh.

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