

# DROWNING WITH JONAH

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## Session 2 - Chapter 2

If you need the text of **Jonah**, you can find the Hebrew and the JPS translation on Sefaria:

<https://www.sefaria.org/Jonah.1.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

## Chapter 2

### MEDIAEVAL COMMENTARY

**Rashi (Shelomoh ben Yitshak, northern France, 1040-1105)**

**David Kimchi (Provence, 1160-1235)**

**Isaac Abarvanel (Spain, Italy, 1437-1508)**

[Translations of Rashi & commentators by Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz; some of Ibn Ezra adapted from Tali Education Fund Collections, <http://www.tali-virtualmidrash.org.il/ArticleEng.aspx?art=15#ibnez>]

**Rashi: v. 1: a huge fish (*dag*):** it was a male fish; and [Jonah] had plenty of room there, but did not bother to pray; so the Holy One, blessed be He, gave a hint to the fish, and it vomited him out into the mouth of a female, pregnant with young, and [Jonah] was cramped there, and he prayed there, as it says (v. 2) ‘from the belly of the *dagah* (female fish)? [Midrash *Yonah*, version B].

**Ibn Ezra: v. 1: And Jonah was:** a human cannot survive **in the belly of the fish** even for an hour, and even though this is recorded, it must have been a miracle.

**Ibn Ezra: v. 2: And Jonah prayed:** the commentators wanted to make novel interpretations, and took the verse out of its plain meaning (*peshat*); for Jonah only prayed once he was back on dry land [and not while he was in the fish]. They saw the words **from the belly [of the fish]** -- but it does not say in the belly of the fish! ... but take careful note and see: every prayer or blessing by a prophet is by means of the prophetic spirit [*ruah nevuah*]; if it is something that has been decreed to happen, it is spoken of in the past tense [as in Jonah’s prayer].

**Ibn Ezra: v. 2:** And some [Rashi!] say that **a female fish [*dagah*]** swallowed the male fish [who originally swallowed Jonah]; but there is no need for this [interpretation], for the words *dagah* and *dag* are just words for the whole class [of fish], like *tsedek* and *tsedakah*.

**Rashi: v. 3: from the belly of Sheol I cried out:** from the belly of the fish, which is like Sheol to me.

**Rashi: v. 4: all Your breakers (*mishbarekha*) and billows:** ‘all the gales of the sea’ [Aramaic, Targum Yonatan], because the gale breaks up and scatters the sea.

**Rashi: v. 5: I said [JPS: I thought]:** when they threw me into the sea, behold, I am dead, ‘and I have been driven away from Your sight’.

**however [JPS omits] (*akh*):** I have seen that You kept me alive all these days [so] I knew that ‘I would gaze again upon Your holy Temple’.

**Rashi: v. 6: weeds [*suf*] twined around my head:** ‘the Red Sea (*yam suf*) went above my head’ [Aramaic, Targum Yonatan], for the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him the Red Sea and how Israel had passed through it, using the two eyes of the fish like two windows, [through which Jonah] looked and saw everything in the sea.

**Rashi: v. 7: I sank to the base of the mountains:** I descended to the very bottom of the mountains that are founded upon the deep.

**[I said] the bars of the earth closed upon me:** it is closed off above me and I shall never get out; [the word] *ba’adi* is used as in [2 Kings 4: 4] ‘shut the door behind you (*be’adekh*)’, and this is the sense of every example of *be’ad* in the Bible, as in ‘skin for (*be’ad*) skin’ [Job 2: 4], a limb for a limb.

**forever:** this relates to what he said above, ‘I said, I have been driven away’ and ‘I said, the bars of the earth closed upon me forever’.

**Yet You brought my life up from the pit:** but I have already seen hell [Gehinom] here, and You have brought me up from there, and behold, now I am directly underneath the Temple in Jerusalem, as it was said ‘I will indeed gaze again upon Your holy Temple’ and ‘my prayer came before You into Your holy Temple’

**Rashi: v. 8: ebbing away (*behitatef*):** ‘fainting’ [Aramaic], as in *behitatef nafsham*: [either:] ‘they languish like battle-wounded’ (*behitatfam kechalah*) [Eikhah 2: 12] [or] ‘their spirit failed’ (*nafsham babem titataf*) [Ps. 107: 5] and ‘sucklings languish (*be’atef*)’ [Eikhah 2: 11]

**Rashi: v. 9: they who cling to empty folly:** those who worship idols.

**forsake their own welfare:** they forsake the fear of the Holy One, blessed be He, from Whom come all their welfare and good, but I am not like that; ‘but I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You’. This is how the Targum renders it. And *Pirkei derabi eliezer* explains [*darshu*] that the sailors forsook all the good things they did for idol worship, and converted to Judaism.

**Abarvanel: v. 9:** This is when Jonah repented of his sin, when he said ‘**they who cling to empty folly forsake their *hesed***’, but he did not say this about the sailors and the other people on the boat who made vows in the middle of the storm but when they left the boat forsook their vows and their *hesed*, as the commentators have claimed. But all these interpretations are far from the intention of the text. And the truth of the matter is that [this shows] that Jonah repented of running away from God, and he resolved to obey God’s command about Nineveh; and he comforted himself by saying that the people of Nineveh **cling to empty folly**, for even though they were going to repent because of his calling out to them, they only persevered in their repentance for a few days, and then they **forsook their *hesed*** and returned to their wickedness.

**Rashi: v. 10: deliverance is the Lord’s:** I will pay my vows to make peace-offerings and thanksgiving-offerings because of God’s saving actions; the form *yeshuatah* [‘deliverance’] is the same as *leyeshuah* [‘because of, for the sake of deliverance’] as in ‘Arise and help us’ (*kumah ezratab*

*lannu*) [Ps. 44: 27], which is the same as '[for] our help' (*le'ezrah shelannu*). Nor is it as the sages interpreted it, taking *besed* to refer to the sailors forsaking their idols because they saw the miracles that were done for Jonah.

## MIDRASH

*Pirkei derabi eliezer* 10 (?8<sup>th</sup> century CE)

Rabbi Meir said: One pearl was suspended inside the belly of the fish and it gave illumination to Jonah, like this sun which shines with its might at noon; and it showed to Jonah all that was in the sea and in the depths, as it is said, 'Light is sown for the righteous' [Ps. 97: 11].

The fish said to Jonah, Do you not know that my day has arrived to be devoured in the midst of Leviathan's mouth? Jonah replied, Take me beside it, and I will deliver you and myself from its mouth. It brought him next to the Leviathan. [Jonah] said to the Leviathan, On your account have I descended to see your abode in the sea, for, moreover, in the future will I descend and put a rope in your tongue, and I will bring you up and prepare you for the great feast of the righteous. [Jonah] showed it the seal of our father Abraham [saying], Look at the Covenant [seal], and Leviathan saw it and fled before Jonah a distance of two days' journey. [Jonah] said to [the fish], Behold, I have saved you from the mouth of Leviathan, show me what is in the sea and in the depths. It showed him the great river of the waters of the Ocean, as it is said, 'The deep was round about me' [Jonah 2: 6], and it showed him the paths of the Reed Sea through which Israel passed, as it is said, 'The reeds were wrapped about my head' [Jonah 2: 6]; and it showed him the place whence the waves of the sea and its billows flow, as it is said, 'All your waves and your billows passed over me' [Jonah 2: 4]; and it showed him the pillars of the earth in its foundations, as it is said, 'The bars of the earth closed upon me for ever' [Jonah 2: 7]; and it showed him the lowest Sheol, as it is said, 'Yet have you brought up my life from destruction, O Lord, my God' [Jonah 2: 7]; and it showed him Gehinnom, as it is said, 'Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you did hear my voice' [Jonah 2: 3]; and it showed him [what was] beneath the Temple of God, as it is said, '[I sank] to the base of the mountains' [Jonah 2: 7]. Hence we may learn that Jerusalem stands upon seven [hills], and he saw there the *even shetiyah* ['foundation stone'] fixed in the depths. He saw there the sons of Korah, standing and praying over it. They said to Jonah, Behold you stand beneath the Temple of God, pray and you will be answered. Forthwith Jonah said to the fish, Stand in the place where you are standing, because I wish to pray. The fish stood [still], and Jonah began to pray before the Holy One, blessed be He, and he said, Sovereign of all the Universe! You are called the One who kills and the One who makes alive, behold, my soul has reached unto death, now restore me to life. He was not answered until this word came forth from his mouth, 'What I have vowed I will perform' [Jonah 2: 10], namely, I vowed to draw up Leviathan and to prepare it before You, I will perform [this] on the day of the salvation of Israel, as it is said, 'But I will sacrifice unto You with the voice of thanksgiving' [Jonah 2: 10]. Forthwith the Holy One, blessed be He, hinted [to the fish] and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land, as it is said, 'And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land' [Jonah 2: 11].

The sailors saw all the signs, the miracles, and the great wonders which the Holy One, blessed be He, did to Jonah, and they stood and they each cast away his god, as it is said, 'They who cling to empty folly forsake their own welfare' [Jonah 2: 9]. They returned to Jaffa and went up to Jerusalem and circumcised themselves, as it is said, 'And the men feared the Lord exceedingly; and they offered a sacrifice unto the Lord' [Jonah 1: 16]. Did they offer sacrifice? But this [sacrifice] refers to the blood of the covenant of circumcision, which is like the blood of a

sacrifice. And they made vows every one to bring his children and all belonging to him to the God of Jonah; and they made vows and performed them and concerning them it says, 'Upon the proselytes, the proselytes of righteousness' [Amidah].

Midrash Yonah, version B (post 8<sup>th</sup> century?)

Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish [*badag*] and he did not pray. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'I made plenty of space for him in the belly of the fish so that he would not be miserable, and he is not praying to Me! I will provide him with a fish [*dagab*] that is pregnant with 365,000 little fishes, so that he will be miserable and will pray to Me, since I desire the prayers of the righteous.' At that hour the Holy One, blessed be He, summoned a pregnant fish, and she went to the male fish. The female fish said to the male fish, 'That prophet who is in your belly—the Holy One, blessed be He, has sent me to swallow him. If you vomit him out, that is good, but if not, then I will swallow you together with him!' The male fish said to the female fish, 'Who knows whether what you say is true?' She said, 'The *leviyatan* knows.' Both of them went to the *leviyatan*. The female fish said to the *leviyatan*, 'King of all the fish of the sea! Do you not know that the Holy One, blessed be He, has sent me to this male fish to swallow up the prophet in his belly?' He said to her, 'Yes.' The male fish said to the *leviyatan*, 'When [did you hear this]?' He said to him, 'In the last three hours, when the Holy One, blessed be He, came down to play with me, I heard it.' The male fish vomited [Jonah] up and the female fish swallowed him. When he entered her belly, he was very miserable, on account of the filth and on account of the dirt inside the female fish; immediately he directed his heart [*kiven libo*] to prayer before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'and Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish [*badagab*]' [Jonah 2: 2]