

Jonah and Olam

Commentary for June 1, 2013 — “Olam” in the Book of Jonah Means “Age”

The article for June 2013 is “Jonah and the New Testament.” Read first the [“June 1, 2013 Newsletter”](#) which has introductory information about the article, and relates that material in light of recent statements on salvation by the new Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church.

The experience of Jonah is used by Jesus Christ to point the Scribes, Pharisees, and the crowds of people to a single sign that He truly was the Messiah. That sign was given in their near future (Matthew 12:39–41, 16:1–2, 4; Luke 11:29–30, 32). That singular sign had two elements associated with it: **[1]** Jesus being dead in the grave for the same limited time as Jonah was in the fish, for three days and three nights, and **[2]** His resurrection from the dead (as Jonah was brought back to life) after the allotted time. This sign of Jonah was fulfilled. Let me quote a relevant passage without chapter and verse indicators:

“Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed unto YHWH his God out of the fish's belly, And said, ‘I cried by reason of mine affliction unto YHWH, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell [*sheol*, the unseen, the place of the dead] cried I, and you heard my voice.”

• *Jonah 1:17–2:2, King James Version*

Later in chapter 2, Jonah says this in his prayer of thanksgiving to God:

“I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever [*l^e-olam*, for the age]: yet have you brought up my life from corruption, O YHWH my God.”

• *Jonah 2:6, King James Version*

Jonah 1:17 defined the length of time that the *olam* in Jonah 2:6 lasted. The “bars” of the earth were not about Jonah “forever.” In fact, that English term for eternity has no connection to the meaning of *olam*. Let me give you this verse in the Concordant Literal Version.

“I go down to the fashioning points of the mountains; The earth, its bars are about me for the eon, Yet You shall bring up my life from ruin, O YHWH, my Elohim.”

• *Jonah 2:6, Concordant Literal Version*

While the King James Version mistakenly translates *l^e-olam* as “for ever,” Jonah was not dead or in *sheol* “for ever.” He was dead for a period of time, for an “age.” In the case of Jonah the “age” lasted 3 days and three nights (Jonah 1:17).

The Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), for this verse has the Greek word *αἰώνιοι*, “for the eon,” where the Hebrew text has the word *l^e-olam*. This is another example of the near total equivalence of the Hebrew word *olam* being translated by its corresponding Greek word *aion*. The word *olam* occurs over almost 500 times in the Old Testament in various

forms.¹ The Greek equivalent *aion* occurs in the New Testament 128 times in the singular and plural, and 71 times in the adjective form. Let me quote a source saying this differently:

“The idea of the nouns (*olam*, or *ai-n*) is always ‘[for the] duration’ of that which is in view. The duration which is in view must always be judged from the context, or from the nature of things, otherwise known. Therefore, the adjectival idea is, ‘of or pertaining to the duration (of that which is in view).’ In some cases, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, the duration which is in view (whether used of the past or future) is not at all referring to the epochal eons (i.e., those eons which, abiding for long periods, correspond to the system [or world] which, during any certain time, prevails on earth; e.g., Eph.2:2).

Often, the references are only to a much briefer duration, such as

- [1] **the length of time when a people lived in a certain region (Joshua 24:2);**
- [2] **the brief duration of Jonah's experience inside the great fish (Jonah 2:6);**
or
- [3] **the duration of the remainder of a slave's lifetime in which he would serve his master (Deut.15:17).”**

• James Coram, “Eon as Indefinite Duration (Part One)”²

What This Means

The significance is that an *olam* or an “age” has an indeterminate duration. However, in every usage the context demands that the period of time has a beginning and an end. While the duration is usually a long time, it is not always the case. In the instance of Jonah he thought he had been dead for an age, even though it was only three days and three nights.

How did Jonah know he was in the fish for that long? The text does not tell us how Jonah knew, it just tells us the period of time in days and nights. We know God spoke to Jonah directly several times. Perhaps He told Jonah how long, but it was omitted from the narrative.

The main message of the Book of Jonah can be summed up in the last part of Jonah 2:9 **“Salvation is of YHWH.”** This sentiment was written by King David almost 200 years earlier: **“Salvation belongs unto YHWH: your blessing is upon your people”** (Psalm 3:8). Jeremiah wrote the same sentiment some 150 years after Jonah: **“It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of YHWH”** (Lamentations 3:26). As believers, we all anxiously wait in hope for God’s salvation (Romans 1:16; 13:11; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Ephesians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:8–9; 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 3:5; Hebrews 5:9, 9:28; 1 Peter 1:9–11; 2 Peter 3:15). God speed the day when we will hear these words:

“I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, ‘Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ’ ...”

• Revelation 19:1

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¹ See “Addendum 1: Hebrew *Olam*” in Dr. Ernest Martin’s presentation “[The Time Periods for Salvation, Part 1](#).” Every instance of *olam* and its variants is listed. Do your own study on this Hebrew word. It will be very rewarding.

² From *Unsearchable Riches*, July 1995, vol. 86, No. 4, pp. 209–210, italics original, underlining mine.