

Shayla: Isn't the Jonah tale physically impossible?

For the whale to get from Tarshish, Spain to Nineveh, Iraq it would have to swim over two hundred miles an hour for three straight days. Obviously, that's physically impossible. Besides, how could a man live in those digestive juices that long?

Midrash:

200mph for 36 hours would mean that by your reckoning the fish travelled 7,200 miles. That means you must be thinking that Jonah's ship had gone past the Straits of Gibraltar and was traveling around the Cape of Good Hope when they threw him overboard.

I say that because the shortest route from southern Spain would be around Africa, and up through the Red Sea to Israel. Even if the fish swam up the Persian Gulf, giving Jonah a shorter route to Nineveh the distance would be about the same, around 12,000 miles. At a constant speed of 170mph that would require 72 hours – clearly a remarkable feat. However, 12,000 miles is nearly twice the distance you're figuring so, I guess you're thinking that for some reason Jonah's ship had to be somewhere close to the Cape of Good Hope off Southern Africa.

However, may I point out that we do not know how far along the journey Jonah actually was? Let's examine the principle points of the account first, shall we?

Several critical geographical and chronological cues are:

- He took a ship from Joppa (Jonah 1:3)
- Was headed toward Tarshish (Jonah 1:3)
- A violent storm arose (Jonah 1:4)
- The men rowed hard but unsuccessfully to get back to dry land (Jonah 1:13)
- Jonah was swallowed by a specially appointed fish and remained there for three days (Jonah 1:17)
- The fish vomited Jonah onto dry land. (Jonah 2:10)

We have no idea where Jonah's ship was when he was thrown overboard. We have no idea where he came ashore. Since the sailors rowed to get *back* to dry land, we can safely assume they were trying to get *back* to Joppa, the port they had recently left. We do know where Joppa is – it's on the western coast of Israel, on the Mediterranean Sea near modern Tel Aviv. We can also be pretty certain from whence Jonah left to go to Joppa. Jonah was from the village of Gath-hepher according to 2 Kings 14:25.

Joppa is south of Gath-hepher and Tarshish is due west from there. Nineveh is north and east of Israel so Jonah was headed in exactly the opposite direction that Yahweh Adonai wanted him to go. Another indication of Jonah's rebellion is that the trip to Nineveh was to be over land and Jonah instead chose to go by sea. So God's will was for him to travel by land north and east. Jonah's will was to travel by sea south and west. Let's assume that God made sure His will was accomplished.

If Jonah was going from Joppa to Tarshish, how did he come to be (by your reckoning) around the Cape of Good Hope? Even if the ship nearly arrived to its destination and Jonah was thrown overboard near Tarshish, why not assume that the fish headed straight back to Joppa and dropped Jonah off right where he started? That would be a journey of about 2,600 miles and could have been made in 72 hours at relatively leisurely 40mph.

However, why not instead assume that the storm arose nearly immediately, the sailors tried to get back to dry land (i.e back to Joppa) and that the fish picked Jonah up close to the Grecian shore and didn't have to travel even THAT far? Perhaps the fish simply lazed around. Jonah did say he sank to the foundations of mountains (Jonah 2:6). Then why couldn't the fish have dropped him off near Joppa? Perhaps it dropped him off 60 miles north-northeast of Joppa, near Nazareth, only about 2 ½ miles from Gath-hepher!

After all, consider what Jonah prayed while in the fish. He promised “I will fulfill what I have vowed.” (Jonah 2:9). What was it that he had vowed? What was his calling? To leave Gath-hepher, go to Nineveh and proclaim God’s message to its people.

Wouldn’t that be just like the God who walked His people around the wilderness for forty years and brought them back to exactly the same spot where they had balked four decades before? Wouldn’t that be just like the God who made sure that the body of Ahab’s son Joram was dropped on the very plot of the man that Ahab had killed?

If you consider yourself a Christian, a believer in a miracle performing God/Man, let me ask you something. Which is more believable to you; that a man could live three days in the digestive juices of a fish or that a man could be crucified, die, be buried three days, and resurrect? If you have no problem believing that God could create the universe, then you should have no problem believing that He could have His Son born in the womb of a virgin, or that he could have a fish swim 40mph for 72 hours straight.

Either you believe in such a Being or you are not truly a disciple of Jesus. Either way, there are too many variables for you to cast aspersions on the Scriptural account especially when the variables could fall well within the bounds of physical laws.