

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

Season 2 - Episode 22

2/26/25

Jonah

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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Jonah

Season 2; Episode 22

2/26/2025

Host: Jim.

Jim explores the book of Jonah from a non-traditional point of view.

[Music]

JIM: Jonah, as in "...and the Whale" - Jonah has been in the news recently because of one Adrián Simancas, who was kayaking off the coast of Chile with his father when a humpback whale surfaced and swallowed him for a few seconds, probably by accident, and then spat him out. We know this because Adrián's father caught the whole thing on video, and though we are rightly suspicious of people who video tragedies instead of putting the camera down to help out, in this case, I don't think the father had time to say, "Sorry, son, but this could go viral on YouTube." No, his video shows the whole thing happened too fast for him to register what he was seeing. Adrián though was in no real danger. Humpbacks are baleen whales, filter feeders, and humans are just too big to fit down their throats. So, the whale spat him out because Adrián was more than he could swallow. Speaking of things that are hard to swallow, let's talk about the book of Jonah. Warning! This is not Sunday School.

[Music]

Actually, the book of Jonah is not at all hard to swallow, if read in a certain way. First, a disclaimer, some will insist that every word of scripture must be taken as literal, verifiable history. If Adrián's father had his camera at, say, the Battle of Jericho, we could watch the whole thing now as a National Geographic documentary. Literalists are in no mood for metaphorical readings of Creation's 6 Days, or folkloric readings of Noah's Flood or Balaam's Donkey. Why? It's because they hold that doubting the reliability of any portion of the Bible, any verse, casts doubt on the reliability of all of it. If anything in the Bible is suspect, historically or scientifically, then the whole Christian project collapses. It's a slippery slope.

I have a different approach. I think that story, metaphor, and analogy are powerful and valid ways to communicate a message. If you agree with me, keep listening. If you disagree, keep listening.

Here's my CliffsNotes version of this brief book of Jonah.

Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, is a wicked place, so God tells Jonah to go and preach against it. Jonah doesn't want to, so he runs away from home and gets on a boat. But God sends a life-threatening storm against the boat, a storm that is quelled only when Jonah is tossed overboard as a sacrifice. God then puts Jonah on a three-day, three-night time-out inside a fish, during which time Jonah reconsiders his life choices. The fish gets sick and

tired of him, mostly sick, and Jonah is given a second chance. This time he goes to Nineveh and gives the world's shortest sermon, resulting in the spontaneous repentance of 120,000 people and their animals. Jonah then leaves the city to watch what will happen next. Expecting fire and brimstone, Jonah instead sees God accept their repentance and spare the city. Jonah is ticked. God sends a plant to shelter Jonah from the heat. Jonah is happy. God then sends a worm to destroy the plant. Jonah is ticked again. God asks him a question. "You're upset about a plant you had nothing to do with? Should I not care for these people who don't know right from left?"

A charming story. You can see why it's on every Sunday School's top ten list. Parts of the story fit well in the kiddie pool, but a dive in the deep end reveals some deeper truths. First some background.

It's the eighth century BC. It's the time of Amos, Nahum, Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah, all serious prophets and all best-selling authors. It's the time of King Ahaz, King Amaziah, King Uzziah, and King Hezekiah. It's the time of Assyria's conquest of the northern kingdom, scattering its population into what we now call the lost tribes of Israel. It's the time of Assyria's conquest of many cities in the southern kingdom and of its siege of Jerusalem. In one reading, it's that humiliating siege that prompts the fish story. More on that later.

With that bit of history, here's some geography. Jerusalem lies at crossroads in the Fertile Crescent, where from their front porch they can watch Egypt to the south, Asia Minor to the north, and Assyria to the east fight each other. And more often than hoped for, they would drag Jerusalem into the melee as well. Assyria's capital is Nineveh to the northeast. When God tells Jonah to go there, Jonah instead heads to Joppa 180 degrees in the opposite direction, and buys a ticket on a boat heading to Tarshish, the farthest western reaches of the Mediterranean Sea.

So what is Jonah's plan here? Two possibilities. One, there was the ancient belief that gods ruled over only their own land, each land with its own god. Maybe Jonah thought leaving home meant leaving God behind. Two, Hebrews prophets did their prophesying from within their own borders. Maybe Jonah thought leaving home exempted him from his prophetic duties. "I'm not at home right now. Leave a message with someone else."

This is as good a time as any to quote from Psalm 139, which Jonah should have known.

*Where can I go from your spirit,
or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there.
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

If Jonah forgot that passage, God reminded him of it with a violent storm. The sailors didn't know what hit them. They tried everything experience had taught them to save the ship. They threw cargo overboard to stay afloat, all prayed to their own gods for mercy. And Jonah? Well, Jonah was in the ship's hold, fast asleep. And when the ship's captain found him - and I like this part - he didn't ask why Jonah wasn't helping. He asked why Jonah

wasn't praying. Pagan piety, it seems, outclassed this chosen one.

Meanwhile, the sailors were casting lots to find out who was causing this calamity, and the lot fell on Jonah. Now I used to think that was a rather strange way to make a decision. But casting lots was, at one time, standard practice for discerning divine knowledge. I was listening to John MacArthur once, for some reason, and at this passage about the casting lots, he called it, let me quote him exactly, "just a silly way to find something out, a primitive way, a pagan way." Well, I disagree. Yes, some pagans cast lots for Jesus' garments, but what about Peter casting lots to replace Judas among the Twelve? Or Aaron casting lots to choose which goat would be sacrificed and which was to be made the scapegoat? Or Samuel casting lots to select the first king of Israel? No, John MacArthur might call it silly, primitive, and pagan, but in our story, casting lots was deadly accurate, and the lot fell on Jonah. So Jonah gets tossed overboard, as the sailors implore God not to hold them guilty for it. Pagan piety prevails again.

And here, let's trace Jonah's journey of descent. First, he went *down* to Joppa. Then he went *down* onto a ship. Then he went *down* into the ship's hold. Then he went *down* into the sea. And then he went *down* into the belly of a fish. And there was one thing MacArthur said that I agreed with. The funniest thing I've ever heard him say. When describing Jonah, MacArthur said, and again I'm quoting, "He's just a bad attitude prophet, just a melancholy, bitter, kind of down in the mouth, bad mood prophet." See, down in the mouth prophet. I don't think he meant that to be funny, but there it is.

At this point, I'd like to say hello to Lance and Kem Duguay, who are probably listening right now with Jan and Rob on a trip to Grand Canyon and Zion National Parks. The point, apparently, is to visit the parks while they're still there. Lance and I, along with Cheryl Wood and several others, were part of a symphonic band once that toured Greece and elsewhere many years ago. And while we were sailing from Crete to Tunisia, an overnight windstorm kicked up. No doubt at the very spot it happened to Jonah.

[*Music*]

I sat on the deck and watched the moon swing back and forth above the mast. Then the wind died down. Now, I can't say for sure we did not throw someone overboard as a sacrifice to calm the sea, but I do remember we were short a clarinet player after that.

[*Music ends*]

While on his three-day, three-night time-out, Jonah offered a prayer. And while he prays, let's talk about literalist interpretations, because this is the event in Jonah's life that Jesus uses as an analogy to his own fate. Bible literalists have a curious interpretation here. Both Matthew and Luke have Jesus using Jonah as a sign for something, but they do it differently. In Luke, the sign of Jonah is his preaching in Nineveh and the Ninevites' repentance. In Matthew, however, the sign of Jonah is Jonah's time in the fish. Reading Matthew 12, verse 40, "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

I've always taken that as a simple analogy, but I've run across a literalist interpretation that sounds a bit - no, I won't say "fishy." Well, there I've said it. That interpretation says this, "Since Jonah's three days and nights are a sign of Jesus's three days and nights, and since

Jesus was dead during his time, Jonah must therefore have been dead in the fish as well, and then was resurrected on the third day when the fish disgorged him." Yeah, I was surprised by that too. "But what about that prayer?" I hear you ask. The answer? The prayer was uttered by Jonah's soul, which was separated from his body at death. And there's textual proof of this, if you're curious. Chapter 2, verse 7, King James, of course, says, "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord." And we're told that the soul fainting means Jonah died. Well, I took the bait and found some soul fainting passages here and there where the person clearly had not died. So I disagree with that reading. And I think it shows a lack of appreciation for how analogies work. Text, not doctrine, must drive interpretation.

And as far as literalism goes, how does a Friday afternoon crucifixion followed by a Sunday morning resurrection allow for three days and three nights? I've had that question for decades, which will be for some other time.

Now, where do we get this "Jonah and the whale"? There is a Hebrew word for whale, but it doesn't appear in Jonah. The Hebrew word in Jonah means simply "fish." When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek for the Septuagint, "fish" was translated as "sea monster." Now, Matthew wrote his gospel in Greek. So when he had Jesus quoting Jonah, he used the Septuagint and made Jesus say, "sea monster." Then when Wycliffe was translating Matthew's Greek into English, he mistook "sea monster" for "whale," which got passed into the King James version and thus into every Sunday school class since. That's how we got "Jonah and the whale."

But, have you ever heard the name James Bartley or maybe his story? A hundred and thirty years ago, James Bartley was a crew member aboard a British whaling ship called "Star of the East," and was in one of two small whale boats led over the side to pursue a sperm whale when the whale breached and smashed Bartley's boat, sending all hands into the water. All were rescued except James and one other. They were presumed drowned. After harpooning the whale, as the ship's crew were processing it, they cut open the stomach and found James inside, still alive, long after he was presumed dead. It is said James lived another 18 years and settled in Gloucester, England, where his grave can still be seen bearing a marker that reads, "James Bartley, a modern day Jonah."

I've heard this story touted as evidence that the Jonah story really could happen. Big problem is, the story collapses on investigation. It most likely started as an entertainment offered to gullible landlubbers, and with every retelling it has acquired new and contradictory embellishments, each calibrated to elicit the maximum astonishment. You know, a fish story. Upon investigation, yes, there was indeed a ship called "Star of the East," but it was not a whaling ship and James Bartley was never on its crew. Good fish stories, like good conspiracy theories, contain just enough verifiable fact to suggest the unverified bits just might be true.

But what if the James Bartley story were true in every detail? Does that in some way verify the Bible? I don't see how. Some Bible stories are meant to convey wonder, they are meant to be miraculous, and I've never understood why people try to defend the Bible's miracle stories by trying to show how those miracle stories aren't really miraculous. Don't defend Jonah with James Bartley. Don't defend the virgin conception with stories of Parthenogenesis. Don't defend a talking donkey arguing with Balaam with clips of Letterman's stupid pet tricks. It seems strangely anti-faith.

Let me offer a different, very non-literal reading of this fish story. I don't think the fish story is historically true. That's not a lack of faith in Scripture on my part. That's an acceptance of Scripture's use of story, of analogy, of creative and perceptive metaphors that beckon truth from the listener. In this case, the fish with Jonah inside is, for me, a provocative retelling of Assyria's siege of Jerusalem. The author of Jonah intends to remind his readers of that harrowing event from the past.

Let's review the facts.

Jerusalem had been warned that punishment was coming if they did not return to reliance on God, and in 701 B.C., that's what happened. The Assyrian army under King Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem, surrounded it. King Hezekiah of Jerusalem offered a prayer to God, acknowledging God's sovereignty over all things, and prayed for deliverance. Deliverance came, and Sennacherib's army withdrew, releasing Jerusalem. The author of Jonah set this episode in metaphor, with Jonah representing Jerusalem, and the fish representing the surrounding Assyrian army. When Jonah prayed for deliverance, he was released from within the fish, just as Jerusalem was released at Hezekiah's prayer. Now this could just be conjecture on my part that's too clever by half. But consider this. Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, and when Nineveh is written in Assyrian cuneiform, it is depicted as, yes, a fish within a house. There's the fish part. And the name Jonah means dove, which is exactly what Hosea called Israel when Israel was being threatened by this same Assyrian army. So it is very reasonable to read the story of Jonah, the dove, inside the fish, as a humorous reminder of Jerusalem, the dove, all but consumed by Assyria, the fish, many years ago. Assyria the fish devouring Jerusalem, the bird. And one further bit. In his record of the siege, Sennacherib boasts that he has trapped Hezekiah in his city, quote, "like a caged bird."

In any event, chapter three now begins with clever, understated humor. Remember, at the beginning of Jonah, God had said, "Go to Nineveh," and Jonah fled in the opposite direction. But that was before the fish. After the fish, chapter three begins, God said the second time, "Go to Nineveh." And so, Jonah went to Nineveh.

Nineveh in its day was the largest city in the world. Jonah reckoned it a three-day journey from one side to the other. Jonah walked into the city one day's journey and delivered a nine-word sermon. That's in the English translation. In the Hebrew, it's only five words, a five-word sermon. And this is where today's preachers feel a bit jealous, because this terse, unenthusiastic sermon yielded results today's preachers would think impossible. The whole city repents, and so, too, their animals. What I like is this, the citizens repent before the king even knows what's happening. Then when the king finally learns of Jonah's message, he plays catch-up and orders his subjects to do what they were already doing.

And with that, we get one final scene. Two questions. What will happen to Nineveh? And how has Jonah changed? Taking the second question first, Jonah didn't change. He never expressed love of God. Instead, he prayed about the duties of temple life, of offering sacrifices, of paying vows, and of claiming deliverance. His repentance prayer reads very much like a quid pro quo arrangement. "If I do this for God, God will do this for me." No repentance, just the art of the deal. Jonah calculates, "Nineveh is the enemy. God is on our side. God should destroy them." But God doesn't destroy them. Jonah thinks, "Look, I thought we had an arrangement here." It's the same ethic that claims, "God is on our side. We get to use him to make our lives better, and too bad about the other guy." God's

message, as relayed by this story, however, is plain. "You Jerusalem, I spared, and now I turn my mercy towards Nineveh." Or in more general terms, "I am God. I am what I am. I will as I will."

Prayers are meant to be entreaties, not controls; pleas, not orders. They are not means to our ends. They are means to God. And God is as God is. That's the message here.

On the teleological side of things, God did not need Jonah for God's plans to work. God did not need Jonah's help. The point of God engaging Jonah at all was that Jonah needed a lesson about both personal pride and national pride.

The author's intent here, his design with this story, his subterfuge, if you will, is what all good authors intend: to offer the reader a portrait, and it is only when the story is concluded that the reader realizes it is no portrait. It is a mirror.

Even with its absurdity and hyperbole, I read this story as an immediate and relevant story with an essential message, and that is, the prerogative belongs with God. From the athlete who thanks God for the winning goal that defeated the opponent, to the patient who claims special favor for recovery while the poor soul in the next bed succumbs, to the nations at war, all of whom claim God on their side, to all those asserting God prefers them to the wicked Ninevites, Jonah offers this sobering corrective: God does not belong to you. God is not your possession. That's exactly backwards. God is not your genie awaiting your wishes, not your weapon against your enemies. Jonah allows us only two possibilities here. You belong to God or you don't.

[Music]

And with that, I'll remind you that this is a weekly podcast. So join us here each week, my friends. You're sure to get a smile. Next week, Jan, though deep in the Grand Canyon where she can't get a signal, will nonetheless miraculously share with us three people who have had a meaningful impact on her life as she has been making her way.

Until next time.

[Music]