

## THE SIGN OF JONAH: JESUS IN THE HEART OF THE EARTH

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***Abstract:** Jesus associated himself with the “sign of Jonah” on multiple occasions in response to Jewish leaders demanding that he prove his authority. Possible explanations of the sign are examined here with an emphasis on Jesus’s statement that he would be “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt 12:40). A close reading of Jonah 2 reveals that Jesus was describing himself as one who must suffer, but that he was depending upon his Father to rescue him from his descent into death. Unlike traditional explanations which assume that the statement must be restricted to the specific period that Jesus was in the tomb, this approach suggests that Jesus’s descent began in the Garden of Gethsemane before he died.*

***Key words:** sign of Jonah, death, suffering, temple, heart of the earth, three days and three nights*

### I. INTRODUCTION

What sort of action could Jesus perform that would prove his identity? He healed people and cast out demons; yet the Pharisees and teachers of the law were not convinced. They even suggested that Jesus was using demonic power against the demons. They demanded a “sign” that would remove all doubt (Matt 12:38; 16:1; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16; cf. John 2:18; 6:30), but Jesus knew that no miracle would be enough to persuade those who did not believe. Therefore, he refused to accept the challenge. In some of the Synoptic accounts, Jesus instead identified with an unlikely prophet—Jonah—and claimed that the similarity between the two of them would be all that he would offer. According to Matthew’s first account, Jesus suggested that he too would be swallowed up for “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt 12:40). This statement will be the main focus of the discussion here, but it must be understood both in the context of Jesus’s comments and from the perspective of the book of Jonah. Many explanations of this sign have been offered, but few have endeavored a close reading of its primary background in the second chapter of Jonah. The key to a better understanding of Jesus’s relationship with Jonah is found in Jonah’s prayer, where Christ’s mission is illuminated by the suffering of the prophet.

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## II. THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS

Before attempting to interpret the “sign of Jonah” itself, the various ways in which it appears in the NT must first be examined. The generally accepted redactional view is that the versions in Mark and Luke are the earliest (perhaps influenced by a hypothetical collection of sayings referred to as Q), with Matthew later altering the explanation in a somewhat different direction.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the development of the texts offers some insights into the way that the concepts in these multiple accounts were used; however, each Gospel writer portrayed the events in particular ways for the purpose of conveying specific messages. Thus, our hermeneutical method should give priority to listening to each text as an early reader might have initially encountered it. The following paragraphs provide contextual summaries of the key passages in Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John.

After Mark’s record of Jesus feeding four thousand near the Sea of Galilee, the Pharisees approached Jesus in order to determine what he could do, and they tried to obtain from him “a sign from heaven” (Mark 8:11). Jesus’s response “records a nadir of dismay in the Gospel of Mark.”<sup>2</sup> A rare Greek word (participle form of ἀναστενάζω) describes his “sigh” or “groan” of frustration at their obstinate unbelief, suggesting that Jesus has been pushed to the limits of his patience with their hardness of heart. So he emphatically refuses to give them any sign, using a Semitic form of an oath.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards, Jesus confronted the blindness of the disciples, but he also healed the blindness of a poor villager. He talked with his disciples about his identity and then stated that the “Son of Man” must suffer, be rejected, die, and rise again “after three days” (Mark 8:31). The larger passage depicts Jesus refusing to give a sign and instead explaining what will happen to him, including both his death and his resurrection. Although Mark’s record of this discussion is brief, it includes many of the themes that appear in the other Gospels.

Luke’s description of a similar event begins after Jesus had offered his disciples an example of prayer and some instruction about the Father’s generosity (Luke 11:1–13). As soon as Jesus cast out a demon, some accused him of doing it by the power of demons, and others demanded a sign “from heaven” (11:14–16). Apparently, they wanted some unmistakable assurance of the source of Jesus’s power and authority.<sup>4</sup> Jesus wisely pointed out that Satan is not about to undercut his own influence, and someone who is stronger than Satan must be at work in order for

<sup>1</sup> Simon Chow, *The Sign of Jonah Reconsidered: A Study of Its Meaning in the Gospel Traditions* (CBNTS 27; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995), 13–15; Richard Alan Edwards, *The Sign of Jonah in the Theology of the Evangelists and Q* (SBT 2/18; Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1971), 9–11; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978; repr. 1992), 483; and W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2: *Matthew 8–18* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 2:357.

<sup>2</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 235–36.

<sup>3</sup> With the elliptical parts reinserted, the statement would literally be translated, “Truly I tell you, [may God punish me] if a sign is to be given to this generation.” Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2008), 582–84 (§165).

<sup>4</sup> Chow, *Sign of Jonah Reconsidered*, 111.

the demons to be routed. He went on to explain that the unclean spirits that have been cast out (by someone with the strength to overpower Satan) might then gather up additional demons and return to make the cleansed person's life even worse, suggesting that staying clean requires more power than people themselves possess (11:17–26). After this discussion, the crowds around Jesus increased, and he declared that generation to be wicked and only interested in seeking a sign. But none would be given except the “sign of Jonah” (11:29–30). The explanation he offers is that the “Son of Man” will be a sign to that generation in the manner that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites. The foreigners who wanted to hear God's word (in the time of Solomon as well as in the time of Jonah) will be the judge of the Jews who ignored Jesus's message (11:31–32). In Luke's account, Jesus's argument is that obedience is necessary, and such obedience is exemplified in repentance. Since Jesus is greater than Jonah (and even Solomon), all people must repent.<sup>5</sup> It is this transformation—occurring in both Jews and Gentiles—that shines out like a lamp, removing the darkness that is in people (11:33–36). The significant themes on this occasion include the greatness of Jesus (relative to Satan, Solomon, and Jonah), the “sign of Jonah” (notice that the word *σημεῖον*, “sign,” appears four times in only two verses), the implication that the “Son of Man” is also a sign, and the necessity that anyone who would be cleansed must hear, repent, and obey Jesus's message. Although proclamation seems to be more important to Luke in this context than the suffering and death of Jesus, the reader is not given an explanation of how the “preaching of Jonah” relates to Jesus's ministry.

The Gospel of Matthew mentions two occasions on which Jesus referred to the “sign of Jonah.” This alone should suggest to the reader that there were multiple circumstances (and perhaps multiple purposes) in which the motif was used by Jesus (and by the Gospel writers to achieve their purposes). The account in Matthew 12 begins with two Sabbath events: the disciples picking grain to eat and Jesus healing a man's hand. Jesus used these opportunities to assert his superiority over both the temple and the Sabbath (Matt 12:1–13). The Pharisees were incensed enough to conspire to kill Jesus, but he continued to heal people, identifying himself as God's “servant” who was prophesied in Isaiah 42. After Jesus healed a demon-possessed man, the Pharisees accused Jesus of using Satan's power to drive out demons (Matt 12:22–24). Jesus responded that Satan's kingdom is not divided (insinuating that some who claim to be part of God's kingdom are more divisive than demons) and that anyone who accuses Jesus of employing Satan's power is guilty of rejecting God's Spirit—a sin for which there is no remedy (12:25–32). Then Jesus claimed that a person's behavior is evidence of the sort of spirit that controls that person. Immediately after these comments, some Pharisees and teachers of the law demanded to see Jesus perform a sign—some sort of divine evidence that his authority is from heaven. Instead, Jesus called them “an evil and adulterous generation” and refused to give any sign except “the sign of the prophet

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, “The Sign of Jonah,” *JETS* 23 (1980): 30.

Jonah” (12:38–39). The explanation of the sign consists of an analogy between the period (“three days and three nights”) that Jonah was in the whale and the period that the Son of Man will be “in the heart of the earth.” Jesus then went on to say, as he did in Luke, that the foreigners who listened and repented in the past will rise up and judge the current generation (12:41–42). Returning to the subject of demons, Jesus then explained that “this evil generation” was becoming more wicked as unclean spirits took up residence in the people where God’s Spirit should have been dwelling. Notice that Jesus has compared himself to Jonah in two ways: first, in regard to the entombment in the fish, corresponding to “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”; and second, in regard to Jonah’s preaching, corresponding to Jesus’s own preaching.<sup>6</sup> There is more emphasis in this account on Jonah’s ordeal in the fish than on his preaching, although the deliverance from the fish is not stated explicitly. Therefore, the most significant themes here include the greatness of Jesus (relative to the temple, Satan, Solomon, and Jonah), his identity as the “servant” of Isaiah 42, and the “sign of Jonah.” Matthew sets up a correspondence between Jonah and the Son of Man, between the “belly” of the fish and the “heart of the earth,” and between the equivalent periods of time spent in both (Matt 12:40). Notice that the sign is described in terms of the suffering rather than the rescue.<sup>7</sup>

Matthew’s second account of the “sign of Jonah” follows the feeding of the four thousand, setting it in the same context as Mark’s version. Here Jesus is approached by the awkward combination of Pharisees and Sadducees, who demanded a “sign from heaven” in order to test him (Matt 16:1). Matthew records a lengthier reply than Mark, telling his questioners that they know how to interpret the signs of the weather, but they do not discern the significance of the times.<sup>8</sup> They were missing the clues that were right in front of them. Therefore, because the Pharisees and Sadducees were not really looking for the Messiah, Jesus refused to give them a sign—except for the “sign of Jonah” (Matt 16:4). Afterwards, Jesus warned his disciples about the teachings and influence (“yeast”) of the Jewish leaders, and he quizzed them on what they understood about the identity of the “Son of Man” (16:13–16). Then he spoke about building his church and he explained to his followers that he must suffer and be killed and “on the third day be raised” (16:21). Notice that this overall passage employs most of the same events and themes that

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<sup>6</sup> Bryan D. Estelle, *Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy: The Gospel according to Jonah* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 72; and Charles W. Allen, “The Sign of Jonah: Matthew 16:14,” *Enc* 51.2 (Spring 1990): 192.

<sup>7</sup> The opposite conclusion is reached by R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1971), 44; and Joachim Jeremias, “Ἰωνᾶς,” *TDNT* 3:409. These authors claim that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites specifically as one who had been delivered from death.

<sup>8</sup> Most scholars regard Matt 16:2–3 as a later insertion because several early manuscripts do not include it. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 33. However, the uncertainty of the text does not impact this study; there is ample evidence that most of the people around Jesus did not understand the full nature of his identity.

Mark included. Jesus refused to give a sign (although Matthew does not express it as emphatically as Mark), he referred to himself as the “Son of Man” in the context of exploring his identity, and he explained that he must suffer and die and rise again.

Although the Gospel of John does not include an explicit reference to the “sign of Jonah,” there are two passages that are similar to those discussed thus far. After Jesus made a commotion in the temple, the Jews asked him for a sign to prove his authority for doing such things (John 2:15–18). Instead of referring to Jonah on this occasion, Jesus claimed that he would raise up the temple in three days (2:19). John then explains to the reader that Jesus meant that he would raise his own body from the dead. In this case, there is no refusal to give a sign, and shortly afterward people saw him performing signs, and “many believed in his name” (2:23). Later in John’s Gospel, after Jesus had fed a large crowd, he told some of the people that it is better to seek “food” that is eternal—available from the “Son of Man”—than food that perishes (John 6:26–27). Jesus explained that what was required was to believe in him, so they asked for a sign in order that they might believe (6:28–30). Again, their request for a sign was not refused, but instead Jesus compared himself (as a sign from heaven) to the manna that God had given to Israel. Jesus is the “bread of life,” but he acknowledged that many would not believe in him (6:31–36). In this context, Jesus did not discuss his own resurrection but instead claimed that those who do believe will be raised up on the last day (6:37–40). The primary theme which we see here in John’s Gospel that is similar to the Synoptic Gospels is Jesus’s claim that he will rise from the dead in three days (equating himself with the temple).

Having now examined the NT texts in which the Jewish leaders asked Jesus to perform a sign, we are in a better position to connect similar passages. The feeding of the four thousand is a key event contributing to the context of both Mark 8 and Matthew 16, and the comments that Jesus makes about rising after three days (or “on the third day”) are more explicit in these two passages than in the other instances. Therefore, we can surmise that the similarity of language and form in Mark 8 and Matthew 16 suggest that they describe a single event.<sup>9</sup> Exorcisms and a discussion of Satan’s kingdom play an important role in both Matthew 12 and Luke 11, and Jesus refers to his hearers as an “evil generation.” Both passages also include references to Jesus being greater than Solomon and Jonah. Luke prefers to emphasize the role of proclamation in producing repentance, while Matthew focuses more on Jesus’s suffering (and the hope for deliverance), but the difference in application by the writer does not preclude the possibility of the two accounts describing a single occasion. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Matthew 12 and Luke 11 describe the same event and that each Gospel writer applied the event in particular ways to reinforce his message.<sup>10</sup> Returning to Mark 8, one might insist

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<sup>9</sup> Edwards, *Sign of Jonah*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> This is the conclusion reached by John Howton, “The Sign of Jonah,” *SJT* 15 (1962): 288–89; and Robert Horton Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 243. Other scholars often deny the possibility that Jesus (or the Gospel writers) might

that Jesus claimed there would be no sign at all, but in a sense that is the meaning of his statement in the other passages about the “sign of Jonah.” The demand for a sign was in fact a form of willful unbelief, and Jesus refused to play the game of those who were challenging him.<sup>11</sup> The people who accept the message and believe it (like the Ninevites) will recognize God in the signs that are offered, but those whose hearts are hardened will not repent regardless of the signs.<sup>12</sup> Even resurrection will not convince everyone.

### III. INTERPRETATIVE APPROACHES

The meaning of the “sign of Jonah” has long been debated, and the most popular suggestions for the sign relate it either to Jonah’s three days inside the great fish (with connections to Jesus’s own death, descent, deliverance, and resurrection) or to Jonah’s preaching to the repentant Ninevites (corresponding to the responses of people to Jesus’s own message).<sup>13</sup> A related explanation associates Jonah’s message of judgment with the future return of Jesus, the Son of Man, for judgment—equating the “sign of Jonah” with the “sign of the Son of Man” in Matt 24:30.<sup>14</sup> Less obvious solutions assume that Jonah’s name has been misunderstood and misreported—that it was originally intended as a reference either to “John” (the Baptist) or to a “dove” that represents Israel.<sup>15</sup>

Assuming that the Synoptic authors were not mistaken or misguided in their portrayal of Jesus, the possible meanings of the sign should be found in the obvious antecedents in the story of Jonah. In fact, Jewish writings prior to the first century reflect the same understandings of Jonah as described in the NT, although the application was made to the salvation of Israel (or all humanity) rather than the Messiah.<sup>16</sup> Jonah was often identified in Jewish writings as the widow’s son whom Elijah raised from the dead, and this association helped promote Jonah as an ex-

have used a single incident to teach more than one lesson. For example, R. B. Y. Scott, “The Sign of Jonah: An Interpretation,” *Int* 19 (1965): 18, claims that “the two interpretations of what Jesus meant by ‘the sign of Jonah’ are essentially different and mutually exclusive.”

<sup>11</sup> Phillip Cary, *Jonah* (Brazos Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 79–80.

<sup>12</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 367.

<sup>13</sup> A. K. M. Adam, “The Sign of Jonah: A Fish-Eye View,” *Sem* 51 (1990): 182. This author provides an excellent history of interpretation (pp. 182–85), referring particularly to R. H. Bowers, *The Legend of Jonah* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 112–18; and Leonhard Goppelt, *TYPOS: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (trans. Donald H. Madvig; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 80–81. Those who hold this viewpoint usually emphasize the future tense of the verb (“will be given”) in Luke 11:29.

<sup>15</sup> For an interpretation of the name as “John,” see Cavendish Moxon, “Τὸ Σημεῖον Ἰωάννα,” *ExpTim* 22 (1911): 566–67; and J. Hugh Michael, “The Sign of John,” *JTS* 21 (1920): 146–59. An interpretation of the word as “dove” is presented by Howton, “Sign of Jonah,” 304. The Hebrew meaning of “Jonah” is “dove,” and it is a word that was used to describe Israel in Hos 7:11.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Allan Powell, “Echoes of Jonah in the New Testament,” *WW* 27 (2007): 161; and Chow, *Sign of Jonah Reconsidered*, 212–13. Cf. 3 Macc. 6:8; *m. Ta’anit* 2:4.

ample of resurrection.<sup>17</sup> Early Christian writers generally regarded the “sign of Jonah” as a reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

In order to comprehend the meaning of the “sign of Jonah,” one must first understand the notion of a sign that the Pharisees requested—and also what sort of sign Jesus was offering. Jesus had already been performing miraculous healings and exorcisms, so his power was evident to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Their demand was for some verification from heaven (see Matt 16:1) regarding Jesus’s source of authority. This is similar to the interchange that Jesus had with the chief priests and elders in the temple when they demanded that he explain where he got his “authority” (Matt 21:23). By refusing to give the sort of sign that was demanded, Jesus was either telling them that he was sufficiently identifiable in the works of healing and mercy that he had already been performing, or that he was going to do something that they would not expect.<sup>19</sup> Jesus was urging them to immediately repent (like the Ninevites), and it was for that reason that he was refusing to give them what they desired. The Jewish leaders were acting like the generation that Moses led into the wilderness,<sup>20</sup> who were unsatisfied with the signs which the Lord had performed among them (Num 14:11, 22) and refused to believe (Ps 78:11–57). Similarly, Jesus was not going to give the sort of sign that would simply entertain and impress the people, but rather something that should cause them to repent—if only they would accept it.

Any viable explanation of the “sign of Jonah” must not undermine Jesus’s initial refusal to accept the Pharisees’ challenge. In other words, the sign must be one that the Jewish leaders would not recognize as such, but that would display the sort of authority that God had given to Jesus, since Matthew and Luke both make the point that Jesus is greater than Jonah and Solomon. Those who could accept this sign were encouraged to repent like the Ninevites. Since Jesus had already been proclaiming the good news about God’s kingdom, the sign in Luke 11 is probably not the preaching itself, but the unexpected response of repentance—perhaps even among non-Jews. The sign is also not the *parousia* (the future coming of Jesus), because on that occasion there will be no opportunity to repent like the Ninevites. In the context of Matthew 12, Jesus appears to be making multiple points, suggesting that the sign refers both to something that he will do and the manner in which people will respond. The objective in any case is repentance, but Matthew goes further by explicitly relating the sign to something about Jesus himself that will be evident (although not recognized or accepted by many). This aspect is explained as “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt 12:40).

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Pirque R. El. 33 (written within the first to third centuries AD).

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 107–108 (second century AD); Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.20.1–2; 5.31.2 (second century); Tertullian, *Res.* 58 (early third century).

<sup>19</sup> George M. Landes, “Matthew 12:40 as an Interpretation of ‘The Sign of Jonah’ Against Its Biblical Background,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O’Connor; Special Volume Series [American Schools of Oriental Research] 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 675.

<sup>20</sup> Chow, *Sign of Jonah Reconsidered*, 85.

The duration of “three days and three nights” is quoted directly from the introduction to Jonah’s prayer in the Septuagint (LXX) and therefore functions as a key linkage in the comparison between Jonah and the “Son of Man.” This period is often associated with Jesus’s death and burial, but it poses a problem because the traditional chronology of the passion week places Jesus in the tomb for portions of three days and only two nights; there is no obvious way to calculate the full time period that Jesus predicted. Scholars have attempted to resolve the discrepancy either by loosening the calculation of days and nights or by revising the sequence of events surrounding the crucifixion. The most common solution has been to disregard any precision in the “three days and three nights,” citing instances of idiomatic Jewish usage in which a portion of a day was reckoned as a day, or attributing it to Matthew’s poetic license.<sup>21</sup> The phrase has also been regarded as a way to express the assurance of death in terms of a period long enough to confirm cessation of life.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, interpreting the statement to mean a literal “three days and three nights” has resulted in alternative theories regarding the day of the week on which Jesus was crucified, shifting it from the traditional Friday to either Wednesday or Thursday.<sup>23</sup> What is clear is that the reader’s assumptions about the period that Jesus spent “in the heart of the earth” significantly determine the resulting interpretation. If Jesus was referring strictly to the time that he was in the tomb, either the initial date or the total interval has to be adjusted. However, a close comparison of the experiences of Jonah and Jesus can guide the reader in understanding the point of Jesus including the specific interval, which may have purposely included more than Jesus’s death.

#### IV. JONAH’S PRAYER

Jonah was a historical character in the eighth century BC (2 Kgs 14:25), but the authorship and date of the book that bears his name are unknown.<sup>24</sup> The book contains a mixture of genres, perspectives, and ironic twists that are held together by “an elaborate interweaving of a number of intricately patterned and interrelated constructions from beginning to end.”<sup>25</sup> It is the story of Jonah’s relationship with God, and in conventional narrative style the plot is moved along using a particular (*vayyiqtol*) verb form. The key sections of the story are clearly indicated by a common Hebrew discourse marker (וַיִּהְיֶה)—the narrative/*vayyiqtol* form of the verb “to

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<sup>21</sup> John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (4 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:209–10; Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 451–52.

<sup>22</sup> George M. Landes, “The ‘Three Days and Three Nights’ Motif in Jonah 2:1,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 446.

<sup>23</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1350–51.

<sup>24</sup> According to Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 432, the book of Jonah has been variously dated between the eighth and the third centuries BC.

<sup>25</sup> Ernst R. Wendland, “Text Analysis and the Genre of Jonah (Part 1),” *JETS* 39 (1996): 201.



be”).<sup>26</sup> The resulting structure situates Jonah’s prayer as the central section of the book (1:17–2:10 in English versions),<sup>27</sup> flanked by God’s actions in sending Jonah (1:1–3 and 3:1–4:7) and in sending major weather events (1:4–6 and 4:8–11). Whereas much of the book describes Jonah’s rebellion and complaints, the prayer (or psalm) in Jonah 2:2–9 is the main expression of Jonah’s dependence on God. It is this section that Jesus primarily used to associate himself with Jonah. The prayer is clearly marked off from the rest of the book by God’s specific instructions to the fish, whose role is ambiguous until Jonah extols the Lord as Savior (2:9). With this final statement of praise, the purpose of the prayer is evident as an articulation of gratitude where there was once despair—deliverance where there was only suffering and death. It is an outburst of joyful worship in a manner that is characteristic of praising God in song after deliverance from a difficult struggle.<sup>28</sup>

Jonah’s prayer begins by calling upon the Lord. It should not concern the reader whether Jonah could have composed a poem while suffering inside the belly of a fish. These are his true feelings and perceptions of that terrible time, and great poetry is often retrospective. The significance of this beginning is that it is a turning point for Jonah, as he finally seeks the Lord’s help. God answers him in “the belly of Sheol,” a unique phrase in the OT that conflates Jonah’s presence in the fish with his perception of being in Sheol.<sup>29</sup> However, God is also the one who has cast him into the depths, and the imagery of a watery abyss is multiplied in verse three. Jonah realized that the Lord had driven him away, and yet he found hope in the direction of the Jerusalem temple (Jonah 2:4; cf. Ps 18:6). He longed for the temple while in the midst of the terrors of “the deep” (Jonah 2:3 uses the word תְּצוּלָה, recalling David’s despair in Ps 69:3, 16; while Jonah 2:5 uses the word תְּהוֹם, reminiscent of pre-creation formlessness of Gen 1:2). As Jonah felt his life ebbing away—entering the world of the dead (2:6)—even the form of his poetic prayer seems to disintegrate as the rhythm (meter) becomes indistinguishable: “The sudden change from familiar to unfamiliar language takes one into the depths of a frightening new world, far from God, where only the sudden intervention of God Himself can restore the lost soul.”<sup>30</sup> But the Lord received Jonah’s prayer (in his

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of Hebrew *vayyiqtol* (or *vayyiqtol*) verb forms and narrative discourse markings, see Duane A. Garrett and Jason S. DeRouchie, *A Modern Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 70, 327–30.

<sup>27</sup> The English verse numbers are used throughout this discussion. In Hebrew manuscripts, Jonah 1:17 is considered to be the first verse of chapter two.

<sup>28</sup> Compare Exod 15:1–18; Judg 5:1–31; 2 Sam 22:1–51; Isa 38:9–20.

<sup>29</sup> Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (AB 24B; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 172.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Bible and Literature Series 8; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976), 49. Some scholars have attempted to smooth out the difficult meter in this verse by connecting the first two Hebrew words of verse 6 to the preceding verse: e.g. Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (trans. Margaret Kohl; CC; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 127. However, the construction may be a poetic way to use the text itself to mimic the content. Duane L. Christensen, “The Song of Jonah: A Metrical Analysis,” *JBL* 104 (1985), 228, suggests that the form of the language alerts the reader that Jonah has “slipped beyond the pale.”

temple) and rescued him. Jonah is nearest to God in verse 7, which marks the halfway point in the book as a whole.<sup>31</sup> Then Jonah closes his prayer with three assertions (2:8–9): those who pursue worthless things forfeit God’s great loving-kindness (יְדֹוּם); the Lord deserves thankful praise and sacrifice; and “salvation belongs to the Lord!”<sup>32</sup> Although Jonah recognized that he had a savior, most of Jonah’s prayer is focused on the terror and turmoil of his experience prior to being delivered. The two prominent motifs in this poetic chapter are the relationship of a person with death (including imagery of Sheol, watery depths, overwhelming waves, and descent to the underworld) and the relationship of a person with God’s temple. An examination of these topics will reveal how Jesus understood his connection to Jonah’s experience of suffering as well as deliverance.

## V. DEADLY DESCENT

Jonah sensed that he was sinking, ever deeper and deeper, into the depths of the sea. This is a description of being overwhelmed by more than just the waters—he is descending into death itself. Similar terms were used to portray Pharaoh’s army drowning in the sea (Exod 15:5) and to refer to those who “go down to the pit” (Isa 38:18; Ps 30:9). The depiction of Jonah’s plight is graphic: far out in the sea, an undertow is engulfing him, and each wave pushes him deeper as it crashes over him (Jonah 2:3). Seaweed wraps around him like a shroud, and he is buried at the bottom, trapped forever in this abyss (2:5–6).<sup>33</sup> On the very brink of death, Jonah believes that he is experiencing Sheol and that the Lord is raising him from the dead (compare the similar experience of the psalmist in Ps 88:4–5). Old Testament poetry can depict severe anguish and trauma in language that refers to Sheol and death, and the reader is left to decide whether Jonah was rescued because of his prayer (and thus had not fully expired) or if he prayed because he was rescued.

“Sheol” is the OT term for the place of the dead, and it does not refer to life after death, whether for reward or for punishment. “To be in Sheol is simply to be dead, beyond all help unless God can give life to what is dead.”<sup>34</sup> However, it is not a synonym for death itself. The term is used in the OT primarily to indicate the destiny of the ungodly, especially when they are under divine judgment (e.g. Num 16:30; Job 24:19; Ps 9:17). The righteous are spoken of as seeking deliverance from Sheol in grim circumstances (e.g. Ps 30:3), but Sheol is not generally regarded as the

<sup>31</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 191.

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the connection Jesus felt to Jonah’s prayer was partly because Jesus’s name was derived from the simple form of the word “salvation” (יְשׁוּעָה).

<sup>33</sup> The word סוּף is otherwise used only for reeds that grow in rivers (Exod 2:3, 5; Isa 19:6), but here the sense must be some form of seaweed. Perhaps this word was chosen to create consonance when heard together with the previous Hebrew word (יַם סוּף), or maybe its association with the exodus (i.e. the Sea of Reeds) sets the stage for the deliverance that is to follow. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 136; and W. Dennis Tucker Jr., *Jonah: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 56.

<sup>34</sup> Cary, *Jonah*, 85.

destiny of all humanity at death.<sup>35</sup> The language of tumultuous waters (e.g. “waves,” “breakers,” and “flood”)—like that of Sheol—appears to have been used to refer figuratively to death and suffering, but not explicitly to an underworld existence after death (e.g. see Pss 42:7; 124:4–5). References to “the deep” are indications of the farthest reaches of the world of the living, sharing some of the characteristics of death.<sup>36</sup> There are non-biblical Jewish texts from the Second Temple period that use this same imagery, demonstrating its widely accepted usage:

When the deeps boil over the springs of water, they rush forth to form huge waves, and breakers of water, with clamorous sound. And when they rush forth, Sh[eo]l [and A]b[ad] [don] open; [all] the arrows of the pit make their voice heard while going down to the abyss; and the gates of [Sheol] open [for all] the deeds of the serpent. And the doors of the pit close upon the one expectant with injustice, and everlasting bolts upon all spirits of the serpent. (1QH<sup>a</sup> XI, 15b–18)<sup>37</sup>

There still remains a paradox in Jonah 2:2–9, since he described himself passing through “the deep,” even to the “roots of the mountains,” imprisoned by the “earth” forever. The image depicts a journey into the world of the dead. And yet Jonah is able to remember the Lord and pray to him, which suggests that he was not yet dead.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps instead of resolving the uncertainty about Jonah’s death, it would be better to simply accept the experience the way that the author describes it—paradoxically—as having brought him “into the terrifying domain of death.”<sup>39</sup> This approach can actually help clarify what Jesus intended by associating himself with Jonah when he said that he would be “in the heart of the earth” (Matt 12:40). This phrase is unique in the Bible, and Jesus most likely composed it as a combination of Jonah’s reference to being thrown “into the heart of the seas” (Jonah 2:4) together with Jonah’s claim that he was imprisoned in the earth (2:7).<sup>40</sup> This way of simultaneously pointing to multiple parts of Jonah’s text signals to the hearer/reader that Jesus had in mind the entire content and context of Jonah’s prayer, and that he was not just talking about being placed in the ground at his death. Furthermore, usage of the word “earth” in the OT, when qualified by another term

<sup>35</sup> Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 80–83.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 118–20.

<sup>37</sup> This quotation is from one of the non-biblical “Thanksgiving Hymns” (*Hodayot*), and the specific context here is a description of the consequences reserved for one who is engaged in injustice. The brackets enclose portions of the text that have been reconstructed but are not reasonably certain. The older designation by E. Sukenik for this hymn verse is 1QH<sup>a</sup> III, 15b–18. Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (paperback ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 176–77. Other similar texts are found in 1QH<sup>a</sup> XIV, 23 [older designation: VI, 23]; XVI, 31 [VIII, 31]; XVII, 4 [IX, 4].

<sup>38</sup> Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 93, 97.

<sup>39</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 173.

<sup>40</sup> Landes, “Matthew 12:40 as an Interpretation of ‘The Sign of Jonah’ Against Its Biblical Background,” 666–67.

(e.g. “depths of the earth”), often connotes more than merely the ground itself.<sup>41</sup> In summary, Jesus used a phrase that not only encompassed all of the implications of Jonah’s prayer, but intentionally modified the word “earth” in such a way that was typically used to signify the realm of the dead. Apparently, Jesus was indicating (to those who were familiar with Jonah’s prayer) that during three days and three nights he would endure a journey of suffering and descent into death.<sup>42</sup> In this way he was referring to an extent of suffering which both preceded and included his death. Assigning it a specific duration certainly hints at the glorious deliverance that would be his resurrection, but the main emphasis of the statement is on his suffering and death rather than his rescue.

When Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples prior to his arrest, he became sorrowful, distraught, and overwhelmed with what was happening (Matt 26:37–38). Already Jesus was experiencing the struggle with the forces of darkness, and three times he prayed for the Father to change course. Finally, Jesus announced that it was time for him to be “betrayed into the hands of sinners” (26:45). He submitted to the torrents of human judgment, with the only supportable accusation before the Sanhedrin being his claim that he was “able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days” (26:61). Since the temple was also mentioned prominently by Jonah and it was an important theme in the context of Matthew 12, its role must be significant for understanding the connection between Jesus and Jonah.

## VI. LIFE-GIVING TEMPLE

When King Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, his dedication included a prayer asking God to always be ready to help his people when they directed their prayer toward the temple (1 Kgs 8:12–53; 2 Chr 6:1–40). Solomon had anticipated that the nation would discover its need to prayerfully repent after being troubled with adversity or sent into exile, relying upon God’s faithfulness to rescue them. This relationship between God and his people is central to Jonah’s prayer, because Jonah had realized that he had been banished from God’s presence and that he needed God to bring him back. Jonah sought deliverance from a long distance away—even from the lowest regions at the gates of Sheol—but that distance was no barrier to the success of his prayer (Jonah 2:4, 7).<sup>43</sup> Life is only to be found in

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<sup>41</sup> Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 109. Johnston notes that compound “earth” phrases refer to the underworld (or simply death) in Pss 63:9; 71:20; Ezek 26:20; 31:14, 16, 18; 32:18, 24.

<sup>42</sup> John Woodhouse, “Jesus and Jonah,” *RTR* 43.2 (1984): 36. It is tempting to use Matt 12:40 to support a theory about what Jesus did while he was dead (cf. 1 Pet 3:19), but that is not the point of Matthew’s usage.

<sup>43</sup> The temple was often depicted as being located on a mountain (1 Chr 3:1; Pss 48:1; 68:16), so Jonah’s position at the “roots” of the mountains (Jonah 2:6) further emphasizes the great distance between God and him.

God's direction. "To move from Sheol to the Temple is to move from death to life. To long to gaze upon the Temple is to long for life itself."<sup>44</sup>

God's promise for the temple was that he would dwell among the people of Israel and not abandon them as long as they followed him obediently (1 Kgs 6:12–13). Prayers were offered toward the Jerusalem temple because that is where God chose to focus his presence, although it was beyond question that the Lord was omnipresent in the world.<sup>45</sup> Jonah longed for the temple because he knew his Savior was there. But that Savior was also the one who delivered Nineveh when they repented. The temple was prophesied to someday be a witness to all the nations (Isa 2:1–3), and during the exile it was predicted to be a source of life spreading out into all the land around it (Ezek 47:1–12). Jesus is the one who fulfilled those promises.<sup>46</sup> The rejected stone (oppressed for being righteous) has become the "cornerstone" (Ps 118:22; Isa 28:16; cf. Isa 8:13–15) of the new temple—the primary manifestation of God's presence in the world.<sup>47</sup> When Jesus referred to himself as a "temple" (John 2:18–22), his point was that he would manifest the abiding presence of God in his resurrection. The apostle Paul expanded on this idea by explaining that all who are in the "body" of Christ (that is, the church) constitute this new temple and that the Holy Spirit displays in that fellowship the real presence of God (1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16). Those who commit their lives to the Lord become "living stones" who are built into that "spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:4–9; Eph 2:19–22), and the new temple is nothing less than the new creation that Jesus inaugurated by his death and resurrection.<sup>48</sup> The temple is an important link between Jonah and Jesus because it witnesses to the world that there is hope during times of suffering (recall Solomon's prayer in 1 Kgs 8:28–53). During his three days of affliction in the sea, Jonah looked with hope to the temple, which Jesus himself would fulfill by creating in himself a new temple that brings salvation. The Suffering Servant gave his own life as a sacrifice so that all the nations might have life. Likewise, the church (as a new spiritual temple) witnesses to the world by sacrificing (and suffering) for it.<sup>49</sup> What the Pharisees could not comprehend is the same thing that vexed Jonah: the path to victory is through suffering and sacrifice.

<sup>44</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 96–97. Also see Ehud Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (JSOTSup 367; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 122.

<sup>45</sup> Compare King David's reference to the ark of the covenant as God's "footstool" (1 Chr 28:2) with the later statement by God that the entire earth is his "footstool" (Isa 66:1).

<sup>46</sup> The visions of Ezekiel 40–48 describe the heavenly temple as the key feature of the entire nation. Jesus Christ is the complete manifestation of that temple, and perhaps such a close connection with Ezekiel (who is frequently addressed as "son of man") is why Jesus repeatedly called himself by the same title (which appears in every instance of Jesus mentioning the "sign of Jonah"). Alternatively, Jesus might have been drawing upon Dan 7:13 for this appellation, in which case his purpose in using it would likely have been to emphasize his role as Israel's divine representative.

<sup>47</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (NSBT 17; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 184; and N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 224–25.

<sup>48</sup> Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 170–71, 176, 182.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

Most of the explanations that have been offered for the “sign of Jonah” are based on an assumption that Jesus meant exactly the same thing every time he used the expression. However, there are enough contextual differences between the passages to conclude that Jesus made similar statements on multiple occasions, and it is also quite plausible that Jesus was making somewhat different points on each of these occasions (or that the Gospel writers were emphasizing different points relative to Jesus’s remarks). All of the Gospel accounts stress that Jesus did not want to give his accusers the sign they wanted, so the sign he does offer must be something different than what they were looking for. Thus, the sign to which Jesus referred was probably not his preaching, because everyone accepted that he was going about preaching the good news. Furthermore, in the context of Matthew 12 and Luke 11, the sign that Jesus had in mind was one that—had they been able to recognize it—would cause them to repent like the Ninevites. The description in Luke does not explain what could cause such repentance, but Matthew 12 gives the primary clue: Jesus expected to be “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Matthew connected the period of “three days and three nights” to the painful descent that Jonah experienced, which culminated in deliverance from death. Jesus is greater than Jonah, but he is also greater than Solomon and the temple (Matt 12:6, 42). Jesus asserted that the “three days” corresponded to the rebuilding of the temple (John 2:19), which only the messianic successor to Solomon could do. Thus, it was during the period of three days when Christ was “in the heart of the earth” that he inaugurated the new creation which the temple symbolically anticipated. The reader need not assume that this new initiative began only after Jesus was buried in the ground. Even before his death, Jesus had begun the process of redemption that ushered in the new age; in fact, his entire ministry fulfilled the messianic role of bearing the weaknesses of the human race (Matt 8:17; cf. Isa 53:1–10). However, as he approached the time of his death, Jesus acutely felt the burden of his mission: he was deeply distressed—even to the point of death (Matt 26:38; Mark 14:34; cf. Luke 22:45). Jesus’s descent to Sheol (death) began before he was placed on the cross; the undertow of worldly and evil forces drew him deep into the abyss of Satan’s realm. He was mercilessly beaten, wrongly accused, detestably mocked, and cruelly murdered. While hanging on the cross, his cry of dereliction rose up like Jonah’s cry of banishment (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34; Jonah 2:4). Jesus’s anguish on the cross (before his death) paralleled Jonah’s suffering in the sea. Then as Jesus died, the temple itself was torn open and many of the dead were released from their tombs (Matt 27:50–54, recalling Jonah’s longing for the temple and his release from the great fish). Thus, Jesus’s descent into death (i.e. into “the heart of the earth”) began before he died, and the journey that appeared hopeless ended in victorious resurrection.

Understood in this manner, the “three days and three nights” began in Gethsemane where Jesus accepted the Father’s plan despite the suffering that was necessary. There is no need to consider it as an imprecise period of time; nor are we forced to modify the traditional sequence of events during passion week. Jesus un-

derstood his ordeal in terms of Jonah's descent into the depths of the sea, and like Jonah, Jesus looked to the Father for his rescue. The disciples realized after the resurrection that they would also suffer for Christ's sake, and that they would also find hope in the midst of suffering, whether or not it brought death.

Such a witness to life and hope should bring about repentance wherever it is observed; Jesus knew that his accusers would remain hardened as long as they refused to accept that Israel's messiah had to suffer on behalf of the people. Anyone who seeks God for the sake of their own vindication is bound to stumble over the very stone which became the foundation of the temple where life is found. The evidence for Jesus's authority is clear, but many are blind and cannot see it. On the other hand, those who are committed to Jesus Christ can confidently follow him down to the gates of Sheol, knowing that he uses our experience as a witness to his power and authority.