

# Jonah's *dāg gādôl*, a Sea-Monster Associated with the Primeval Sea?

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## Abstract

The quest for the identity of the fish in the story of Jonah has been extraordinary. Many attempts have been made to identify known sea animals, with bodies and mouths large enough to swallow and harbour a human being. The whale seems to have been crowned the general best-fit solution. A few interpretations have veered to the mythological, with the fish being associated with creatures such as sea-monsters. None of these viewpoints convincingly identified the Jonah fish as a sea-monster associated with the primeval waters. The probability that *dāg gādôl* was a primeval sea-monster is investigated. How mythical creatures thrived in the milieu of the Jonah narrative and why these mythological creatures are absent from modern Bible translations is explored, as well as the dissonance of translators and interpreters not to endorse a foreign creature in the Old Testament. This article hopes to shed new light on the probable identity of Jonah's fish.

**Keywords:** big fish (*dāg gādôl*); sea-monster; mythical; *deus ex machina*; cosmology

## Introduction

The story of Jonah is generally known for him being swallowed by a big fish (*dāg gādôl*, לִיָּהּ אֲדָמָה Jonah 2:1 WTT), in which he stayed three days and three nights and then was spat out—alive. Through the ages, the quest for the real identity of the fish has been extraordinary. Many, sometimes amazing, attempts were made to identify known sea animals, with bodies and mouths large enough to swallow and harbour an adult human being. The whale seems to be crowned the general best-fit solution and answer. Haupt (1907, 152) cites Smith remarking on the book of Jonah:

And this is the tragedy of the Book of Jonah, that a Book which is made the means of one of the most sublime revelations of truth in the Old Testament should be known to most only for its connection with a whale.

This article will endeavour to identify Jonah's big fish as a sea-monster, associated with the primeval sea. A vivid overview of the dating and historicity of the book of Jonah, followed by a brief history of translations will provide the backdrop for the propensity of Jonah's **לִיְתָבַשׁ**, being a sea-monster to be deliberated.

The dating of Jonah causes much dissent amongst scholars. A wide range of dates has been suggested. Ben Zvi (2003, 110) dated Jonah to the postmonarchic period. Wolff (1986, 110) argued that the date was more likely to be after 587 B.C.E., as he detected similarities between Jonah and Arion, a Greek singer, from around that period. Sasson (2010, 27ff.), initially hesitant to date the book of Jonah, later placed the time of final redaction during the exile-restoration period (between 586 and 438 B.C.E.), based on literary and linguistic features. To reach a conclusion on such a wide span of dates, each with convincing reasons, remains a challenging task. Therefore, Phyllis Tribble's insight succinctly summarises this issue, "the majority of opinions clusters around the sixth, fifth and fourth centuries, it but shows how indeterminate is the date. The book may belong to the pre-exilic, exilic, or post-exilic period. Dating it becomes even more elusive if a history of composition lies behind the present form" (Tribble 1994, 466). However, based on the approach of this study, the most compelling motivation for dating it to the fourth century B.C.E. comes from John Day. This date, according to Day (2000, 104), coincides with the date assigned to the myth of Perseus and Andromeda, that also originates from the same place where Jonah embarked on his journey, namely Joppa.

The Hebrew words **לִיְתָבַשׁ** ("big fish"; Jonah 1:21 in the Masoretic text (MT) and in the Septuagint (LXX), Jonah 1:17 in most English translations), have been translated as different sea-creatures over the years, mostly indicating the quest to try and identify it with a known natural creature. Several translations in English, German and Dutch, as well as the LXX and the Masoretic text (WTT) have been consulted, presenting multiple differences and variations in translations.<sup>1</sup> It becomes evident that the Hebrew term **לִיְתָבַשׁ** has mostly been translated as "big fish," with minor variations such as "great fish", "large fish" and "huge fish". Two exceptions are to be noted; "large dragon" (LXX, **κῆτος μέγας**) and "great whale" (LXA). Apart from the LXX, all the translations merely translated the Hebrew term, without considering a possible mythical connotation.

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1 ASV; BBE; CSB; DBY; ELO; ERV; ESV; GNV; GWN; KJV; LEI; LXA; LXX; NAB; NAS; NIV; NJB; NKJ; NLT; NRS; RSV; SCL; SVV; WEB; WTT; YLT.

To most exegetes and translators, it was just a big fish, worthy of identification. To the LXX, it was a sea-dragon, indicating its mythical characteristics, and, to the LXA, it was a natural, real sea-animal, the whale. In mitigation to the general translation outcome of a big fish, the Hebrew term **לִיָּוִט גָּדוֹל** has been honoured by translators, but the vagueness of this term should have prompted translators to draw on their interpretational insight of other occurrences of mythical presentations of sea-monsters in the Hebrew Bible.

But who was this man Jonah, who wilfully portrayed himself in such a cowardly and negative manner? The man who spent three days and nights in the belly of a big fish and lived to tell his story of spiritual unease during this dark time? A man whose presentation of the size of the city of Nineveh was hugely exaggerated? Or the man who lead the entire city, including pets and domestic animals, to repentance for their masters' sins? The final question is, why did, and still does, the book of Jonah seem to captivate scholars and lay people the way it has?

The book of Jonah is actually not from a prophet but rather about a prophet. Furthermore, it is read in manifold ways. Landes (1999, 293), reflecting on the interpretative problems the book of Jonah presents because of what he terms "information gaps" and "dissonance", also feels that the problem will never be resolved. "But that does not stop us from trying and failing and trying again." The genre of Jonah proves to be as problematic. It has been identified as midrash (Trible 1963), history (Walton 1982), allegory (Ephros 1999), parody (Band 2003; Miles 1975; Orth 1990), prophetic parable (Rofé 1974), irony (Good 1981; Gunn and Fewell 1993), legend (Eissfeldt 1974), prophetic legend (Handy 2007), novella (Landes 1976; Kaiser 1984), satire (Ackerman 1981; Holbert 1981; Marcus 1995), didactic fiction (Rudolph 1971), and even as a satirical didactic short story (Fretheim 1977; Wolff 1991). However, I opt to read the book of Jonah against its compelling mythological milieu.

To form a backdrop for this study, an overview of the history of interpretation is informative. The Jonah narrative in its entirety is extremely strange in modern world-views. Normally, it would immediately have been classified as an extraordinary figment of some ancient author's imagination, if it were not that this text appears in the historically inerrant word of God, as believed by fundamentalist scholars. Intriguingly, two contributions, dated 1883 and 1907, still seem to be a broad representation of all subsequent views on Jonah's **לִיָּוִט גָּדוֹל**. This is interesting, as Ewald (1981, 90–91), for example, states that even stories about prophets are prone to emerge with not only modifications but also with embellishments.

Firstly, Harper (1883) evaluates the story of Jonah as possibly:

- Not true history, but not pure fiction either.
- A moral fiction, a parable, a fable, with no historical basis what so-ever.

- A historical allegory, with Jonah as a historical character symbolising Josiah and Manasseh.
- In close relation to myths such as Hercules and Hesione, as well as Perseus and Andromeda.
- Not only connected to, but probably derived from the Assyro-Babylonian myth of Oannes, the sea-monster-god.

He concludes that many scholars (such as Delitzsch and Keil) attempted to defend the genuine historical character of the book. Although they could not prove the book to be totally historical, they were reluctant to concede that the book is fiction. His supposition is that only some scholars hold a middle ground, with the majority hinging on extreme insights. Thus, to regard *ḥayyān* as being a sea-monster is an extreme insight.

Haupt (1907) summarises the history of interpretation of Jonah's whale. It is interesting to note that the main tenets of his discussion still echo in modern-day reflections.

- Septuagint uses *cetus*, which is translated as a whale.
- Jonah dreamed that he was in a fish.
- Jonah in fact was not swallowed, but he clung to the belly of the fish.
- "The Whale" was the name of the ship that picked Jonah up from the sea.
- The general belief that the fish was a whale is flawed, as whales are not known to be indigenous to the Mediterranean, therefore the great fish was actually a shark.
- Jonah is not actual history but a didactic narrative such as the parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament.
- Jonah's fish may be associated to legendary creatures such as serpents and dragons believed to be alive within the waters of Joppe, therefore the association by some interpreters with a sea-monster.

Later propositions that Jonah's fish was actually a sea-monster have been put forward by Keller (1965), Lacocque and Lacocque (1981), Wolff (1986), Couffignal (1990), Limburg (1993), Snyder (1999), Campbell and Moyers (1991) and Handy (2005). Handy believes that the *ḥayyān* of Jonah is not a fish and should take its rightful place in the Old Testament amongst biblical monsters such as Leviathan, Behemoth and the beasts of Daniel (Handy 2005, 77). Levine (1975, 70) also has it that Jonah was swallowed by a sea-monster. Although the conclusions of these scholars are insightful, no conclusive evidence has been presented to equate the *ḥayyān* with a sea-monster.

The quest to identify Jonah's fish as a sea-monster makes one feel like a state prosecutor who, in the absence of irrefutable evidence to comfortably convict the accused of a felony, has to gather as much circumstantial evidence as possible to lead the judge and the jury to a conviction of guilty as charged.

In the same manner, I cannot present irrefutable evidence that would identify Jonah's *ḥayyān* as a sea-monster associated with the primeval waters. Therefore, I would like to

introduce several contentions that may collectively assist in pointing to a credible identification of **לִיָּתָן** as a sea-monster. The scope of arguments to acknowledge the **לִיָּתָן** as a mythical sea-monster will begin with the context of the narrative, as the context of Jonah’s fish and subsequent visit to the realms of **לִיָּתָן** (“underworld”) strongly suggests a magico-mythical milieu.

## Ancient Near Eastern Cosmological Beliefs

Considering the backdrop of the immense treasure of creative stories that emerged from the various cultures of the ancient Near East, the natural fish, just big enough to be able to swallow the hero Jonah, is an unimaginative, insipid failure. Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) narratives would simply not allow such a hero who is meekly swallowed and later spat out by an ordinary fish, without even a hint of a struggle. Even the Israelites, who considered themselves to be of a higher eminence than the pagan nations around them, would not accept such a protagonist. Therefore, this could not have been the real scenario. The context suggests something much larger than just a large fish. The fish had rather to be viewed as a powerful, colossal sea-monster, just like the ferocious Leviathan in Isa 27:1 and Ps 74:13.

The cosmos in the ANE had generally been depicted as a threefold division: the heavens and the waters above the firmament, the skies under the firmament with the earth consisting of land and waters such as lakes and seas, wherein the animals of the sky, land and water dwell, with the waters under the earth forming the third tier. These waters under the earth were distinguished by subterranean fresh waters (fountains and springs) and the abyss, the waters of the deep—the underworld. This description of the ANE cosmology is congruent with all the cultures represented.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew Bible clearly shares this world-view, as noted in Exod 20:4, “anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” The part below the earth, **תְּהוֹמוֹת** (the deep/primeval sea) is a deep abyss filled with water and inhabited by sea-monster deities. It should be clear from the opening verses in Genesis 1 that at least these waters were in existence when God started his creation. The waters of the deep were wrapped in total darkness, and the breath/wind of God lingered over the waters. One should take note that the underworld, **לִיָּתָן**, is an integral part of Hebrew cosmology.<sup>3</sup> It becomes clear that the Hebrew Bible generally shares the cosmos as a threefold division, with similar beliefs to other ANE cultures.

The differences should be noted as not critical to the shared outlook. The ancient Israelites imagined the earth as flat and covered by a solid dome of the firmament which is held up by mountain as pillars (Job 26:11; 37:18). Above the firmament and below

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2 See Fleming and Lothian (1997, 38–39), Remler (2010, 136), Stephens (2016, 13–14) and Lambert (2016, 119).

3 The location of **לִיָּתָן** is discussed later.

the earth were the primeval waters that Yahweh divided at creation (Gen 1:6, 7; Pss 24:2; 148:4). The heavenly lights were attached to the firmament (Gen 1:14–19; Ps 19:4, 6).  $\text{הַיָּם}$ , the place of the dead, lay under the earth, in the deep (Num 16:30–33; Isa 14:9,15). Isaiah 5:14 subtly suggests a touch of mythology where  $\text{הַיָּם}$  (as the equivalent of Hades and Tartarus) is presented as a power that can destroy the living.

Jonah’s actions and amazing journey thoroughly fit into this cosmological horizon of understanding. He flees from God and boards a ship. This enrages God and he wills a mighty storm on the sea. As storms are violent actions by an angry storm-god, the sailors firstly give sacrifices by throwing all their belongings into the sea to appease the angry storm-god. When this does not have the desired effect, they believe that it is someone else’s stronger storm-god who is furious, and they pray to that deity. After tossing Jonah into the sea, it suddenly becomes calm, supporting their notion that a storm-god had a problem with one individual only. As drowning is the obvious result after being thrown into deep waters, the body of the dead sink down and would be accepted in the mythical realm of the netherworld. But Jonah’s God did not want him dead, so he arranged that Jonah would be swallowed by a mythical  $\text{תַּיִשׁ}$  functioning as a “salt water taxi” (Fretheim 1977, 98). There seems to be a compelling case to be made to read the Jonah narrative against a mythological backdrop. Such a reading should be seriously considered considering the suggestion from other evidence in the Old Testament that indicates a mythological background not foreign to the ANE.

## The Sailors and the Storm

The general three-fold cosmological heritage discussed above formed the horizon for both Jonah and the sailors on board the ship caught up in a ferocious storm. The reactions of the sailors on the ship to the storm and the sea invoke two mythical motifs. Firstly, the sea as a personified and wrathful deity, and secondly, the belief in the presence of storm-gods in their own state of fury, controlling the sea. This storm in Jonah resembles all the might of the forces of chaos, and recalls memories of Tiamat in the Enuma Elish, and *Yamm* in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle (Gilmore 2003:33). The sailors, non-Israelites, would have grasped this milieu fully. For Jonah, it must have been common knowledge, as he was a prophet of Yahweh. He was well versed in the Hebrew Bible’s tradition of  $\text{יָם}$  (the sea), also representing the chaos waters—the primeval opponent of Yahweh.

Secondly, the sea is also personified in the Hebrew Bible. This is evident in Jonah 1:15, when Jonah was thrown overboard the ship “the sea ceased from her raging” (NRS). Considering an even wider insight, the Aramaic Targum (Levine 1975, 69) also personifies the sea, as it depicts the sea as resting from its rage, becoming tranquil again. In the Gilgamesh Epic (Tablet XI, Line 132), the ravenous sea and its subsequent serene calmness are depicted in terms similar to Jonah 1:15, “The sea grew calm, that had fought like a woman in labour” (George 2003, 711).

These personal traits of the primeval sea, and ׀, add to the mythological milieu of the text. A storm of this magnitude is the abode of deities and monsters only. A standard fish cannot be the *deus ex machina*.<sup>4</sup> It calls for a monster at least.

Two intrinsic sources of chaos were known in the ANE, chaos waters and chaos monsters. The link is explicit. The chaos monsters lived in the chaos waters, as mentioned above, and in this milieu the sailors lived, fully grasping its “reality”. Several texts, such as Nah 1:4, draw attention to Yahweh’s peculiar interaction with ׀. In this text, Yahweh rebukes the sea and tramples the sea with his horses. He churns the mighty waters in Hab 3:15. Psalm 93:3 provides insight into the personification of the waters as it lifted its voice and roars, as does Isa 17:12. Although the waters fiercely roar, Yahweh rebukes them and makes them flee (Isa 17:13). Habakkuk 3:8 asks whether Yahweh’s wrath and rage were against the rivers, also equated to ׀. Chaos monsters in the Hebrew Bible are depicted as dragons (Ps 74:13; Isa 27:1), serpents (Job 26:13; Isa 27:1), Leviathan (Job 3:8; Ps 74:14), Rahab (Job 26:12, Isa 51:9) and also helpers of Rahab (Job 9: 13).

The motif of a young storm-god defeating the forces of chaos, embodied as the sea, thereby establishing his hegemony and subsequent take-over of the kingship from the father of the gods appears to be homogeneous in the ANE. The storm-god evidently has dominion over storms and tempests (using the same word as it appears in many Bible translations). Storms and tempests were a supernatural power in the ANE and were the manifestation of a god’s wrath and anger. Therefore, the reactions, as well as the actions, of both the sailors and Jonah during the storm supports the mythical connotations in their horizon of understanding. Their established and respective weather/storm gods that they turned to in prayer would most probably have been Baal (who conquered *Yamm* in the Canaanite tradition, and for good measure also ׀ and Lotan), Teshub (Hittite/Hurrian, who fought against Illuyanka) (Oldenburg 1969, 64), with battles also by Kumarbi (Mittani) and Hadad (Syria), (Wyatt 2007, 118;(Schwemer 2001) Egyptian Horus had fought against Seth, Babylonian Marduk against Tiamat, Greek Zeus against Typhon. Akkadian Tishpak battled Labbu (Heidel 1951, 141–43). And to conclude the list of extensive examples, Demarous fought against Pontos in the Phoenician history of Philo of Byblos (Baumgarten 1981, 195), and even Yahweh.<sup>5</sup>

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4 A *deus ex machina* is the solution of an unforeseen, apparently hopeless situation, provided by the introduction of a newly introduced influence not part of the existing characters in the plot. It originated in ancient Greek theatre, where a mechanical device brought actors performing the roles of deities to the stage from above the cyclorama. These gods provided the unexpected and unpredictable solution to a major problem. The *deus ex machina* had been introduced by the fifth century B.C.E. and may have formed part of the knowledge of the author of the book of Jonah (Müller 1840, 363; Scodel 2010, 48,186–187).

5 Texts such as Judges 5:4 and Psalm 18:11–15 clearly attest to Yahweh’s storm-god attributes.

To this myriad of invincible gods the sailors prayed. But to no avail, as this storm must have been worse than the captain of the ship ever had dealt with. The severity of the storm eventually caused the captain to abandon his own storm-god for that of Jonah's.

### **Dagon as a Fish-God, with its Likely Semantic Link to Hebrew דָּג**

Dagon's reign stretched as far as Syria, Mesopotamia and Chaldea. Iconography portrays Dagon as a fish-god of the Philistines. A description of one of Dagon's many temples shows that the first doorway to the temple was adorned by fish-gods guarding the entrance. Some fragments from the first two chambers further depict a city situated on a sea (Layard 1874, 168). These apparently extensive portrayals in the temple certainly strengthens the notion that Dagon was a fish-deity, despite some attempts to identify him as the "grain" god as well. Dagon was a prominent deity in the ANE and seems to have outlived the Philistines as he was still worshipped in his temple in Ashdod during the second century (Freedman, Myers, and Beck 2000, 307).

The interest in Dagon as a fish-god in this argument arose from a popular etymology based on the Hebrew word דָּג for fish (Freedman, Myers, and Beck 2000, 307). The name of Dagon as a fish-god most probably derived from the Hebrew דָּג as fish (Handy 1994, 109). Therefore, the insight of Dagon being portrayed as a large fish (Davidson 1848, 147), as well as him being a pagan deity, gives rise to the propensity that Jonah's large fish could actually have been a mythological sea deity, such as a sea-monster.

### **Connotations with other Similar Myths**

Two Greek myths display the motif of a person being rescued before being devoured by a sea-monster. Herakles saved Hesione, and Perseus delivered Andromeda. Hesione was the daughter of the king of Troy who had provoked the wrath of Poseidon. Poseidon, in a vengeful rage, initially pounded the shores of Troy with massive waves of water. After her father consulted an oracle, he tied her at the shore as an appeasement to Poseidon, who then sent a large sea-monster to dispose of Hesione. Hercules rescued her by killing the monster (Hansen 2002, 123). In the myth of Perseus and Andromeda, Andromeda's mother, queen Cassiopeia boasts that she and Andromeda were more beautiful than the Nereids (sea-goddesses). They complained to the god of the sea Poseidon who in rage threatened to destroy the entire kingdom. King Cepheus consulted an oracle and subsequently tied Andromeda to the sea's edge as a sacrifice for the sea-monster Cetus to devour her. Perseus, after asking her if she would marry him if he kills the sea-monster, killed the sea-monster in a gruesome battle at Joppa in Palestine (Hansen 2002, 122).

Some interpreters associate these myths with the Jonah narrative. Day considers the probability that a common sea-monster in the Canaanite dragon myth tradition may sit behind both the Jonah and Perseus and Andromeda accounts (Day 1990:33). A further



correlation is that the Perseus and Andromeda saga took place in Joppa, the same city in which the Jonah story is set. These two incidents from Greek mythology, in which a sea-monster was about to swallow its victim, correlates with the לִיָּוֵלֵת “swallowing” Jonah (Jonah 2:1).

Another mythical association is that the לִיָּוֵלֵת in Jonah is not only coupled to, but that it possibly originates from the Assyro-Babylonian sea-monster-god, Oannes. Spence (1916, 87) alludes to the probability that a semantic correlation may exist between the Greek fish-god Oannes and יוֹנָה (*yōnâh*). These associations do not prove that the לִיָּוֵלֵת was a sea-monster, but the possibility remains strong.

### **The Physical Size of the לִיָּוֵלֵת as Incriminating Evidence of it being a Monster**

The size of the לִיָּוֵלֵת forms the main tenet of an article by Handy (2005). He is satisfied that the לִיָּוֵלֵת in Jonah meets most of the attributes that establish monstrosity in world myths and legends. I disagree with him that the לִיָּוֵלֵת matches most of those determinants but concede that at least two important descriptions of a monster clearly depict the לִיָּוֵלֵת: “an animal or plant of abnormal form or structure” (Handy 2005, 78)—as a creature that can accommodate an adult human being for three days inside its stomach—and “one who deviates from normal behavior or character” (Handy 2005, 78)—no fish or whale is interested in swallowing an adult human being. Simon (1999, 18), on the other hand, focusses predominantly on the size of the fish without elaborating much on the fish itself. He does not make mythical connotations based on its size alone.

Despite agreeing with only two determinants, I concur with Handy’s conclusion that “on the basis of its size, Jonah’s לִיָּוֵלֵת had size and a great deal more that earns it the right to join Leviathan, Behemoth and all those dragons as a bona fide biblical ‘monster’” (Handy 2005, 82–83).

### **Jonah’s Jaunt to שְׂאוֹל**

After creation, the function of the sea-monsters changed, mostly to a guarding function. In the Gilgamesh Epic, ferocious scorpion men guarded the mountain at the edge of the world, wanting to prevent Gilgamesh from entering the garden of the gods (Dalley 2000, 96ff.). The פְּרִיָּמִים had the same function in Genesis 3:24. One of the assigned duties of the sea-monsters was to guard the gates of the netherworld. The hellhound Cerberus guarded the netherworld in Greek mythology, and Aker (Schweizer 2010, 110), in the form of a double-sphinx, guarded the underworld in Egypt. The fact that the לִיָּוֵלֵת in Jonah took him to the gates of שְׂאוֹל, therefore strongly suggests that it was a sea-monster associated with שְׂאוֹל.

One reads about *לְאֵשׁ* in several texts in the Hebrew Bible, but Ezek 31:16 provides a general insight into how *לְאֵשׁ* had been viewed by the Israelites: “I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I cast him down to hell with them that descend into the pit: and all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, shall be comforted in the nether parts of the earth.” (ASV)

*לְאֵשׁ* involves loss of contact with Yahweh, and it is one place where Yahweh does not dwell or even enter. The last part of Isa 38:18 mentions *בֵּרַח* and not *לְאֵשׁ*, but the inference remains the same—being away from God in a place that God does not enter. As supreme deity of all the spheres of his creation, he has the propensity to enter *לְאֵשׁ*, but the Old Testament does not distinctly depict any visit inside *לְאֵשׁ*. In *לְאֵשׁ* one is separated from God. One text though, Ps 139:8, depicts God’s presence in *לְאֵשׁ*, but seems to be more of a poetic comparison of the range of God’s manifestation from the highest heights of the heavens to the lowest possible place under the earth. Further possible insinuations in Job 14:13 and 38:17 of God’s presence in *לְאֵשׁ* are inconclusive. Two texts in the Hebrew Bible indicate that Yahweh can either see what is hidden in *לְאֵשׁ* (Job 37:17), or that he has knowledge of its hidden mysteries (Prov 15:11).

These texts represent more of a yearning for Yahweh being present even in *לְאֵשׁ*. A recognition of this notion is that the first appearance of God in *לְאֵשׁ* seems to be only after the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ (the son of the triune God) when he subsequently “descended into hell,” conquering death and the forces of evil as stated in the traditional Apostle’s Creed.

The question remains: did Jonah enter *לְאֵשׁ* whilst in the belly of the *גִּדְּיָדָיִם*?

The first consideration is, what does the Hebrew Bible say about entering *לְאֵשׁ*? It describes journeys *down into* *לְאֵשׁ* (Job 33:24; Ps 22:29; Isa 5:14 and Ezek 32:27–30). Isaiah 14:15 depicts going *down to* *לְאֵשׁ*, whereas Ps 107:26 speaks of going *down to* *תְּהוֹמוֹת*. Sasson (2010, 184) recognises *תְּהוֹמוֹת* in the Hebrew Bible as a “poetic term for a (primordial) body of water.” Thus *תְּהוֹמוֹת* and *לְאֵשׁ* are closely associated in that *תְּהוֹמוֹת* gives access to *לְאֵשׁ*.

*לְאֵשׁ* is further described as having gates: gates of *לְאֵשׁ* (Isa 38:10), gates of death/doors of the shadow of death, (indicating *לְאֵשׁ*? Job 38:17), and gates of death (Pss 9:13; 107:18). It is not clear whether Jonah had been inside, or only at the mouth or gates of *לְאֵשׁ*. Jonah’s conviction that when he called God “out of the belly of *לְאֵשׁ* I cried, and you heard my voice” (Jonah 2:2, NRS) could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, that he was not in *לְאֵשׁ*, because if he was down there, God would not have been able to hear him. The other interpretation is that he had been in *לְאֵשׁ* and was protected inside the *גִּדְּיָדָיִם*, but that he had been in a delirious state, believing that God actually heard him. Fretheim’s (1977, 99) insight regarding Jonah 2:6, that Jonah was more dead than alive, supports the notion of Jonah’s being delirious as stated above.

Taking into consideration that **שְׁאוֹל** is a place of no return, as stated succinctly in Job 7:9 (NRS) “so those who go down to **שְׁאוֹל** do not come up,” this again indicates that Jonah had not been in **שְׁאוֹל**. However, the reason I believe that this call to God from Jonah comes from within **שְׁאוֹל**, is the use of the participle **מן** which indicates “being a proper part of” in conjunction with the word **בֶּטֶן** “the womb,” collectively referring to the very core of **שְׁאוֹל** (i.e., “from the midst of the kingdom of the dead”). This indicates that Jonah was indeed in **שְׁאוֹל**.

Then again, it may appear that outside **שְׁאוֹל** is akin to being inside. Psalm 141:7 (NRS) speaks about “their bones be strewn at the mouth of **שְׁאוֹל**.” In Isaiah 14:15 (KJV) one reads of being brought down to **שְׁאוֹל** “to the sides of the pit.” The Hebrew word translated as “sides” (**יַרְדֵּה**) could mean “rear” or “recess”, but probably indicates “border” or “side” (Strong 2007). The LXA translation of this text, to go down to the foundations of the earth” apparently contradicts being on the fringes, but then correlates to Jonah 2:6 (NRS) “at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.”

In the context of possible doubt as to whether Jonah was indeed inside **שְׁאוֹל**, Fretheim (1977, 99) concludes, “Inasmuch as **שְׁאוֹל** was believed to be under the floor of the ocean, Jonah was spatially near the place.” Another consideration is that Jonah’s visit to **שְׁאוֹל** is also reminiscent of Hercules’ visit to the underworld, “an undertaking only mythic men attempted – going to the land of death and, after touring, coming home again” (Carper 1983, 75).

I concede that although it can be contemplated that Jonah was inside **שְׁאוֹל**, it cannot be confirmed explicitly. However, the people of the time most probably believed that he was there. The reality of the situation is that Jonah’s **גָּד** served as a “salt water taxi” (Fretheim 1977, 98), but that no ordinary animal could enter **תְּהוֹם**. This was the abode of deities only, such as Inanna as well as mythical sea-monsters. The Gilgamesh Epic portrays the god Enki attempting to rescue his wife Inana from within the netherworld (Gadotti 2014, 16). This indicates that even gods could not enter the netherworld, but although no one could enter, reaching the gates of the deep seems like a feat no ordinary person or animal could achieve. He failed, as he could not enter the netherworld. This **גָּד גְּדוֹל** is therefore no ordinary fish.

## **The Time of Jonah’s Underwater Stint**

The three days and three nights of Jonah’s stay inside the **גָּד גְּדוֹל** have a mythological resemblance to Inanna’s voluntary descent into the netherworld (Kramer 1951, 8).

After three days (and) three nights had passed,  
Her minister Ninsubur,  
Her minister of favorable words

Her knight of true words,  
Sets up a lament for her by the ruins... (169–173).

Landes considers the “three days and three nights” to be the time of Inanna’s descent to the chthonic depths, that may have significance in Jonah’s “three days and three nights” journey inside the  $\text{לִיְלָדָאֵי אֲרָ}$ . However, in Jonah’s case (Jonah 2:5–6), it indicates the time span it took the  $\text{לִיְלָדָאֵי אֲרָ}$  to bring Jonah back from  $\text{לִיְסֻפִּי}$  or the Deep. This, per Landes (1967, 449), indicates the “distance and separation” of the netherworld from life on earth. Fretheim (1977, 98) further acknowledges the possibility that the period of three days and three nights refer to the time the  $\text{אֲרָ}$  brings Jonah back to the earth from  $\text{לִיְסֻפִּי}$ .

Landes’ (1967, 449) insight does not infer that the author of the book of Jonah was familiar with the Sumerian myth or that he adopted the idea, but he implies that the author of Jonah has applied the same meaning as that of the mythographer of the Inanna myth, without speculation as to how Jonah’s author may have become aware of its mythological background.

### **A Mythological Link with Nineveh?**

The city of Nineveh, its king and inhabitants as the central protagonist in the book of Jonah may have elemental mythical undertones. The name Nineveh is derived from the Akkadian word *nūnu*, “fish”, thus the city is “Fishtown” (Merrill 1980, 26–27). The further posit that the fish-goddess Nanshe could have been the chief deity of early Nineveh adds to the mythical intrigue of Jonah’s narrative.

The sailors, on their eventual return to Nineveh, must have recounted the story of Jonah. When Jonah eventually came to Nineveh, his miraculous survival with the added new knowledge of his wondrous rescue by none other than a fish must have prompted them to think of their own history of fish-gods such as Nanshe and Oannes. Whether this may have assisted in their astonishing conversion, is an open thought. This mythical connotation, however, adds to the mounting evidence of Jonah’s  $\text{אֲרָ}$  as being a sea-monster.

### **LXX Translation of the $\text{לִיְלָדָאֵי אֲרָ}$ Leans Towards the Mythological**

The LXX recognises the mythological context by translating  $\text{לִיְלָדָאֵי אֲרָ}$  as  $\text{κῆτος μεγάλω}$  (“great dragon”) in Jonah 2:1 and  $\text{אֲרָ}$  to  $\text{κῆτος}$  in Jonah 2:2, 11 (Montanari 2015). This concurs with two principles of translation, namely the principle of necessary precision, where significant information is provided to assist in fusing the horizon of the text and the reader. Secondly, it adheres to foreignization which stresses the fundamental need that the modern reader be made fully aware of the foreignness of the source text, and through this the foreign has been honoured as foreign.

However, the translation of אִי in the rest of the Old Testament is ἰχθύες (Gen 1:26, 28; Exod 7:18, 21; Num 11:5; Deut 4:18; Ps 105:29; Isa 50:2; Ezek 29:4, 5; 47:9, 10). As the usual word for fish (ἰχθύες) is translated as κήτη in the book of Jonah, Parry (2015, 42) concluded that “the fish was a cosmic sea monster.” It is noteworthy that the LXX employs κήτη when translating אִי־בְּתֵיבָה in OT texts such as Gen 1:21, but δράκων in, e.g., Exod 7:9, Job 7:12, Ps 74:13, or omits the word totally as in Isa 51:9.

Midrash expositions linking the sea-monster to Jonah may have prompted the LXX to translated the fish as ketos, such as that the fish told Jonah that its time is limited as Leviathan is about to devour it (Narkiss 1979, 65). This may be coupled to Jonah’s subsequent threats to Leviathan, causing the sea-monster to flee for his life (Hyrceanus, ben Eliezer 1916). Noegel’s (2015, 240) conclusion that the translation of the LXX deliberately chose κήτος because it strongly relates to רִמְתַּי as a term that is linked to Leviathan, affords a mythological credence to the אִי.

## Translators Do Not Just Translate Words

After careful consideration of various translations of the לִי־אִי אִי in the book of Jonah, it is evident that all translators into English did a literal translation of what was presented in the Masoretic text. Jonah’s לִי־אִי אִי is a natural sea-animal—a great fish. No finger can justifiably be pointed as being untruthful in terms of the source text. However, this gives rise to a critical issue. Translators translate meaning as well, which, in turn, is intrinsically embedded in the milieu of the text. Therefore, if a translator encounters a natural animal within a mythical ambience, the natural animal should be recognised as being out of place, and the horizon of the source text needs to be investigated.

## Conclusion

Who of those who have descended to the nether world (ever) ascend unharmed from the nether world? (Kramer 1952, 11)

The context of the narrative set within, and fitting in perfectly with general ANE cosmology, strongly supports a magico-mythical milieu in which it is more appropriate for a mythical sea-monster to have swallowed Jonah. The interpretation of Jonah’s לִי־אִי אִי as a big fish is not true to the horizon of the source text. The task of the translator is to approach this horizon with an open mind, to transfer meaning. One should therefore be alerted to the absolute dissonance of a natural fish employed to transport someone into the mythical core of לִי־אִי־בְּתֵיבָה. The onus is therefore on the translator to expose, and correct, falsification, and/or gatekeeping of the source author. Even though the author had obviously been hesitant to reflect the mythological reality of the ancient world, the translator still has the responsibility of presenting the modern reader with the opportunity to fuse both horizons. This did not happen here.

Although Jonah's **לִיֹּשֶׁת** is not explicitly implicated as a deity, or as a twisting, writhing serpent, it matches the core DNA of a mythical sea-monster associated with the primeval waters—a supernatural and monstrously big sea-dragon. Like Apophis, Typhon, Tiamat, and Yamm/Lotan in ANE myth, and Tannin, Rahab, Behemoth and Leviathan in the Hebrew Bible, the **לִיֹּשֶׁת** is a monstrously big supernatural creature, who lived in the primeval waters as a sea-monster.

All the arguments attempt to point out that the intrinsic core of Jonah's story not only indicates but also supports its strong magico-mythical connotation. Then, after weighing up all these arguments, the question remains: is the mythological *umwelt* enough to prove that the fish was indeed a monster?

The arguments collectively aimed at highlighting the distinct probability that, although the **לִיֹּשֶׁת** can be translated as a large fish, a sea-monster associated with the primeval seas is a more plausible interpretation. Therefore, when considering all these arguments together, it must serve as a coercive supposition that the **לִיֹּשֶׁת** in the book of Jonah is a sea-monster and as Day (1990, 47) surmises, that it “probably derives from the Canaanite chaos monster.”

Like any research undertaken, our findings may surprise us, it may often confuse us, may certainly anger some, but eventually it may enrich us. Because Jonah's journey in the **לִיֹּשֶׁת** is “an undertaking only mythic men attempted—going to the land of death and, after touring, coming home again” (Carper 1983, 75).

This **לִיֹּשֶׁת** is no ordinary fish.

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