

Chapter 5: The Sign of Jonah

“Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee” was the response of members of the Sanhedrin to messianic claims about Jesus, according to John 7:52. They were almost correct. Prophets whose places of origin are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible came from outside Galilee with a single exception: Jonah the son of Amittai of Gath Hepher.¹ Even if Jonah and Jesus were raised in the same region they seem to have little else in common. Jonah, who ran away from one of his assignments and was swallowed by a large fish, appears to be among the least messianic of the prophets. Defying the apparent dissimilarity, Jesus said that “the sign of Jonah” was the only grand miracle he would offer to his opposers.

In Luke, Jesus compares his preaching to that of Jonah.² In Matthew, Jesus additionally says that the three days he will spend “in the heart of the earth” are like the three days spent by Jonah in the fish.³ The reason for the allusion in Matthew would seem to be the coincidence of three-day periods and that fact that a huge fish would almost certainly become the grave of whomever it swallowed. By now, however, we ought to suspect that Jesus was hinting at a typological connection.

In the Old Testament book of Jonah, the prophet of the same name boards a ship to run away from the Lord. The vessel encounters rough weather as Jonah naps below deck. The ship’s captain finds it incredible that Jonah can sleep as disaster overtakes them, and he urges Jonah to pray for deliverance. The sailors cast lots to find out who may have brought ill fortune upon them. When the lot falls on Jonah and they confront him, he tells them that the only way to save the ship is to throw him into the sea. The crew battles heroically to make landfall with the prophet still aboard, but the storm increases in violence until the sailors are forced to throw Jonah over the side. The sea becomes calm, leaving the sailors so awe-stricken that they make vows to Jonah’s God.

The events that befall Jonah resemble those leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion. To start with, both Jonah and Jesus appear to be indifferent to their peril. “How can you sleep?,” the captain asks Jonah. “Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.”⁴ Compare the words of Pilate to Jesus: “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” Matthew adds that “Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge

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—to the great amazement of the governor.”⁵ John has Pilate saying, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”⁶

The resemblance extends further, to the interrogation of Jonah concerning his identity and origin. “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us?,” the ship’s crew demands of the prophet. “What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”⁷ Pilate similarly asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?,” and, “Where do you come from?”⁸ Once the special status of the man of God is discovered it arouses fear. When Jonah declares, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land,” the ship’s crew is “terrified.”⁹ When Pilate is told by Jesus’ accusers that the Galilean “claimed to be the Son of God,” Pilate likewise becomes fearful.¹⁰

In both instances, the parties responsible for the fate of the man of God battle hostile forces in an effort to spare his life and then declare themselves innocent of his blood.¹¹ In each narrative the man of God ultimately must be consigned to oblivion.¹² Onlookers in both accounts are moved to recognize God’s hand at work.¹³ Note how vivid the correspondence becomes when the climactic moments are read together:

The men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.

—Jonah 1:13.

Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with him whom you call the King of the Jews?” They shouted back, “Crucify him!” But Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” —Mark 15:12-14.

Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, but they kept on calling out, saying, “Crucify, crucify him!” And he said to them the third time, “Why, what evil has this man done? I have found in him no guilt demanding death; therefore I will punish him and release him.” But they were insistent, with loud voices asking that he be crucified. And their voices began to prevail.

—Luke 23:20-23.

The question the sailors put to Jonah, “What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?,” is paralleled by Pilate’s

question to the mob, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?”¹⁴ Jonah’s answer as related in the Septuagint Greek Bible is, “Take me up [*airo*] and cast me into the sea.” The narrative continues, “So they took [*lambano*] Jonas, and cast him out into the sea.” The mob’s answer to Pilate on the subject of what should be done with Jesus is, “Take him away [*airo*]! Take him away [*airo*]! Crucify him! . . .” In compliance with the answer of the crowd, “the soldiers took charge [*paralambano*] of Jesus” to prepare him for execution.¹⁵

Not only does one set of events mirror the other, the narratives have the same urgent, fatalistic momentum. They also share the notion of ransom or redemptive death, since Jonah’s life becomes the price of the lives of the other men aboard the ship.

We need not rely on resemblance alone, because the major symbols of the story are confirmed by identifiers elsewhere in the Scriptures. The Psalms show us that sleep may connote seeming indifference, since God’s apparent unconcern over Israel’s plight is compared to his being asleep.¹⁶

A stormy sea as a metaphor for a violent mob occurs in two passages in Isaiah. One of these, at 17:12, says, “Alas, the uproar of many peoples who roar like the roaring of the seas,” and another, at 57:20, says that “the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet.”¹⁷ Matthew’s Gospel says that the crowd came to the verge of rioting.¹⁸ A gauge of the seriousness of the unrest is Pilate’s alleged release of a violent rebel popularly known as Barabbas.¹⁹ Apparently during major festivals Pilate had given special consideration to petitions concerning Jewish prisoners, but for him to relinquish a notorious cutthroat must be seen as an emergency measure comparable to the jettisoning of the ship’s cargo in the Jonah story.²⁰

Plumbing the Depths of the Abyss

The clue that drew our attention to the book of Jonah, the saying of Jesus about his spending “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth,” leads to another identifier having to do with the curious “death” and “resurrection” Jonah experiences. The depths of the earth and of the sea become poetically interchangeable in Jonah’s psalm. Jonah says, “The deep surrounded me,” at 2:5 and then repeats the thought in the very next verse by saying, “The earth barred me in

forever.”

In the same way, the New Testament likens Jesus’ death not only to a descent into the earth but also a descent into the “abyss” or the sea.²¹ Being drawn out of the water is a figure of rescue from death in Psalm 18 and by implication also in Psalm 69, where the psalmist prays to be delivered “from my foes and from the deep waters.” “May the flood of water not overflow me nor the deep swallow me up,” he goes on, “nor the pit shut its mouth on me.”²² Here waters stand both for enemies plotting the psalmist’s death and for death itself.

In saying that the grave threatens to “swallow” him, the psalmist uses the same Hebrew verb that describes the swallowing of Jonah by the fish. In Jonah’s story the fish is an embodiment of the sea’s deadly nature, which claims human lives through cold, through drowning or, rarely, through predators such as great white sharks, the largest specimens of which are capable of swallowing a man whole. The imagery is consistent with other passages in the Old Testament that associate dying with being swallowed.²³ The text at Isaiah 25:8 (quoted by Paul at 1 Corinthians 15:54) that says God will “swallow up” death forever is a play on words in which the “swallower” is swallowed, the destroyer finally destroyed.

Although Jonah was devoured he was not left in the fish, which he calls the “belly of Hades,” just as Jesus would not be forsaken in “Hades,” the realm of the grave.²⁴ An intriguing confirmation of this fulfillment occurs in Matthew, but before it can be understood we must go back to a point raised briefly in Chapter 2 about the redemptive quality of Jesus’ death. The claim that Jesus furnished a “ransom” or a price in blood to pay off the sin debt of mankind is one that secular people find grotesque. To many of them it smacks of the horrors of human sacrifice and seems to turn God into a bloodthirsty tyrant. While there is no pretending that the doctrine of the ransom is easy to come to terms with, it helps to realize that death for its own sake is not object of Jesus’ mission.

Instead of beginning with the idea of death, a better starting point is righteousness or obedience. In Biblical terms, perfect obedience to the will of God is the condition, the “price” as it were, of everlasting life. Humans in general, subject as we are to frequent moral failure, cannot hope to pay that price. Assuming that someone were able to pay it, what would perfect obedience look like?

To obey only under favorable circumstances would fall short of perfection, which in the Biblical sense means “completeness.” Obedience to be complete would have to be tested to the limit. That in turn can only mean obedience through temptation, distress, torture and death without the slightest moral failure. Death in that case would become a kind of seal, a certification that perfect obedience had been attained. This is what Jesus achieved according to apostolic teaching. “He humbled himself and become obedient as far as death,” Paul says in Philippians, “death on a cross.”²⁵

According to the Scriptures the righteousness of Jesus up to death provided the basis for lifting the crushing burden of sin off humanity. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.”²⁶ At the same time Jesus’ death constituted a different kind of price in that it entitled him to receive back his own life. Paul identifies the obedient death of Jesus as the basis for Jesus’ exaltation by God at the resurrection.²⁷

God says in Isaiah that he will award his servant “a portion among the great . . . because he poured out his life unto death.”²⁸ The “life” said to be poured out here is actually the Hebrew word *nephesh*, “soul,” which is symbolized by blood.²⁹ Hebrews 13:20 confirms that God brought Jesus back from the dead “through the blood of the eternal covenant,” in other words, because of or by means of the perfect obedience represented by Jesus’ shed blood.

With this “double price” in mind we can understand the incident recorded in Matthew. When Jesus comes to Capernaum, Peter is approached by men collecting the two-drachma tax for the maintenance of the temple in Jerusalem. The men ask Peter whether his teacher, Jesus, intends to pay the tax. When Peter next talks to him, Jesus comments that members of the royal household do not have to pay taxes, implying that he as messianic king and the apostles as future rulers of Israel are not obligated to pay. Nevertheless, he tells Peter that to avoid giving offense they will comply by what can only be called a bizarre procedure. Peter is to go down to the water and throw in a fishing line. In the mouth of the first fish he catches Peter will find a stater coin worth four drachmas. “Take it and give it to them,” Jesus says, “for my tax and yours.”

Improbably, the coin comes out of a fish’s mouth, but no more improbably than had the prophet Jonah. Jesus as the antitype of Jonah

also comes out of the mouth of the fish, which pictures the grave according to Jesus' own words. The difference between Jonah and Jesus is that the Messiah came forth entitled not just to receive back his own life but to redeem sinful mankind, functioning as the price for both.

The coin out of the fish's mouth that pays alike for Jesus the sinless Son of God and for Peter the flawed human being, understood as a coded miniature, is no mere magician's trick. The symbolism is all the more appropriate considering the background of the temple tax. The tax was instituted as part of the Mosaic law at Exodus 30:12-16, where it is called a "ransom" for the soul of each man of Israel and as an "atonement" to prevent destruction from coming upon the nation. The corresponding Greek words from the Septuagint text of these verses, *lutron* and *hilaskomai*, are key words used of the redemptive value of Jesus' death in the New Testament.³⁰

Jonah's Proclamation and the Gospel

The parallels between Jonah and Jesus do not stop at the resurrection. After his deliverance Jonah undertakes an unprecedented mission to Gentiles, preaching judgment to the infamously cruel Assyrians at Nineveh. Jesus, after his resurrection, delegates the disciples to preach in his name to the world, Gentiles included.³¹ In both instances the goal of the preaching is repentance and the emphasis is on God's mercy toward those who have not known him.

When Jonah declares impending doom on Nineveh the Assyrians are struck by his message, perhaps not least because a prophet is audacious enough to deliver it to their faces, and for a time they repent of their wickedness. The unnamed Assyrian king dresses in sackcloth and issues a proclamation commanding Ninevites to "call urgently on God" and "give up their evil ways and their violence" in the hope that "God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."³²

The language in the Septuagint text of this section of Jonah, which says that the people of Nineveh "turned each one," *apostrepsan hekastos*, from their "wicked ways," *poneras*, is followed closely in the New Testament book of Acts where Peter says to his listeners that Jesus wants to bless them by "turning each one of you," *apostrephein*

hekaston, away from his “wicked ways,” *ponerion*.³³

We know from the book of Ephesians that it is appropriate to think of Jesus as preaching the message of God’s grace to all people, Gentiles as well as Jews, even though he did so by means of missionaries such as Peter and Paul. The second chapter of Ephesians introduces that thought by first referring to the sorry spiritual condition of the Gentiles before the message reached them. They are reminded that they were “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.” The pitiable ignorance described in Ephesians 2:12 recalls God’s description of the morally insensible Assyrians of Jonah’s day, who “don’t know their right hand from their left.”³⁴

Ephesians goes on to say that the Gentiles, who were once “far off” from God, have been brought near through the blood of Jesus. The catalyst for their repentance and reconciliation was evangelism, as it had been for the Assyrians. “He [Jesus] came and preached peace to you [Gentiles] who were far away and peace to those [Jews] who were near.”³⁵ The great missionary effort among the Gentiles is attributed to Jesus as if he personally preached to them the way Jonah did to the Ninevites.

With the outline of the fulfillment now clear, we return to Jesus’ statement that he would give no sign to his generation except his death and resurrection as typified by Jonah. We noted previously this saying must be weighed against Jewish hopes for a Messiah who would wield invincible power against the hated Roman occupation.

Exaggeration for emphasis also has to be considered where the context suggests it. For example, in Genesis God tells Jacob that “your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel.”³⁶ In fact, both Jacob and the nation that descended from him continued to be referred to occasionally by his birth name, but that name soon was overshadowed by the designation “Israel.” By a similar hyperbole, when Jesus spoke about “no sign but that of Jonah” he may have meant that other works of his that might be called signs would pale next to his Jonah-like journey into and out of the grave. Here our study merges with the last chapter, where we saw that the fulfillment of the third sign of Moses, the pouring out of water and blood, would inspire belief where previous signs had not.

These suggestions as to how Jesus' comment was intended find support in a dialog from John's Gospel. Jesus' opponents try to trap him by asking, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answers, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The passage goes on to say that the "temple" Jesus refers to is his own body.³⁷ By refusing to recommend any sign to his antagonists except his coming death and resurrection, at the same time veiling his meaning thinly in a riddle, Jesus relies here on the same strategy he does in the Jonah saying of Matthew.

The passage in John is evidence that for all the peculiarities of the fourth Gospel the Jesus it portrays is the same one we meet in Matthew, Mark and Luke. And since John freely describes Jesus' supernatural works as "signs," we know that Jesus is not denying the significance of those works, but rather putting his crucifixion and resurrection in a special category. Later, the apostolic proclamation of the early church, the *kerygma*, will identify the death and resurrection of Jesus as the key miracle in the outworking of God's purpose. That central divine act gives sinful man the chance of entry into the kingdom of God. "I delivered to you as of first importance," Paul assures the Corinthians, "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."³⁸ Every aspect of Jesus' statement about the sign of Jonah now makes sense.

Where Did Jonah-Jesus Parallel Come From?

The similarity between Jonah's experiences and those of Jesus must have been orchestrated, but how and by whom? Consider the accounts in the Gospels of John and of Matthew. John most closely follows the actual language of the Greek Septuagint text of Jonah. Pilate's questions, "Where are you from?" and "What did you do?," in Greek *pothen ei su* and *ti epoiesas*, nearly duplicate those in Jonah, *pothen erche* and *ti touto epoiesas*, although they occur in a different order.³⁹ Matthew lacks these specific questions, but it contains an echo of Jonah not present in John, namely, Pilate's declaration of innocence regarding Jesus' blood.⁴⁰ If either of the two authors consciously imitated the other by basing part of his Gospel on Jonah,

why would he leave out parallels the first already had established?

The Gospel of Luke compounds the difficulty. Like John, Luke lacks the declaration of innocence by Pilate and the earlier saying of Jesus that compares Jonah's three days in the fish with Jesus' three days in the grave. However, the episode of Pilate attempting to "sail" against the will of the Jewish crowd has more dramatic intensity in Luke than in the other Gospels. And Luke compares the preaching of Jesus with that of Jonah more pointedly than does Matthew, saying that Jonah prefigured Jesus by becoming a "sign" to the people of Nineveh.⁴¹ The verses in Luke regarding Jonah's preaching set the stage for the repeated post-resurrection commands to go and preach to Gentiles as recorded in Acts, the sequel to Luke's Gospel.⁴²

Given the different ways the Gospels incorporate the Jonah storyline, how can literary borrowing explain it? Imagine, for example, that the borrowing began with the writing of Mark, which is usually assumed to be the first Gospel and which has the simplest form of the Jonah motif. Even if the authors of Matthew, Luke and John all had access to Mark when they began writing, each of them would have to have recognized that Jonah was the "script" being followed by Mark's author. After making the discovery, each of them must then have decided to expand the Jonah parallel in his particular Gospel version.

An astonishing degree of coincidence between the actions of the evangelists has to be accepted along with this theory, the purpose of which after all is to explain an otherwise unacceptable level of coincidence between Jonah and the Gospels.

The proposal that the evangelists simply appropriated plot elements from Jonah runs up against another obstacle because it assumes that they were free to invent the end of Jesus' biography. Clearly, that assumption is false. Certain beliefs about Jesus were widespread by the middle of the first century, well before any commonly accepted date for the writing of the Gospels. Among these was the teaching that he had been "crucified" by the "world rulers" of the time, the Romans.⁴³ But it was also thought that leading elements of Jewish society had called for Jesus' death.⁴⁴

Other early beliefs were that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, that he understood his death to be necessary and accepted it

voluntarily, and that his death has redemptive value.⁴⁵ Whether or not these beliefs are provable historically, there is no doubt that they were widely held by Christians from an early date. When the evangelists began to write their accounts of Jesus' life such traditions formed the boundaries they had to stay within if they wanted their writings to be accepted by believers. These constraints would have applied even under the most cynical theory of how the Gospels were composed.

It is not difficult to see how early traditions would guide, specifically, Gospel narratives about the events immediately preceding the crucifixion. In all the Gospels the priests condemn Jesus and bring him before Pilate, asking that he be put to death as a threat to public order. To Pilate's puzzlement Jesus offers no defense, yet Pilate hesitates to grant the Sanhedrin's request. A partisan crowd incited by the Jewish leadership agitates for Jesus' execution until the Roman governor acquiesces.

Aside from certain details, an account substantially like this was demanded by the tradition that Jesus' enemies among his own people were the driving force behind the crucifixion even though the Romans carried it out. Of indirect support are Christian traditions that Jesus approved the paying of Roman taxes and opposed violent resistance toward the imperial regime, since a rabbi who took such positions would not be a natural target for Roman repression.⁴⁶

The enmity between Jesus and Jewish religious leaders evident in the trial scenes of the Gospels is not depicted as a sudden development. The Gospels uniformly teach that it was a consequence of Jesus' ministry. Jesus not only declined to submit to institutional religious authority, he also leveled stinging accusations against both priests and Pharisees. New Testament scholar Graham Stanton has pointed out that a clash between Jesus and the Judaism of his day is the most natural explanation for the tensions that appear to have existed between Jews and Christians as far back as available sources can take us and that reached the "point of no return" in the late first or early second century.⁴⁷

Given the content of early Christian tradition and the relationship between the story of Jesus' condemnation and the rest of the Gospel narrative, it is impossible to imagine that the evangelists manufactured the circumstances of Jesus' death to conform to a few verses in a minor prophetic book of the Hebrew Bible. Equally

inconceivable is the suggestion that Christian tradition itself originated when certain Jews decided to project the experiences of Jonah onto a Galilean peasant, paying little regard to the actual circumstances of that man's life and death, and then began to proclaim their "new Jonah" as the Messiah.

We began in Chapter 1 with a study about Jacob and have added several typological sketches to it. Before we add still other examples we will consider in greater detail the question of typology and coincidence.

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- 1 2 Kgs 14:25; see note to John 7:52, *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 1533.
- 2 Luke 11:29-30, 32.
- 3 Matt 12:39-40.
- 4 Jonah 1:6.
- 5 Matt 27:14; cf. Mark 15:4-5.
- 6 John 19:10.
- 7 Jonah 1:8.
- 8 Mark 15:2; John 19:9; cf. Luke 23:3.
- 9 Jonah 1:9-10.
- 10 John 19:7-8.
- 11 Jonah 1:13-14; Matt 27:21-24.
- 12 Jonah 1:15; Matt 27:26 and parallels.
- 13 Jonah 1:16; Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47.
- 14 Jonah 1:11; Matt 27:22.
- 15 John 19:15-16.
- 16 Ps 44:23-24.
- 17 Cf. Luke 21:25; Jude 13.
- 18 Matt 27:24.
- 19 Mark 15:7; Luke 23:25; Barrabas means “son of the father” and may not have been his real name.
- 20 Jonah 1:5.
- 21 Rom 10:7; cf. Deut 30:13.
- 22 Ps 69:14-15; cf. Ps 124.
- 23 Exod 15:12; Prov 1:12; cf. Job 2:3, where the Hebrew reads “swallow him up without cause.”
- 24 Jonah 2:3, LXX; Acts 2:31.
- 25 Phil 2:8.
- 26 1 Pet 2:24.
- 27 Phil 2:8-9.
- 28 Isa 53:12; cf. John 10:17.
- 29 Lev 17:11.
- 30 Mark 10:45; Heb 2:17.
- 31 Matt 28:19.
- 32 Jonah 3:8-9.
- 33 Acts 3:19, 26.
- 34 Jonah 4:11.
- 35 Eph 2:17.
- 36 Gen 32:28.
- 37 John 2:18-21.
- 38 1 Cor 15:3-4.
- 39 John 19:9; 18:35; Jonah 1:8, 10.
- 40 Matt 27:24; cf. Jonah 1:14.
- 41 Luke 11:30, 32.
- 42 Acts 1:8; 9:15; 10:34-35; 13:46-47; 22:21.
- 43 1 Cor 2:8.

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- 44 1 Thess 2:14-15.
- 45 1 Cor 15:4; Gal 1:3-4; Rom 5:8-9; 6:23.
- 46 Rom 12:17-13:7.
- 47 Stanton, *Gospel Truth?*, 160-62.

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