



THE SIGN OF JONAH

Taking it seriously

Some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” And He said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, but a sign will not be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as ‘Jonah was in the belly of the monster three days and three nights’ so also the Son of Man will be in the heart of the Earth three days and three nights. Ninevite men will rise in judgment with this generation and they will condemn it, since they repented because of the preaching by Jonah and behold *One* greater than Jonah *is* here. *The Queen of the South* will rise in the judgment with this generation and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the Earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold *One* greater than Solomon is here.”

(Matthew 12: 38 – 42)

When Jesus was in the middle of His ministry, by which time His name was *a household name* and He was famous for His miraculous powers and righteous teaching, there was a demand issued by the Scribes and Pharisees (although note carefully that the text above says *some of* the Scribes and Pharisees) for a “sign” to “prove” His credentials. Plainly at this time in Jesus’ ministry many were openly asking the question, *is this the promised Messiah?* The tragedy of the

Pharisees' demand was, of course, that Jesus had previously given many signs, even (it would appear) shortly before this impertinent demand was issued, and much to the amazement of onlookers, when Jesus healed a blind-mute who also "had a demon". (Matthew 12: 22-32). What was the reaction of the religious authorities to this wonderful healing? They attributed it to the devil; effectively saying that Jesus had healed by Satan's power and that Jesus was in league with the devil. These religious authorities had seen holiness and righteousness at work, yet had rejected it in the most caustic terms. Was this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:22-30 and Matthew 12:22-32) and if so a committing of the unpardonable sin?

In response to the Pharisaical demand, Yeshua gave a simple answer. The ONLY sign that a sinful generation would receive, would be the sign of Jonah. It does seem to this writer that the biblical account of Jonah in the Bible is given short-shrift by most exegetes. To this doubting modern age the "story" of a man in the belly of a fish seems fanciful and most exegetes and preachers seem to think that Bible readers are supposed to 'discern' some spiritual lesson from the text. The 'lesson' associated with Jonah is generally said to be something along the lines that "*God loves sinners and wasn't Jonah naughty in refusing to honour God's demand to preach repentance*"? It is almost as if we are being told to consider the "story" of Jonah to be apocryphal or metaphorical, and one that we are supposed to see *beyond*. Yet in the light of our book looking at the three days and three nights question, and of Yeshua's specific response in Matthew chapter 12, can we seriously say this is the way in which Yeshua viewed the account of Jonah? Remember, the Pharisees had asked a thoroughly impertinent and disbelieving question and Jesus said that ONLY one sign would be given, and that would be the sign of Jonah. There is a clear need for us, then, to understand *what is the real meaning of Jonah*, and also to determine whether Jesus allegorized the "story".

The New Jerusalem Bible of the Roman Catholic tradition has this to say as its editor's introduction to Jonah: "A light satire, with no pretensions of being historical. It teaches the universality of God's love, probably to correct the exclusiveness of the post-exilic community. The willing obedience of the Ninevites contrasts pointedly with Jonah's obstinacy and bad temper. This fictional form is unique

in the prophetic tradition”¹. We must immediately critique the Roman Catholic position, for it acknowledges that this so-called “fictional form” is unique in the prophetic tradition. Does this statement not at least raise in our minds the possibility that, in fact, this is no literary aberration or literary device, but rather that it is an account of a series of events that are historical? Of course we can easily recognize the key point that the Lord Jesus is making – that His Own deceased body would be three days and nights in a burial chamber, following which new life would be given. As the Lord’s crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection are arguably the key turning point in the history of human-kind, can we really say that Jesus would have made direct analogy to the awful crucifixion events that lay ahead with a “light satire” (in the words of the New Jerusalem Bible)? We are surely entitled to ask, how did Jesus view the account of Jonah and what is the REAL lesson that it contains?

It is not the message of this article to pit liberal ‘interpretation’ against conservative exegesis. If readers want to get to the core of Jonah, then the Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible provides a detailed and valuable blow by blow exposition. It concludes that “there seems to be no convincing reason for rejecting the historicity of the book of Jonah on the basis of the arguments generally given. Jesus referred to the account of Jonah in a way that seems to imply His acceptance of its validity”². Another brilliant exposition is found in David Pawson’s significant work “Unlocking the Bible – a unique overview of the whole Bible”³. Well worth reading!⁴ Of all the prophets, Jesus compared Himself to Jonah. So who was Jonah? He was a prophet of Israel who lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II (793 - 753 BC). In the midst of prosperity matched by moral decline, Jonah remained a true and zealous patriot. God ordered Jonah to go to Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and there to preach repentance. We should note carefully that the Assyrians were an excessively cruel and expansive-militant nation. The cruelty of the Assyrians might easily be

¹ The New Jerusalem Bible, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990, ISBN 0232518904

² Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, Baker Books, 1997, page 1206

³ Unlocking the Bible, Collins, 2015, chapter 18

⁴ In addition, there is a complete and free series of videos by David Pawson on every book of the Bible. Just Google Youtube and David Pawson and you are likely to find what you are looking for. Specifically and on Jonah, this is the URL of Pawson’s lecture of some 40 minutes:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_UJOIgazU4

compared to the Nazis, or to our own contemporary Daesh (the Islamic State in its various guises).

That Jonah was single-mindedly opposed to ministering to the Ninevites is hardly surprising. Not only was their cruelty absolutely appalling, they were intermittent enemies of Israel and Jonah sensed that God would in the future use them as a terrible punishment on rebellious Israel. So it proved to be, as the Assyrians took the Northern Kingdom of Israel (note, not Judah) into captivity in 722 BC. In Jonah's refusal to preach to the Assyrians, not only was there his own safety to consider, perhaps more importantly was the moral state of this evil heathen empire. It is probably fair to say that Jonah hated the Assyrians and did not want to see God's mercy extended to them. The closest analogy that we can think of, perhaps, would be that in 1943 at the height of the Second World War, God had commanded a Jewish rabbi to travel to Berlin and preach repentance leading towards national renewal. It was this sort of task and this sort of moral dilemma that God had given to Jonah. Jonah rebelled at this order and went in the opposite direction, aiming to reach Tarshish. The precise location of Tarshish remains, today, the subject of scholarly debate but Spain or Sardinia are two distinct possibilities. The point is that Ninevah lay East and Jonah headed West, by sea.

Jonah's ship was struck by a supernatural storm, leading Jonah to own up to being the cause of the storm and telling the ship's crew to throw him overboard, so as to save themselves and finish him off. Jonah was a seriously unhappy prophet! He preferred death to fulfilling God's specific command – but God was having none of it! He had commanded and Jonah would definitely fulfill the command. It is at this point in the account that the major modern error in exegesis appears to occur, even amongst Bible believing Christians. There is an inexplicable (and on reflection, rather childish) assumption that Jonah was alive in the belly of the "monster" (as the ONMB has it) or "fish" (as some other translations have it). Yet the Bible is clear that Jonah drowned. Jonah chapter 2 is a "prayer" of Jonah acknowledging his own death, yet God's salvation. What does Jonah say?

Drowned

These key verses point unremittingly to Jonah's physical death:

3. [Jonah] said, I cried for myself to the LORD by reason of my affliction and He answered me. Out of the inmost of the grave I cried and You heard my voice.

Comment: people who are dead are found in graves!

4. For You had thrown me into the deep, in the midst of the seas and the floods compassed me about. All Your billows and Your waves passed over me.

Comment: It takes about 90 seconds to drown. Yet Jonah was "flooded" and covered over by water. Why do we assume he did not drown? Lungs filled with water tend to drag a body down.

6. The waters surrounded me, even to my very life. The depth closed all around me, the weeds were wrapped about my head.

Comment: "even to my very life". This again appears to point to the loss of that same life. People who have sea weeds wrapped around their heads are likely to be drowned people.

7. I went down to the bottom of the mountains. The earth with her bars was about me forever, yet You have brought up my life from corruption, LORD my God. 8. When my life fainted within me.

Comment: Jonah was deep in water on the sea bed – what he calls "the bottom" of the (underwater) "mountains". Having been *rescued from corruption* suggests that, miraculously, his dead body was in some way preserved. Jonah's life had "fainted".

The fact that Jonah's body would see no corruption calls to mind the prophecy in Psalm 16:10, which most serious Bible exegetes understand to be a direct reference to Yeshua: **For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.** Psalm 16:10 (NASB). The apostle Paul certainly

saw the verse in the same way (Acts 13:35). Jonah was neither abandoned, nor did he rot in a grave, because God had other plans.

The sign of Jonah, therefore, was more than ‘just’ the miraculous resurrection of his body. It was much more about God’s offer to all Mankind, even to the most evil among us, whom can never the less find peace and forgiveness – yes, and new life – because God offers it. One “sign of Jonah” that we must take seriously is that all too often it is the conventionally religious who miss out on that offer eternally, and yet the truly penitent sinner who *can* indeed close with the offer – for eternity. Surely this is the scandal of the gospel of which the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthian assembly in 1 Corinthians 1:23. The gospel, Paul says, is seen as a stumbling block by Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, and yet it is the power and wisdom of God. The word normally translated as “stumbling block” in most English translations, is taken from the Greek word *skandalon*, from which we get our English word scandal! It surely *is* a scandal (in the world’s estimation) that the most irreligious and most sinful can yet find total forgiveness, whereas the conventionally ‘religious’ may in the end miss it, for sometimes their hearts are not where their mouths are! Their private actions may belie their public piety.

It is foolishness to try to compass what is in any way of thinking a miraculous event, from end to end. In terms of the miracle with the fish (or “monster” as the ONMB helpfully puts it) we should note that occasionally ‘monster’ fish do try to swallow dead people. In the UK a popular television series called “River Monsters” depicts a fresh water angler, Jeremy Wade, searching for and then taking⁵ monster freshwater fish. There ARE fish that can grow to extraordinary sizes, and some of these fish take a distinct interest in human flesh. One photograph that is frequently used in the television series shows a dead giant catfish with two human legs sticking prominently out of its mouth. This fish had swallowed, whole, the head and torso of a drowned fisherman. Presumably it had proverbially *bitten off more than it could chew* and died in the process. No doubt a large sea fish of some sort might well attempt the same thing, especially if it was directed by the power of God. If Jonah’s dead body was sunk at the bottom of the sea it might well make a tempting target. Furthermore,

⁵ Jeremy Wade always releases them, unharmed!

the Bible states clearly that Jonah's head was wrapped in seaweed. As seaweed does not exist in the deepest levels on the ocean floor, might this mean that the "fish" picked up Jonah's lifeless body near the sea shore? Seaweed typically begins to peter-out at a depth of 75 feet, so it is just possible that his body might have been swallowed near the shoreline, so facilitating the 'spewing out' (Jonah 2:11) of Jonah's body on shore? We repeat it is not wise to speculate on what was, by any way of thinking, a thorough miracle, from end to end⁶.

Resurrections

The other thing we should keep in mind as we read the account of Jonah is that there are a number of other resurrections in the Bible. Every time a person was raised from death, it was a stupendous miracle, demonstrating that the God Who is in Himself the source of all life has the ability to give life to anyone He chooses – even after death. The following people were raised from the dead in the Bible:

The widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kings 17:17–24). Elijah the prophet raised the widow of Zarephath's son from the dead. Elijah was lodging in an upper room of the widow's house during a severe drought in the land. While he was there, the widow's son became ill and died. In her grief, the woman brought the body of her son to Elijah assuming that his presence in her household had brought about the death of her boy as a judgment on her past sin. Elijah took the dead boy from her arms, went to the upper room, and prayed, "Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!" (verse 21). Elijah stretched himself out on the boy three times as he prayed, and "the Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived" (verse 22). The prophet brought the boy to his mother, who was filled with faith in the power of God through Elijah: "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth" (verse 24).

The Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4:18–37). The prophet Elisha raised the Shunammite woman's son from the dead. Elisha

⁶ Such speculation is unlikely to impress a sceptic, in any case. They will merely focus, then, on what they perceive as the "unlikeliness" of the scenario presented to them.

regularly stayed in Shunem in an upper room prepared for him by this woman and her husband. One day, while Elisha was at Mount Carmel, the couple's young son died. The woman carried the body of her son to Elisha's room and laid it on the bed (verse 21). Then, without even telling her husband the news, she departed for Carmel to find Elisha (verses 22–25). When she found Elisha, she pleaded with him to return to Shunem. Elisha sent his servant, Gehazi, ahead of them with instructions to lay Elisha's staff on the boy's face (verse 31). As soon as Elisha and the Shunammite woman arrived back home, Elisha went to the upper room, shut the door, and prayed. Then he stretched out on top of the boy's body, and the body began to warm (verse 34). Elisha arose, walked about the room, and stretched himself out on the body again. The boy then sneezed seven times and awoke from death (verse 35). Elisha then delivered the boy, alive, to his mother (verses 36–37).

The man raised out of Elisha's grave (2 Kings 13:20–21). Elisha is connected with another resurrection that occurred *after* his death. Sometime after Elisha had died and was buried, some men were burying another body in the same area. The grave diggers saw a band of Moabite raiders approaching, and, rather than risk an encounter with the Moabites, they threw the man's body into Elisha's grave. Scripture records that, "when the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet" (verse 21).

The widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11–17). This is the first of the resurrections that Jesus performed. As the Lord approached the town of Nain, He met a funeral procession leaving the city. In the coffin was a young man, the only son of a widow. When Jesus saw the procession, "his heart went out to [the woman] and he said, 'Don't cry'" (verse 13). Jesus came close, touched the shroud and commanded the dead man: "Young man, I say to you, get up!" (verse 14). Obeying the divine order, "the dead man sat up and began to talk" (verse 15). And thus Jesus turned the funeral into a gathering of praise and worship: "God has come to help his people," the people said (verse 16).

Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:52–56). Jesus showed His power over death by raising the young daughter of Jairus, a synagogue leader. The Lord was surrounded by crowds when Jairus came to Him,

begging Him to visit his house and heal his dying twelve-year-old daughter (verses 41–42). Jesus began to follow Jairus home, but on the way a member of Jairus' household approached them with the sad news that Jairus' daughter had died. Jesus turned to Jairus with words of hope: "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed" (verse 50). Upon arriving at Jairus' house, Jesus took the girl's parents, Peter, James, and John and entered the room where the body lay. There, "he took her by the hand and said, 'My child, get up!' Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up" (verses 54–55). Jesus and His disciples departed, leaving the resurrected girl with her astonished parents.

Lazarus of Bethany (*John 11*). The third person that Jesus raised from the dead was His friend Lazarus. Word had come to Jesus that Lazarus was ill, but Jesus did not go to Bethany to heal him. Instead, He told His disciples, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (verse 4). A few days later, Jesus told His disciples that Lazarus had died, but He promised a resurrection: "I am going there to wake him up" (verse 11). When Jesus reached Bethany, four days after Lazarus' death, Lazarus' grieving sisters both greeted Jesus with the same words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (verses 21 and 32). Jesus, speaking to Martha, promised to raise Lazarus from the dead (verse 23) and proclaimed Himself to be "the resurrection and the life" (verse 25). Jesus asked to see the grave. When He got to the place, He commanded the stone to be rolled away from the tomb (verse 39), and He prayed (verses 41–42) and "called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'" (verse 43). Just as Jesus had promised, "the dead man came out" (verse 44). The result of this miracle was that God was glorified and "many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him" (verse 45). Others, however, refused to believe in Jesus and plotted to destroy both Jesus and Lazarus (*John 11:53; 12:10*).⁷

Various saints in Jerusalem (*Matthew 27:50–53*). The Bible mentions some resurrections that occurred en masse at the resurrection of Christ. When Jesus died, "the earth shook, the rocks

⁷ Note carefully that not even bodily Resurrection is sufficient "evidence" for those who are determined to oppose Jesus. Here again we must ponder the unforgiveable sin – blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

split and the tombs broke open” (verses 51–52). Those open tombs remained open until the third day. At that time, “the bodies of many holy people . . . were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ Resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people” (verses 52–53). On the day that Jesus was raised to life, these saints were also raised and became witnesses in Jerusalem of the life that only Jesus can give.

Tabitha (*Acts 9:36–43*). Tabitha, whose Greek name was Dorcas, was a believer who lived in the coastal city of Joppa. Her resurrection was effected through the apostle Peter. Dorcas was known for “always doing good and helping the poor” (verse 36). When she died, the believers in Joppa were filled with sadness. They laid the body in an upper room and sent for Peter, who was in the nearby town of Lydda (verses 37–38). Peter came at once and met with the disciples in Joppa, who showed him the clothing that Dorcas had made for the widows there (verse 39). Peter sent them all out of the room and prayed. Then “turning toward the dead woman, he said, ‘Tabitha, get up.’ She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet” (verses 40–41). The overjoyed believers received their resurrected friend, and the news spread quickly throughout the city. “Many people believed in the Lord” as a result (verse 42).

Eutychus (*Acts 20:7–12*). Eutychus was a young man who lived (and died and lived again) in Troas. He was raised from death through the apostle Paul. The believers in Troas were gathered in an upper room to hear the apostle speak. Since Paul was leaving town the next day, he spoke late into the night. One of his congregation was Eutychus, who sat in a window and, unfortunately, fell asleep. He slipped out of the window and fell three stories to his death (verse 9). Paul went down and “threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him” (verse 10). Eutychus was restored to life, went upstairs, and ate a meal with the others. When the meeting finally broke up at daylight, “the people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted” (verse 12).

These resurrections, alongside those of the Lord Jesus Himself, lead us firmly to the view that God is LORD over life and death, and in the future He will raise from death all human-kind on what the Bible

frequently calls “that Day”, more popularly thought of as *the day of judgement*. In the light of these scriptural truths, the reluctance of some Bible exegetes to recognize Jonah’s death and resurrection, especially in the context of the “sign” that Yeshua said was the ONLY sign that would be given, is rather inexplicable.

Parallels

We should not make too much of the fact that Jonah’s life and Jesus’ life contained several parallels. These are not really the “sign of Jonah”, but they are interesting and instructive never the less. Jesus’ general commission to all His disciples is to *preach the message*, to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:19). Some 700 years earlier, God had commissioned Jonah with a similar task – specifically to preach to the Ninevites at the capital of the Assyrian empire. Jonah, as we have seen, was reluctant to do so! God’s final lesson to Jonah was poignant: in spite of Jonah’s reluctance (and disobedience) God’s first and foremost thought was for the innocent who would ultimately suffer – and suffer terribly – if the Ninevites did not finally repent and turn away from their spectacularly evil ways. God’s simple question to Jonah is indeed poignant: **should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also many animals?** (Jonah 4:11). Other translations render this as 120,000 “children”, but the point is clear, that even in Ninevah there are those who were morally innocent of guilt for the running of that appalling city and Empire, in the same way (for example) that there were Germans who were innocent of the atrocities of the Nazi regime in the 1940s. God’s first concern is for the innocent. God does not ultimately want to judge and to find guilty. Not for nothing is eternal judgment described in Isaiah as God’s “strange work” (Isaiah 28:21). God *will* find a way “out” from inevitable judgment, if only we will cooperate with Him!

What parallels the can we find between Jesus and Jonah?

Jonah ran away from his God-given responsibilities	Jesus never ran away from His responsibilities, no matter how hard they were (Matthew 26:39)
Jonah argued with God	Jesus did not argue with His Father
Jonah was motivated by hyper self-righteousness	Jesus displayed righteousness in all things. Whilst the Bible does not specifically state this, we could legitimately say that <i>Jesus is righteousness personified</i>
Jonah was unwilling to forgive	Jesus provides the route to forgiveness
Jonah caused a storm	Jesus calmed a storm
Jonah died and was raised from death, in a mortal body	Jesus died and was raised from death, in an immortal body
Jonah was to be a sign	Jesus used the sign of Jonah

The Sign of Jonah

In the light of the foregoing we can say that Yeshua’s phrase “sign of Jonah” was used by Him as a typological metaphor for His future crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. The Pharisees remained unconvinced of Yeshua’s claims about Himself, despite His having within their sight cured a demon-possessed blind-mute. Later the Pharisees accused Jesus of driving out demons by the power of Satan. Yeshua stated clearly that “**an evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign**”. (Matthew 12:38–41). Surely we must take the Lord literally in this: one day the penitents of Nineveh will indeed be called as “expert witnesses” in condemning those conventionally religious leaders of Jesus’ day. Today’s conventionally religious leaders should learn from this, and quake!

Yeshua’ paralleling of the Pharisees with the people of Nineveh is telling. The people of Nineveh repented of their evil ways (Jonah 3:4–10) after hearing Jonah’s call, yet the Pharisees continued in their

unbelief despite being eyewitnesses to the miracles of Jesus. Yeshua was warning the Pharisees that they were fully culpable for their unbelief, given the conversion of the people of Nineveh, sinners who had received far less evidence than the Pharisees themselves had witnessed.

God often used signs (or miracles) in history to authenticate His chosen messenger. The Lord provided Moses with several miraculous signs in order to prove to others that Moses was appointed by God (Exodus 4:5–9; 7:8–10; 19–20). God sent down fire on Elijah’s altar during Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:36–39). He performed this miracle to demonstrate that the God of Israel is the one true God. Yeshua Himself would perform many miracles (or “signs”) to demonstrate His power over nature (Matthew 4:23; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 8:22–24; John 6:16–24). The “sign of Jonah” would turn out to be Yeshua’s greatest miracle of all. His resurrection would be God’s chief sign that Yeshua is Israel’s long-awaited Messiah (Acts 2:23–32) and demonstrate His claims to deity (Romans 1:3–4).

Demanding a sign runs contrary to the nature of true faith, which will not rely on some spurious “proof” to convince people to believe. If Yeshua had provided a sign like that, it is frankly unlikely that these people would have believed. They were merely challenging Yeshua, and if He did “perform” a sign they would most likely have rejected it. They had, after all, frequently explained away the great miracles He had been performing in their midst. This must remain true today, for all those doubters who say “if only God would provide a sign, then I might consider believing in Him”. Of course they would not! He has provided *just one sign down through history, and the awesome message today remains as ever it was: take it or leave it*. It has been pointed out (interestingly, by some Messianic Jews) that the judgement of God upon Israel and their long time exile from the Land following the Roman wars was not because of their involvement in the Roman crucifixion of Jesus. It was because of their refusal to acknowledge the Resurrection. In a very real sense they, of all people, should have been able to “see” the crucifixion and

Resurrection in the holy purposes of the God of Abraham, and of Isaac and of Jacob.⁸

Is Jonah “a light satire” in the words of the editor of the New Jerusalem Bible? Since the Lord Jesus took it seriously and since it was the ONLY sign that Yeshua would give to a rebellious generation (think also of today’s generation) it seems perverse that (some of) His followers should choose otherwise.

Editor’s Note:

In this article the names Jesus and Yeshua are used interchangeably. They are of course the same name in English and in Hebrew.

⁸ A helpful book looking at some of the modern discussions with Jews relating to Yeshua’s Messianic title is Tony Pearce’s “The Messiah Factor” – still widely available at the time this article was written.