

Jonah, Bartley and the Whale – Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D., Ph.D. – 2014

The biblical story of Jonah being swallowed by a whale – just an ancient fish story? As recently as [120] years ago, a human being was swallowed by a whale – and lived.¹

In February 1891, a young English sailor named James Bartley was a crew member on the whaling ship *Star of the East*, which ranged the waters off the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic, searching for marine leviathans. Suddenly, three miles out, the sailors spotted a sperm whale that later proved to be 80 feet long and weigh 80 tons. Two boats with crew members and harpooners – one of them Bartley – were dispatched to kill the whale. As they closed in, one harpooner catapulted his eight-foot spear toward the sea beast. The instant it struck, the whale twisted and lashed out with its fanning tail. The tail slammed into one rowboat, lifted it into the air and capsized it. But the sailors soon subdued and killed the wounded mammal.

When the rowboat was righted, Bartley and another crewman were missing and written off as drowned. The crew pulled the carcass of the whale alongside *Star of the East* and worked until midnight removing the blubber. The next morning, using a derrick, the sailors hoisted the whale's stomach on deck. According to M. de Parville, science editor of the *Journal des Débats*, who investigated the incident, there was then a movement in the whale's belly. When it was opened, Bartley was found unconscious. He was carried on deck and bathed in sea water. This revived him, but his mind was not clear and he was confined to the captain's quarters for two weeks, behaving like a lunatic.

Within four weeks, Bartley had fully recovered and related what it had been like to live in the belly of a whale. He remembered the whale's tail hitting his boat. Then, reported de Parville, Bartley was encompassed in darkness and felt himself slipping along a smooth passage. His hands felt something slimy all around him. The heat was unbearable – it was thought to be 104° – and he lost consciousness. When he awoke, he was in the captain's cabin.

For the rest of his life, Bartley's face, neck and hands remained white, bleached by the whales' gastric juices.

¹ Except for the updated bracketed [120] in the first paragraph (originally read "90"), the above was taken verbatim from an August 16, 1981 *Parade Magazine* article. Its source was that of J.D. Wilson's "Sign of the Prophet Jonah and its Modern Confirmations", originally published in the prestigious *Princeton Theological Review* 25 (October 1927), pp. 630-642. It was also cited in Merrill F. Unger's *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 2 (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981) p. 1832 (Jonah) and in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Old Testament), by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck of Dallas Theological Seminary (see: Victor Books, 1985, p. 1462-63 under "Jonah"). On the same page, Walvoord and Zuck further reference George F. Howe's article in *Biblical Research Monthly* (January 1973) pp. 6-8. In short, Bartley's dreadful experience is documented beyond all controversy. Indeed, Walvoord and Zuck write that in 1898 Frank T. Bullen reported a 15-foot shark as being found in a sperm whale (*Cruise of the Cachalot Round the World after Sperm Whales*, London: Smith Pub.): further, that whale sharks have swallowed men who were later found alive in their stomachs.