

What is the sign of Jonah?

Jesus had a very particular way of reading and interpreting scripture. The way Jesus read scripture, all of scripture pointed to and had their focal point in his own life and mission.

“... [scriptures] bear witness about me ... ” (John 5:39).

“Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

“... everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44).

And his disciples and apostles carried on this method of interpretation, declaring that all the promises of God have their answer and their realisation in Jesus.

“From morning till evening [Paul] expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (Acts 28:23).

“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

So when Jesus stood at the Passover table, he held a panoramic view of all the history of Israel converging into the focal point of his own life. Jesus inaugurated the memorial of the new covenant, using symbols that were far older than the Exodus itself. Jesus reached way past the Exodus, past the Egyptian captivity, past the covenant with Abraham, and chose to use the symbols of Melchizedek.

The symbols of the new covenant are older than the symbols of the old covenant.

In Jesus' day, rabbis taught that the unleavened bread symbolised redemption from Egypt.¹ Redemption means release from slavery. Redemption points to a price being paid, and the slaves being set free. Redemption meant that the slaves were released, and could now worship their God in freedom. They were free of the yoke of Egypt; they were freed to be free. The unleavened bread symbolised redemption, a hope realised, the birth of a chosen people, the principal sign of the power of God in the history of Israel.

Now in the first century, the remnant of Israel inhabiting the land were waiting for the exile to end. They were waiting for forgiveness of sins. They were waiting for the true repentance within Israel. They were waiting for the promised blessings that signified the end of their slavery to the pagan nations (Deuteronomy 30:3–10).

But more than this, they were waiting for resurrection from the dead. The prophet Ezekiel received a vision of a valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1–14). God told him that these bones represented the slain of Israel (Ezekiel 37:9, 11). The interpretation of the prophecy concludes with these words:

¹ According to Gamaliel in Mishnah (mPes. 10.5).

“Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am YHWH, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am YHWH; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares YHWH” (Ezekiel 37:12–14).

So Ezekiel’s message enhanced Moses’ prophecy. Moses prophesied that when Israel truly repented of her sins, then she would be gathered from exile to live in the land more prosperously than her forefathers. Ezekiel’s message said that not only would Israel be returned from exile, but that all of Israel would be saved, gathered, redeemed, resurrected.

So when Jesus broke the bread for the disciples, he was telescoping the prophecies and promises of God to Israel into His own life and purpose. Jesus saw Himself as the realisation of these promises. He explicitly saw Himself as forming a new covenant with Israel. A covenant that would involve the Spirit being poured out on Israel, so that a whole hearted repentance could occur. A covenant that would involve a heart transplant, a complete change of heart. It would be like a light suddenly being switched on in a dark place, giving hope and life (2 Corinthians 4:6).

In instituting the symbols of the new covenant, Jesus focused all of Israel’s hopes, dreams and promises on Himself. Jesus broke the bread, saying, “Take, eat; this is my body” (Matthew 26:26). Jesus poured out the wine, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:27–28).

Focusing all of Israel’s prophetic hopes and promises on Himself must have seemed like a bold, daring and dangerous thing to do. Making such a claim is either the work of a prophetic revolutionary; or the work of a deluded madman. How do we know Jesus’ claims are true?

Quite interestingly, the people in the first century asked Jesus exactly that question.

“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”

And Jesus answered the question, by saying,

“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:38–42).

Jesus tells us here that this is the crux of Jesus’ credibility. Jesus was teaching a revolutionary message, and his authority hinges on this one sign. It is not too strong a word to say that Jesus’ entire credibility rests on this one act: his resurrection.

For Matthew, the sign is the three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Now I have a study on my iPad that I believe conclusively demonstrates that Jesus was indeed in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. I'll make this study available shortly. But for this morning, I'd like to focus more on the parallel passage in Luke. For Luke presents the sign of the Jonah a little differently. According to Luke,

“For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation” (Luke 11:30).

So, rather than simply the three days and three nights, Jonah himself is presented as a symbol to Ninevah; which Jesus then applies to himself for Jerusalem.

Given Jesus' method of interpreting scripture, it seems reasonable that Jesus saw Jonah as a prophecy about Himself. In Jesus' symbolic universe, Israel was chosen by God to represent Him on earth. Jonah was chosen as a representative of Israel to warn the people of Ninevah. Jesus read from Jonah's life both the life of Israel, whom he represented, and Jesus' own life, of whom he was a prophetic forerunner. So in studying Jonah, we can discover the meaning of the sign of Jonah.

Jonah as Israel

Portions of Jonah stand as a symbol of Israel's relationship with God. God commanded Israel go to help a pagan nation, and she would rather disobey and leave the land than to follow God's direction. Later in the book of Jonah, he demands the pagan nation be punished, much as Israel in Jesus' day were longing for the subjugation of the hated Romans under their own rule. So, there is this dimension where Jonah represents Israel.

Jonah as Jesus

But there is also this dimension where Jonah represents Jesus.

When Jonah is cast into the “heart of the seas” (Jonah 2:3), he is symbolically cast into the kingdom ruled by Satan (Ezekiel 27, 28).

When Jesus is cast into the “heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:39), he is cast into the grave, into Sheol, into Satan's kingdom.

Next we can read the prayer of Jonah, not just as the prayer of Jonah, but as a prayer of Jesus, describing the experience of passing through death itself.

“I called out to YHWH, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.
Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;

yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.’
The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O YHWH my God.
When my life was fainting away,
I remembered YHWH,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the Lord!”
(Jonah 2:2–9).

Can you hear Jesus’ distress? Can you hear His sense of separation from His Father?
Can you hear Jesus feelings of being cut off? Can you hear the refrain of faithfulness
when all appears lost?

Yet YHWH reached into that kingdom of darkness, and the light shone forth. No one, no
matter how removed from God they are; no matter how cut off from the life of God they
are; no matter how ensconced in the kingdom of darkness they are—No one is beyond the
reach of God.

For God reached into the heart of Satan’s kingdom and engineered Jonah’s deliverance.

And God reached into the grave and brought Jesus forth.

By the way, did we say earlier that Israel was looking for a resurrection? Did we say that
Israel was looking for the resurrection of the righteous dead? Matthew reports,

“The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen
asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went
into the holy city and appeared to many” (Matthew 27:52, 53).

It was not only Jesus who was resurrected on that day; but a direct and literal realisation of
Ezekiel’s prophecy.

A sign in his generation

So here in Jonah we have a resurrected man, as it were. Notice that Jonah’s mission, after
his ‘resurrection’, is to go to a Gentile nation.

See how that parallels Jesus' instruction and direction to his disciples. Following his resurrection, they are to go to Gentile nations. If you're looking for Jesus' sense of mission to the Gentiles before his resurrection, here it is—the sign of Jonah.

This resurrected man, someone back from the dead, went into Ninevah and preached judgment. That's right. Jonah did not preach repentance. He preached judgment.

“Yet forty days, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4).

And what did Jesus prophesy?

“Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (Matthew 24:2).

Jonah prophesied the overthrow of Ninevah. Jesus prophesied the overthrow of the temple “in this generation” (Matthew 23:36; 24:34; Luke 11:30).

Jonah prophesied the overthrow of Ninevah in forty days. Jesus prophesied the overthrow of the temple, and all she symbolised of Jewish nationalism and pride, in forty years.

Ninevah believed God. She found grace in His sight. And she was spared.

The leaders of Israel did not heed Jesus' warning. They continued their path of national violence. The temple and all she represented was overthrown forty years after Jesus' resurrection.

So, what was the sign of Jonah? The sign of Jonah was a resurrected man prophesying God's judgment; the sign of Jonah was a resurrected man reaching out to a Gentile nation, extending God's grace.

So too, the sign of Jesus is a resurrected man who prophesies judgment; the sign of Jesus is a resurrected man reaching out to all nations, extending God's grace.

Jonah was a sign to Ninevah; as Jesus was a sign to “this generation.”

Symbols of the new covenant

So, what then do the symbols of the new covenant mean?

The bread, Jesus' broken body, represents the life eternal to which Jesus was raised. Unleavened bread represents our source of life—Jesus the Messiah—unstained, unblemished by sin, in perfect harmony with YHWH. This is our bread, which we take into ourself, and it becomes us; it becomes our life (Ephesians 3:16, 17). Jesus' body represents resurrection from the dead, the source of eternal life for all who believe God.

The blood, which Jesus poured out for you and for me, seals the new covenant. It is God's signature written in blood, guaranteeing the promise of the Holy Spirit; guaranteeing power to be born from above; to be anointed of God; to have one's heart transformed into a living, breathing, testimony of the life of God in you, and in me.