

# JONAH AND THE "GOURD" AT NINEVEH: CONSEQUENCES OF A CLASSIC MISTRANSLATION

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**ABSTRACT.** The fast-growing plant referred to in the biblical Book of Jonah is most often translated into English as "gourd." However, this is a mistranslation that dates to the appended Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, in which the Hebrew word *qiqayon* (castor, *Ricinus communis*, Euphorbiaceae) was transformed into the somewhat similar-sounding Greek word *kolokynti* (colocynth, *Citrullus colocynthis*). In translation of the Greek into Latin, *kolokynti* became the similar-sounding *cucurbita* (gourd). This is reflected in early iconography, the plant most often depicted being a long-fruited *Lagenaria siceraria* (bottle or calabash gourd), a fast-growing climber.

**C**ucurbits are frequent subjects of art, literature, and myth. Since ancient times, people the world over have been fascinated by the fast growth of cucurbits, from seed to a rampant vine bearing prominent, attractive fruits within two or three months. Metaphorically, the cucurbits are associated with warmth, sunshine, health, vitality, fertility, sexuality, and abundance, leading to mirth and laughter (Norrman and Haarberg, 1980).

Cucurbit fruits have been valued by humans for thousands of years, for food and a multitude of other uses. The Cucurbitaceae are extremely polymorphic for fruit size, shape, and color and the fruits of some species can exhibit great similarity to those of others (Chester, 1951). Often, the result has been different names for the same species and the same name for different species, resulting in the confusion that has afflicted cucurbit terminology since ancient times. This confusion has been enhanced by the translation of names to different languages and by mistranslations. One of the most striking cases of mistranslation occurred when the biblical Book of Jonah, which is read in its entirety by Jews as part of the afternoon prayer of the Day of Atonement, was translated into other languages.

Jonah, more accurately Yona the son of Amittay, is one of the remarkable figures of the Hebrew Bible. He was ordered by God to *get up and go to Nineveh* (a destroyed Assyrian city near the present-day Mosul, Iraq), *the great city, and call upon it because its wickedness has risen up to Me*. But Jonah disobeyed the Divine command and tried to run away, boarding at the port of Jaffa (Yafo, Israel) a boat bound for the city of Tarshish (a Mediterranean port, perhaps in Spain). However, the craft was soon overtaken by a squall, for which Jonah admitted responsibility and persuaded the crew of the boat to throw him overboard. Swallowed by a providential fish in whose belly he remained for three days and three nights, Jonah composed a psalm of thanksgiving. He was then vomited out on the shoreline. The Divine command to preach to Nineveh was repeated. As a result of Jonah's exhortations, the populace heeded the warning of destruction and atoned, and the city was spared. Jonah, who had withdrawn and watched the city from a booth, was displeased at the Divine mercy toward Nineveh. A fast-growing plant had provided him with much-needed shade, but at the break of dawn one day a worm attacked the plant, causing it to wither. Jonah was rebuked for his distress at the loss of the plant, in view of his displeasure toward the Divine mercy that spared 120,000 Ninevans their lives (Jonah 4:6–11).

The Hebrew name for the fast-growing plant that provided relief for Jonah is *qiqayon*. Derived from ancient Egyptian, this word signifies castor, *Ricinus communis* L. (Euphorbiaceae), castor oil being *shemen qiq* in Hebrew. However, in a number of biblical translations, including the King James Version of 1611, *qiqayon* is translated as "gourd": *And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.*

A translation more faithful to the Hebrew is given in the *Jerusalem Bible* (Fisch, 1992): *And the LORD God appointed a castor oil plant, and made it to come up over Yona, that it might be a shade over his head, to deliver him from his distress. And Yona was exceeding glad of the plant. But God appointed a worm when the dawn came up the next day, and it attacked the plant, so that it withered.*

The story of Jonah is one of the best-known biblical tales and is referred to both in the New Testament and in the Qur'an. The giant fish, referred to as a whale by Jesus (Matthew 10:39–40), has captured the imagination of children, like the marvelous but less well-known miraculous "gourd" that resonates in the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. It is not our purpose here to reflect on the theological

meaning of Jonah or its historical accuracy. Our objective is twofold: first, to trace the story of how the fast-growing *qiqayon* eventually became translated as “gourd” and second to identify the cucurbit depicted in ancient images of the story of Jonah.

### Translation from Hebrew to Greek: Septuagint

The translation of the Hebrew Bible to Greek began in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE in Alexandria. Philadelphus II (Ptolemy, 285–247 BCE) requested of El’azar, the High Priest in Jerusalem, a translation from Hebrew into Greek for the library at Alexandria. Initially, only the Tora (Instruction), known in Greek as the *Pentateuch* or Five Books of Moses, was translated. This Greek translation became known as the *Septuagint* (Seventy) as it was supposedly conducted by a committee composed of six translators from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. Only later were the other books comprising the Jewish scriptures translated and appended to the original Septuagint, becoming an inseparable part of it. The Septuagint is still a part of the Bible of the Eastern Orthodox Christian churches.

In the Septuagint translation of the Book of Jonah, the Hebrew *qiqayon* is translated as the somewhat similar-sounding word *kolokynthi* (also *kolokynthan*), colocynth, *Citrullus colocynthis* (L.) Schrader. The intensely bitter colocynth is referred to in the Bible as the Hebrew *paqqu’ot sade*. During a famine, its fruit was gathered from vines in the field and were then mistakenly included in a pottage prepared for the disciples of the prophet Elisha’: *And they poured for the people to eat and it was when eating from the pottage that they yelled and said death is in the pot of the man of God and they could not eat* (2 Kings 4:39–40). Elisha’ was able to ameliorate the taste of the pottage by adding flour.

*Citrullus colocynthis* is a prostrate, relatively small vine with pinnatifid leaves. It is not adapted to climbing nor could it be thought of as a good provider of shade. Possibly, the ancient Greek usage could have been less specific and included a broader spectrum of cucurbits. The colocynth was used by the ancients medically as a purgative, and is specifically mentioned in three works of the first century CE: *Materia Medica* of Pedanius Dioscorides, *Historia Naturalis* (Book 20) of Pliny the Elder (Jones, 1951), and the *Mishna*, a series of six books of commentary on Jewish Law. In Book 2 of the *Mishna* an entirely different use of the *paqqu’ot* is revealed. Oil was pressed from the seeds, for illumination, but was deemed inappropriate for lighting the Sabbath (*Mishna 2, Massekhet Shabbat*). In Book 6 yet another usage is described. Young shoots of *paqqu’ot* plants were eaten after pickling in salt or vinegar (*Mishna 6, Massekhet ‘Oqazin*)

(Feliks, 1957). An ancient illustration labeled with Greek *Kolokynthis* clearly depicting a plant of *Citrullus colocynthis* (Figure 1) is in the *Codex Vindobonensis (Anciae Juliana)*, a 512 CE rendition of Dioscorides' *Materia Medica*.

*Citrullus colocynthis* was described as being used for medicinal purposes in botanical herbals of the Renaissance and was depicted in the herbals of Fuchs (1542), Bock (1546), Dodoens (1616), Chabrey (1666), and others. Subsequently, the usage of colocynth or *coloquinte* was expanded to encompass other bitter cucurbits, most often the small-fruited *Cucurbita pepo* L. gourds (Gerard 1597; Tabernaemontani 1664). Bauhin (1651) illustrated and described the true colocynth and listed and described briefly nine other gourds that were also denoted colocynth. Seven were described as having rough foliage, probably indicative of *C. pepo*, an eighth was pyriform, probably also *C. pepo*. The last was described as having soft foliage and white flowers, evidently a small, bitter gourd of *Lagenaria siceraria* (Molina) Standley. The loose usage of the word *colocynth* in the later Renaissance gives credence to the supposition that the word *kolokynthi* was occasionally used loosely for cucurbits in ancient times.

## Translation to Latin

The translation of the Hebrew Bible into Latin was originally by way of the Septuagint. The Greek *kolokynthi* was translated with the similar-sounding *cucurbita* (gourd) (Norman and Haarberg, 1980). Eusebius Hieronymus Sophronius, 340–420 CE (later Saint Jerome), who was fluent in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, translated directly from Hebrew to Latin. His translation is known as the *Vulgate*. The plant in the Book of Jonah was to become a source of contention in early Christianity between Augustine of Hippo, 354–430 CE (later Saint Augustine), and Jerome. Augustine was concerned about differences that could arise about biblical mistranslations, and the precise name of the plant in the Book of Jonah became the basis of a heated exchange of letters between Augustine and Jerome starting in 394 and continuing through 406. Augustine stridently objected to Jerome translating the Bible into Latin without adding the presence of notes and was especially vexed about mistranslations of the fast-growing plant of the Book of Jonah that Jerome translated as *hedera* (ivy). The English translations of Augustine's letter of 403 and Jerome's response of 406 are quoted below (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/vulgate2.html>):

Augustine: *A certain bishop, one of our brethren, having introduced in the church over which he presides the reading of your version, came upon a word in the book of the prophet Jonah, of which you have give a very different rendering from that which had been of old familiar to the senses and memory of all the worshippers, and had been chanted for so many generations in the church. Thereupon arose such a tumult in the congregation, especially amongst the Greeks, correcting what had been read, and denouncing the translation as false, that the bishop was compelled to ask the testimony of the Jewish residents (it was in the town of Oea). These, whether from ignorance or from spite, answered that the words in the Hebrew manuscripts were correctly rendered in the Greek version, and in the Latin one taken from it. What further need I say? The man was compelled to correct your version in that passage as if it have been falsely translated, as he desired not to be left without a congregation—a calamity which he narrowly escaped. From this case we also are led to think that you may be occasionally mistaken. You will also observe how great must have been the difficulty if this had occurred in those writings which cannot be explained by comparing the testimony of languages now in use.*

Jerome: *You tell me that I have given a wrong translation of some word in Jonah, and that a worthy bishop narrowly escaped losing his charge through the clamorous tumult of his people, which was caused by the different rendering of this one word. At the same time, you withhold from me what the word was which I have mistranslated; thus taking away the possibility of my saying anything in my own vindication, lest my reply should be fatal to your objection. Perhaps it is the old dispute about the gourd which has been revived, after slumbering for many long years since the illustrious man, who in that day combined in his own person the ancestral honours of the Cornelii and of Asinius Pollio, brought against me the charge of giving in my translation the word “ivy” instead of “gourd.” I have already given a sufficient answer to this in my commentary on Jonah. At present, I deem it enough to say that in that passage, where the Septuagint has “gourd,” and Aquila and the others have rendered the word “ivy” (kissos), the Hebrew MS. has “ciceion,” which is in the Syriac tongue, as now spoken, “ciceia.” It is a kind of shrub having large leaves like a vine, and when planted it quickly springs up to the size of a small tree,*

*standing upright by its own stem, without requiring any support of canes or poles, as both gourds and ivy do. If, therefore, in translating word for word, I had put the word “ciceia,” no one would know what it meant; if I had used the word “gourd,” I would have said what is not found in the Hebrew. I therefore put down “ivy,” that I might not differ from all other translators. But if your Jews said, either through malice or ignorance, as you yourself suggest, that the word is in the Hebrew text which is found in the Greek and Latin versions, it is evident that they were either unacquainted with Hebrew, or have been pleased to say what was not true, in order to make sport of the gourd-planters.*

Clearly, then, as now, misuse and mistranslations of plant names, especially names of cucurbits, have led to misunderstandings and controversy.

### The Translation in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, written in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the plant at Nineveh is identified as *yaqtin*: *there grew over Jonah a kind of yaqtin* (Sura 37:139–146). Usually, the Arabic *yaqtin* is identified with *Lagenaria siceraria*. Commentators of the Qur'an have offered a spectrum of opinions concerning the identity of the *yaqtin*, which can be summarized as indicating an herbaceous, summer-annual plant lacking support tissue, a climbing, quick-growing vine, having large foliage. The identification of the Hebrew *qiqayon* as *Ricinus communis*, Arabic *kharua'*, is not accepted in Islamic tradition (Amar, 1998), echoing Latin translations of the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Bible or the Vulgate.

### English Translations

The famous Authorized Version of King James I, 1611, has many mistranslations of biblical plants (Moldenke and Moldenke, 1952). The erroneous use of “gourd” for *qiqayon* in the Book of Jonah was copied in a number of subsequent English translations. The English translations based on the French Douay version of Roman Catholics use “ivy,” following Jerome's Vulgate. A number of new translations based on modern scholarship equivocate and call it either “plant” (Revised Standard Version) or “vine” (New International Version).

## Images from Antiquity

A gourd is used for the story of Jonah in Judeo-Christian iconography of the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. One example is a sculpture from 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Phrygia (Central Turkey) showing Jonah under a vine bearing a fruit that is clearly an elongated *Lagenaria siceraria* (Figure 2). Two others are mosaics, one from Tunisia dating to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> or beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 3) and the other from Italy (4<sup>th</sup> century) (Figure 4). Their similarity suggests that a standard representation of the incident was copied. The two mosaics show a nearly nude figure of the reclining Jonah under a trellis from which hang eight elongate fruits. Based on the swollen peduncular ends the fruits (Figure 4), these too appear to be *L. siceraria*. The young fruits of elongate *L. siceraria* are a food crop in some regions, such as Sicily, to the present day. Long-fruited *L. siceraria* are also depicted in Roman mosaics of the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century, indicating that they were a familiar esculent in the ancient Mediterranean region, and specific mention of the use of trellises for gourds is made by Columella and Pliny. A 12<sup>th</sup> century image (Figure 5) captures the entire story of Jonah, including his being tossed overboard, being swallowed by the fish, and reclining under a cucurbit vine, but the image is too crude to make an identification of the species. Later images, from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, depict Jonah's gourd as the more familiar bottle-shaped *L. siceraria*.

## Conclusion

The identification of the fast-growing plant in the Book of Jonah as a gourd is due to a mistranslation of the Hebrew word *qiqayon* (castor) to the Greek word *kolokynti* and then to the Latin word *cucurbita*. The error is reflected in early iconography, the *qiqayon* being depicted as a long-fruited *Lagenaria siceraria*. The confusion over the plant shows how, then as now, misuse and mistranslation of plant names, especially names of cucurbits, have led to misunderstandings and controversy. The *qiqayon* of Jonah was a lush, fast-growing provider of shade. By rendering it an edible-fruited cucurbit, it became, in addition, a symbol of sustenance, well-being, and life itself.

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**Fig. 1.** Painting of *Citrullus colocynthis* from *Codex Vindobonensis*, 512 CE (Der Wiener Dioskurides, 1998).

**Fig. 2.** Jonah at Nineveh in a paleo-Christian sculpture from Phrygia (Central Turkey), ca. 270–280 (Cleveland Museum of Art).

**Fig. 3.** Jonah at Nineveh in a 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup>-century mosaic at Tunis (Baggio et al., 1995).

**Fig. 4.** Jonah at Nineveh in a mosaic at Aquileia, Italy (Rossi, 1968).

**Fig. 5.** The story of Jonah from a 12<sup>th</sup> century manuscript. Sinai Peninsula, Monastery of Saint Catherine, Ms. 1186, fol. 110r. Photo Richard Cleave. (Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972).



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