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### Faithless Israel, Faithful Gentiles: Ethnic Irony in Jonah and Matthew

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis will first examine the plot and rhetoric of Jonah with special focus on how the prophet is disgraced by pagan characters. Attention will then be turned to the Gospel of Matthew. After determining the meaning and function of Matthew's "sign of Jonah" in context, we will discuss the sign as a link between the two works and an invitation to look for parallels. Finally, several points of contact will be suggested with emphasis on the ethnic reversals common to both works—how the faithful Gentiles in Matthew recall those in Jonah, and how Israel in Matthew resembles the disobedient prophet.

Before our expedition into the text, however, we must recognize the limits and merits of this kind of comparative study. In drawing connections and searching for parallels, we do not want to overestimate the influence of the Jonah on the plot of Matthew. Unlike Jonah, which by comparison is a simpler and more straightforward text, the first Gospel as a matter of genre is staggeringly complex. It contains a massive web of biblical echoes and typologies, some of which have a significant influence on the narrative (e.g. Jesus as the new Moses or the Son of David). Moreover, it weaves together many diverse Jesus traditions to address various theological, ecclesiastical, and ethical issues. To ignore these complexities in a quixotic search for Jonah parallels is to violate the text.

This does not, however, mean that a comparison of the works is unwarranted. Typology has been recognized by scholars as an important feature of Matthew.<sup>1</sup> What is more, Jonah typology is inarguably present in the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> The "sign of Jonah" appears twice in Matthew and the Ninevites once. No other New Testament book invokes the Jonah story as

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<sup>1</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 12.

<sup>2</sup> France, 490, calls the sign of Jonah the single most obvious instance of typology in the Gospels.

clearly and frequently.<sup>3</sup> Jonah and Matthew also share a penchant for irony and explore similar questions: What are the boundaries of God's compassion? What happens when God's "chosen" resist his purposes and his "enemies" embrace them? Thus, because of the request of Matthew to examine the Jesus tradition vis-à-vis Jonah, and because of the similarities of the two narratives upon careful investigation, the intersection of Matthew and Jonah promises to be exegetically fruitful. As long as we restrict our search to those parallels intended by the author or likely to be heard by a biblically-literate audience, our project is not only permitted but invited.<sup>4</sup>

Several directions are open to our study, but we will restrict it to how Matthew's Gentiles act as types of sailors and Ninevites and thereby shame disobedient Israel. Attention from scholars has been given to the main instance of Jonah typology in Matthew: Jesus' function as a "new Jonah."<sup>5</sup> But the Gentiles' similarity to the sailors and Ninevites, and the subsequent antitype of Israel as the "old Jonah," have not been sufficiently explored. It is our hope that a Jonah-shaped reading will yield a richer understanding of the Gospel.

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<sup>3</sup> With its one reference to the sign of Jonah, Luke 11:29-32 is the only other New Testament passage that draws an explicit parallel.

<sup>4</sup> Where parallels are explicit in the text, attention is of course always merited. But even parallels which are less obvious may be helpful inasmuch as they illuminate a passage, identify a pattern, or contribute to a theme. On the other hand, those parallels which contradict a text's message, or on which doctrines exclusively hang, are to be avoided. Our treatment of Matthew and Jonah will strive toward the former categories rather than the latter.

<sup>5</sup> The primary analogues are Jesus' resurrection and preaching to the wicked city (to be discussed below), but the calming of the storm (Mt 8:23-27) has also been recognized as parallel to Jonah. In both stories, a storm threatens to overtake the prophet's boat while he has fallen asleep. Both Jesus and Jonah are awoken by terrified shipmates petitioning for help. But while Jonah must be thrown into the sea to placate the surging seas, Jesus needs only get up and speak a word (8:26). After the seas calm, both prophets' companions are left bewildered with a new awareness of the divine. The pagan sailors discover the power of Yahweh, the Israelite God; the disciples discover the power of Jesus, the Israelite Christ. See Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1995), 221.

## THE PLOT AND IRONY OF JONAH

We first turn to Jonah. In exploring the plot of Jonah and the implications it poses for its readers, we will be better equipped to compare it to Matthew and consider the ways in which the latter evokes the former. We will set aside issues of historicity and examine Jonah from a purely literary-critical perspective, giving attention to the narrative's reversal of expectations along Jewish-pagan lines. More specifically, we will track how the prophet of Israel is shamed by Gentile figures.

### Jonah and the Sailors

Typical of the prophetic corpus, the narrative begins with divine revelation. Yahweh commands his messenger to “arise” (קום), travel to the mighty city Nineveh, and pronounce judgment on its wickedness, which has “gone up” (עָלָה) before God. This opening line immediately saddles readers with expectations as to how the story will unfold. Jonah, as the recipient of Yahweh's word, is esteemed by default. By contrast, Nineveh, whose wickedness reeks to the heavens, is assumed to be the major antagonist of the story.<sup>6</sup> This is of course keeping with Nineveh's unsavory reputation in the ancient world; that Yahweh has finally taken notice of the city may even relieve the audience.

As quickly as these expectations form, however, the narrator shatters them with Jonah's surprising response.<sup>7</sup> The prophet indeed arises (קָם), but only to flee from the presence of

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<sup>6</sup> The Assyrian capital until 612 B.C., Nineveh would have brought with it strong associations with pride and violent conquest. See Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 203.

<sup>7</sup> James Bruckner's insistence that Jonah demonstrates *integrity* in fleeing is overblown. See James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

Yahweh to Tarshish.<sup>8</sup> Verse 2 begins a series of spatial contrasts which pit Jonah's intentions against God's—having been asked to get up and address the evil rising before God, he “goes down” (וַיֵּרָד) to Joppa instead. There he finds a ship headed for Tarshish and “goes down” yet again to board it. Readers are left only to speculate his motivations, but they are forbidden to see them as noble: The twofold repetition of מִלְּפָנֵי יְהוָה (“away from the presence of Yahweh”) emphasizes Jonah's misdirection. The prophet of Israel has designs of his own, and they are precisely the opposite of Yahweh's. He is bent on avoiding Nineveh, even if it means substituting one journey to Gentile territory with another. The audience's initial impressions are therefore frustrated. The conflict thickens in the absence of a hero figure—Gentile wickedness is going up before God, and now his own agent of justice has abandoned him.

Yahweh's response is to hurl a terrible wind onto the sea (v.4) such that the ship itself threatens destruction. Once more irony creeps into the narrative. Whereas readers might have foreseen acts of judgment against Nineveh, it is Jonah who instead provokes divine punishment. This irony is heightened by the behavior of the pagan sailors introduced in v. 5. Aware of some divine displeasure and struck with intense fear, they scramble for ways to avert the catastrophe, calling out to their gods and emptying cargo so as to lighten their vessel. In addition to predicting the Ninevites' posture towards judgment later in the plot, it is significant that these Gentiles are more sensitive to offending deity than Jonah is. Indeed, they are willing to take whatever actions

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2004), 66. It seems to operate under the undefended assumption that Jesus “celebrates” Jonah as a positive example for his death and resurrection. Jesus' own handling of the Jonah story will be discussed below, but there is no reason to assume that his use of Jonah material in any way endorses the main character's behavior.

<sup>8</sup> The precise location of Tarshish is lost to modern readers, with commentators variously placing it in Spain or Phoenicia. However, the basic exegetical significance of Jonah's flight is clear. He is turning away from the divine imperative by placing as much distance between himself and Nineveh as possible. See Allen, 204.

necessary to be saved from this calamity. Meanwhile Jonah, relegated to a disjunctive clause in v. 5, has “gone down” yet again and fallen into a deep sleep—showing his characteristic lack of concern for Gentile life. The Gentile captain must provide the rude awakening that turns Jonah’s attention to God’s wrath. Hauntingly, the captain’s orders for Jonah to “arise” (אִקֵּם) and “call out” (קִרָּא) (v. 6) are identical to Yahweh’s in v. 2, and these Gentiles’ hope that God might spare them in mercy is telling of the story’s conclusion.<sup>9</sup> Jonah is finally given a voice in v. 9, where he identifies himself as a Hebrew who worships Yahweh, the creator of land and sea. However, the sailors’ response upon learning Jonah’s story—“What is this you have done?” (v. 10)—suggests that they know better the kind of conduct consistent with his confession. When the creator gives an assignment, it must not be ignored.

For once, Jonah takes responsibility for his actions (v. 12). That he instructs the sailors to calm the sea by tossing him overboard could signal deep remorse at offending Yahweh and, at last, concern for the lives of Gentiles. Having provoked the God of the heavens, land, and sea, Jonah now solemnly accepts his fate in the drink.<sup>10</sup> In light of the similar death wish in 4:3, however, Jonah’s eagerness to die may well reveal cowardice above anything else. Even a watery grave is preferable to completing his God-given objective.

The sailors, meanwhile, prove more committed to Jonah’s survival than he ultimately will be to anyone else’s (1:13). They “dig” (חָדַדוּ) against the waves in a last-ditch attempt to return safely to shore. But their efforts are in vain, and the wrath-storm intensifies. Neither Yahweh nor the narrator is content to let Jonah off the hook; his disobedience must be addressed. Even so, the

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 458.

sailors' concern with shedding innocent blood (1:14a), when viewed alongside Jonah's own indifference to Nineveh, more closely resembles Yahweh's interests (4:11) than his prophet's. Likewise, their resignation to God's freedom to do what he pleases (1:14b) contrasts Jonah's attempts to control God.

Whereas Jonah incites divine wrath, the sailors at long last placate it. Their response to the calm seas (1:16) is also their grand exit. The irony crescendos as they direct to Yahweh the highest gratitude for their deliverance (literally "fearing fear," "sacrificing sacrifices," and "vowing vows"—all of which emphasize their thorough, intentional response to this god they hardly know). Meanwhile, the prophet of Israel, the one entrusted with Yahweh's own self-disclosure, has been cast out of the scene entirely. His prior claim in 1:9 to fear (יִרָא) Yahweh, which he took as an identity marker alongside his Hebrew heritage, is shamed in practice by the sailors' "great fear" (יִרְאָה גְּדוֹלָה). Readers are left with a shocking role reversal, Israel playing the part of the pagan, the pagans the part of Israel.

### **Jonah and the Fish**

Yahweh's mercy takes the form of a great fish sent to retrieve Jonah from the deep. It is generally agreed that this fish is a vehicle of deliverance rather than a further judgment.<sup>11</sup> This

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<sup>11</sup> Allen, 185. Additionally, Stuart, 182-184, discusses the disagreement surrounding to the compositional history of the psalm in 2:2-9. Many receive it as unoriginal for various reasons: the song's peculiar insertion into prose, its interruption of a chiasmic structure in 1:17 and 2:1, its triumphant tone in an otherwise dire context, and its different vocabulary, among others. These objections are nevertheless suspect, particularly in light of the fish's apparent function as a deliverer and in the psalm's compatibility with the narrative project of shaming Jonah. Moreover, it is not beyond imagination, and neither does it require later additions, for typical psalm-language of rescue to find its way into a prophet's song. Even so, the compositional discussions do not threaten our assessment of the narrator's objectives. The original inclusion of the psalm sharpens the critique considerably, to be sure, but its absence does not improve or drastically change Jonah's portrayal. Indeed, the theme of faux-religiosity is already present by 1:9, and the inclusion of the psalm only serves to emphasize Jonah's self-interested piety.

explains the surprising content of the prayer issued from the fish's stomach (2:2-9). Jonah sings as one who has already been delivered. He found himself in the belly of death, but his cries for help were heard. Mere rescue is not the only theme explored in the song; divine mercy is emphasized as well. Not the sailors but God himself had thrown Jonah into the raging currents (v.3), and the "waves" and "breakers" are likewise attributed to the divine with the second-person suffix. The song speaks of banishment from God's sight and entrapment within the bars of the earth (v.6), and yet it is by God's hand that Jonah emerges unscathed. The occasion for rejoicing, then, is God's relenting.

Even within the song, however, are elements that rise up and condemn Jonah by the narrative's end. Emphasis is placed on rescue rather than remorse. The fixation on the first-person, though perhaps expected in songs of this sort, is nevertheless telling. Jonah is eager to extend mercy to himself but, as readers soon discover, attempts to monopolize it. Similarly, the song's religious imagery sours the portrait of Jonah. His elevated language and rich metaphors recall the psalms employed in temple worship, and his vows to make sacrifices and praise God suggest humble religiosity.<sup>12</sup> A first reading might interpret this as conviction and transformation, but in light of Jonah's later attitude, the narrative does not permit readers to see it as genuine piety at all. Jonah speaks the language of worship but does not know the heart of it. That he sets himself over against the idolaters (v. 8) becomes embarrassing when the "idolaters" prove more reverent to Yahweh in the end. So too the song's final pronouncement, *ישועתה ליהוה* ("deliverance belongs to Yahweh" or "comes from Yahweh"), smacks of irony.<sup>13</sup> Deliverance is indeed Yahweh's to grant, but only to those whom Jonah permits.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart, 478.



Thus, though the song seems to signal a shift in Jonah's characterization, it ultimately emphasizes his shallow religiosity. Intended to exalt God, it criticizes his myopic prophet.

### **The Repentance of the Ninevites**

Of course, the above critique is only accessible on a second reading. Readers know nothing of God's coming mercy and Jonah's coming disgust. They are perhaps hopeful that Jonah's second attempt will be different. This is at least implied by the parallelism in 3:1-2 with the opening chapter; it is as if the narrative has reset.

To readers' relief, Jonah arises at last and travels to his destination as God had commanded (3:3). Nineveh is warned that a great overthrow looms forty days in the future, and there is no hint of conditionality in this proclamation. Bringing all of the atrocities of the city to mind, the story reclaims the possibility of conflict between Yahweh and his pagan enemies.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on Nineveh's grandeur (3:2-4) makes it all the unlikelier that the city will pay heed to a foreign prophet from a tiny land.<sup>15</sup> Judgment, it seems, will finally be dealt to the pagans. Once more, Jonah may become a hero figure.

In one verse, reader expectations are toppled. As quickly as Jonah had deserted God (1:1-2), Nineveh turns to God with striking speed and thoroughness. The people believe in God and evidence this with acts of repentance: fasting and sackcloth, "from the least of them to the greatest" (3:5). When the message reaches the king, he too displays remarkable humility,

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<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that, while the original audience would have surely been aware of Nineveh's atrocities, the narrative is uninterested in identifying particular *instances* of wickedness. The gruesome specifics are left to the minds of readers and, presumably, to the minds of the story's characters. Meanwhile, Nineveh is presented in a uniformly positive light in repenting, and it is the flaws of Jonah which are emphasized.

<sup>15</sup> While it certainly lends to the story's surprise and heightens the critique by suggesting the extent of repentance, the author's stress on Nineveh's "greatness" also supports the point made in 4:11—should God not be concerned about a city of this size and influence?

abandoning his throne for ashes and his robe for sackcloth. He issues a decree extending not only to humans but to animals—“herds and flocks” are to don sackcloth as well and participate in a fast from food and water (3:7-8). Moreover, people are commanded to turn from their evil so that God might relent from the catastrophe he threatened. These actions of the city beg to be contrasted with Jonah’s behavior.<sup>16</sup> Jonah had heard God’s word directly but failed to obey; Nineveh hears God’s word secondhand through a prophet and believes. Jonah had been graced with miracles of deliverance and still resisted God; Nineveh received no such signs and yet repents.<sup>17</sup> Jonah had arisen (נִקְרָא) to flee God’s mercy; the Ninevite king arises (נִקְרָא) to seek it. Indeed, Jonah demonstrates less allegiance to God than the cows and sheep of Nineveh, for while they represent the city’s fear and grief at having violated God’s will, Jonah is soon angered for having accomplished it.<sup>18</sup>

### **Jonah’s Response**

Nineveh’s surprising course of action does not immediately condemn Jonah, however. If the story closed with the third chapter, Jonah himself could be counted among the repentant. Earlier critiques would be tempered by his final obedience bringing about a miraculous turn of events. Even the plot’s continuation does not require that Jonah’s characterization sour; the possibility remains that his transformation was as legitimate and powerful as Nineveh’s.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jeremiah 18. Stuart, 495.

<sup>17</sup> Terrence Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 54, helpfully suggests that the book’s liberality with miracles is intended to condemn Jonah and convict Israel, who likewise has a heritage of wonders but remains unrepentant.

<sup>18</sup> The animal “repentance” is in keeping with the theme that even nature is more responsive to God than his prophet. The storm, fish, plant, and worm all bend to the divine will immediately. Shamed by animals and inanimate objects, Jonah is the only figure in the narrative that, having received God’s command, resists it.

Such a possibility is not realized. The climactic exchange beginning in 4:1 seals Jonah's fate as compulsively inimical to God and a figure to be pitied. That God chose to relent from the destruction he threatened incenses the prophet.<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew text maximizes Jonah's opposition to Yahweh: the deity's act "was evil to Jonah, great evil" (וַיֵּרַע אֶל-יְהוָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה).<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the humble supplication of the sailors and Ninevites, Jonah rails against God in prayer. He then relays a startling confession: he had fled to Tarshish precisely because he knew that God would act compassionately and withdraw judgment (4:2).<sup>21</sup> The revelation is crucial to the book's rhetorical strategy. Readers were unaware of Jonah's motives until this outburst. Feeling betrayed and unable to detect legitimate repentance, they are forced to revisit Jonah's prior disobedience.<sup>22</sup> The critiques and contrasts observed above—that is, all of the ways in which the pagans have shamed Jonah by showing themselves to be more closely aligned to God—are now accessible.

Jonah's fury boils to comical levels when he concludes his prayer by demanding death (4:3).<sup>23</sup> A world in which even Nineveh is spared is a world from which Jonah would rather be removed. The divine act (and indeed God's very character) has so vexed the prophet that he spurns the life he so recently celebrated. The joy that marked Jonah's previous prayer has been eclipsed by disgust; his desires to escape the grave and behold the temple once more have been reversed, and Sheol is the only land he will tolerate. Salvation is not Yahweh's prerogative after

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<sup>20</sup> Stuart, 502.

<sup>22</sup> To those readers who do not feel betrayed but instead share Jonah's anti-Ninevite sentiment, this final chapter obligates them to view their feelings as foolish. If they take the side of Jonah, they too find themselves in opposition to God, and they too are susceptible to the book's sharp criticism.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jonah 1:12, where Jonah is also quick to desire death.

all (2:10), but Jonah's. Refusing to indulge Jonah's self-pity, Yahweh answers the rant with a mere three words inviting the prophet to evaluate his anger.<sup>24</sup>

The invitation is declined. Apparently hoping that he had corrected God's error, Jonah leaves Nineveh and stations himself at a distance to see what will happen to it (4:5). A clever object lesson serving to expose his foolish attitude brings the book's critique to its climax. If Jonah wants a deity who destroys his creations mercilessly, then Yahweh is willing, for didactic purposes, to play the part. A plant is thus appointed as a shade to rescue Jonah from his "distress," which alternatively can be translated as "wickedness"—a pun likely intended given God's purposes for the plant (4:6). The comfort leads Jonah to "rejoice with great joy." That Jonah's sudden delight in the plant is placed between outbursts of anger emphasizes his internal incongruity. He responds to the rescue of Nineveh with unbridled fury, yet greets his own deliverances with joy.<sup>25</sup>

God promptly sends a worm to assault the plant (4:7). He then unleashes a searing wind that accompanies the sun in "smiting" Jonah. This divine act elicits a second angry death wish from the prophet. The absurdity of a prophet of Yahweh forfeiting life because of a withered plant is not lost on readers, and it provokes God to question Jonah's anger once more.<sup>26</sup> The incensed prophet responds in an embarrassingly defensive posture—he is "angry to the point of death" (4:10). This invites Yahweh's climactic critique of Jonah's attitude. Jonah finds it appropriate to become enraged over a fleeting plant over which he had no responsibility

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<sup>24</sup> Phyllis Trible, "Jonah," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville:Abington, 1996), 519.

<sup>25</sup> Fretheim, 58.

<sup>26</sup> Jonah's death wish under the plant brings to mind that of Elijah under the tree (1 Kings 19:4). For Allen, 233, "the narrator's echo of the Elijah story is here, as in v. 3, a deliberate anti-Jonah device. Jonah may mouth Elijah's words, but against that giant of a prophet this squirming victim of his own ideology cuts a pitiable figure."

growing. And yet God's concern for the Nineveh, with its 120,000 people deprived of moral development and many animals (all of whom, it is implied, were carefully made by God), is repugnant to the prophet (4:9-11).<sup>27</sup> If Jonah is entitled to show concern over the life of a plant, how much more concern is God entitled to show over the life of a great city?

Jonah's rants are not permitted to close the book; it is God who has the last word. The prophet's self-absorption is indefensible. His response to Yahweh's challenge, whether in rejection or repentance, is beside the point. The story is not interested in establishing him as a character to be redeemed but exposing him as an attitude to be checked. It is to this end that the ubiquitous irony serves. Again and again the narrative expects its central conflict to be between God and Nineveh, but it is in reality between God and his stubborn prophet. Moreover, the book's rhetoric of reversal shames not only Jonah but the Israel whom he represents.<sup>28</sup> As Allen observes: "The pagan Assyrians of Nineveh repent as fully and heartily as any Israelites ever did! The chosen people had not yet in their history (i.e., to the mid-eighth century B.C.) repented so sincerely."<sup>29</sup> If, the narrative implies, the notorious Ninevites can repent with such vigor, if Gentile sailors can render worship, and if pagan cows can come before God in the apparel of grief, then Israel's own entitled stubbornness is inexcusable.

Viewed as a whole, the Jonah narrative offers one of the most jarring examples of biblical irony. Every Gentile character is a better example of conduct than Jonah, while nearly every action attributed to the prophet condemns him. The prophet of God is self-absorbed and childish. His praise is mere lip service. He is graced with God's self-revelation yet spurns it. Meanwhile,

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<sup>27</sup> Allen, 234.

<sup>28</sup> Nowhere does the book suggest that Nineveh's repentance somehow invalidates Israel's covenant status, or even that Yahweh worship enters the matrix of Ninevite life. The book is primarily meant to correct a skewed *Israelite* view of God and a particularism surrounding his compassion.

<sup>29</sup> Stuart, 496.

pagans ignorant of Yahweh respond to the deity as any good Israelite should. The narrative's midway "reset" allows for the ironies to be resolved, but in fact it pushes them to new extremes. Jonah does not redeem himself but instead becomes worse; the Ninevites do not become antagonists but instead impress. Surprise ultimately becomes the vehicle for the book's most basic message—do not imitate Jonah and his attitudes.<sup>30</sup>

## MATTHEW AND THE SIGN OF JONAH

With the above episodes and literary techniques in mind, we now turn to Matthew. Our treatment of the Gospel will begin with a careful examination of the sign of Jonah passages as, firstly, the most explicit links between Matthew and Jonah, and, secondly, as invitations to consider the former in light of the latter. After determining the meaning and function of the sign in its contexts, Matthew will then be canvassed for echoes of Jonah's ethnic irony.

### The Sign of Jonah in Matthew 12

The first and most significant reference to the sign of Jonah appears mid-narrative in Matthew 12:38-42. Readers have recently been met with an extravagant display of resistance from Israel, from unrepentant cities (11:20-24) to Pharisees accusing Jesus of violating the Sabbath (12:1-14) and attributing Jesus' power to Beelzebul (12:22-32). This prompts a teaching on the blasphemy of the Spirit and on the judgment of people by their words (12:31-37). If indeed "the mouth speaks from what fills the heart" (12:34), as Jesus warns, then what the religious leaders request next is indicative of their spiritual condition.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 434.

Thus the scribes and Pharisees 12:38 answer Jesus by expressing desire to see as a sign. Precisely what is meant by “sign” (σημεῖον) is subject to some discussion, although scholars agree that it involves an unambiguous validation of Jesus’ identity and ministry.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in a context where even healings can be attributed to Beelzebul, this sign must be some demonstration for which God alone can be responsible.<sup>32</sup> The religious leaders’ question is by nature a challenge. It does not stem from some a legitimate need for a miracle, but from a lack of faith in the miracles already surrounding Jesus’ activity.<sup>33</sup> It thus provokes a harsh response from Jesus: such a request is typical of an “evil and adulterous generation” (12:39). This language brings to mind the idolatry of the pagans rather than what is expected of the house of Israel.

The sort of sign which the wicked generation demands will not be given (σημεῖον οὐ δοθήσεται αὐτῇ). In Mark’s account of the episode (8:11-13), the dialogue ends there. But in the accounts of Matthew and Luke (11:29-32), an exception is made. The mysterious “sign of Jonah the prophet” (τὸ σημεῖον Ἰωνᾶ τοῦ προφήτου) will be offered. This incites an allusion to Jonah’s stay “in the belly of the sea creature” as comparable to the Son of Man’s coming experience in “in the heart of the earth” (Mt. 12:40). Then a pair of apocalyptic condemnations is issued. Upon hearing Jonah’s message, the wicked Ninevites repented—at the last day, how much worse will Israel be for failing to repent for a superior prophet (12:41)? So too the Queen of the South, who travelled great distance to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, shames this generation by comparison (12:42). The wisdom of a greater king is in their very midst, and yet they refuse to hear it.

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<sup>31</sup> Dale Allison and W.D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, International Critical Commentary, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 354. Additionally, Allison and Davies point to Old Testament texts in which signs are confirmations of the divine messenger (Exod 3:12; 1 Sam 10:7, 9; 14:10; 1 Kgs 13:3, 5; 2 Kgs 19:29; 20:2-9; Isa 7:11, 14; 38:22; Jer 44:29).

<sup>32</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 206.

<sup>33</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 248.

## The Identity of the Sign of Jonah

But what precisely does Jesus have in mind with these cryptic pronouncements? And with what, more specifically, may we identify the sign of Jonah? A straightforward answer evades readers, and several suggestions of varying persuasiveness have been proposed. We will thus evaluate the options, arranging them from least to most satisfactory.

Might Peter, the “son of Jonah” (Matt 16:17), himself be the sign?<sup>34</sup> Matthew is after all unique in his emphasis on Peter’s foundational role in the church (16:18). The life and leadership of Peter, it could be argued, remains as a testimony to the wicked generation; or perhaps Peter’s climactic confession is intended as the sign. Either interpretation seems forced in context, however. It would be a strange maneuver indeed to situate the sign next to Jesus’ resurrection and preaching (12:40-41, 16:4) only to later reveal that it primarily involves Peter. Moreover, Luke clearly insists that it is the “Son of Man” who will be a sign to the generation (11:30). In keeping his focus on Jesus in the sign of Jonah texts, Matthew fails to depart significantly enough from Luke in to warrant such a reading.

Though they fail to develop its implications, Davies and Allison also consider baptism as a possible meaning of the sign. Early Christians felt free to identify baptism with the crossing of the Red Sea (1 Cor 10:1-5) and with Noah’s ark (1 Pet 3:18-22), so it is not incredible to imagine associations with Jonah’s deliverance as well.<sup>35</sup> The early connection of baptism with Jesus’ death and resurrection would justify his subsequent talk of burial. Israel then rejects the sign of Jonah in refusing to be baptized into the death-and-resurrection discipleship of Jesus, and the nations are offered the sacrament by the narrative’s end (Matt 28:19-20). While fascinating, the lack of contextual evidence for this reading makes it difficult to establish. Rejecting Jesus’

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<sup>34</sup> As is among the options proposed by Allison and Davies, 2:353.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



ministry and resurrection certainly entails the rejection of baptism, but compelling reasons would need to be given to show that the sacrament is in mind rather than some aspect of Jesus's life.

Might the sign of Jonah be the destruction of the Jerusalem temple or the final judgment? In a context of condemnation and amid talk of "this generation," one may connect the sign of Jonah to the Olivet Discourse's "sign of the Son of Man" which brings mourning in 24:30. To be sure, striking comparisons can be made between the overthrow of Nineveh and that of Jerusalem, and these will be discussed below. But while apocalyptic themes are present in 12:41-42, there are difficulties in equating the sign itself with a judgment. The Lukan account, which also refers to judgment, presents the sign as the actions or experiences of the prophets Jonah and Jesus. For Luke, Jesus himself must be the sign in some sense, and nothing in Matthew's immediate context objects to this.

But if the sign must be some analogy between Jesus and Jonah themselves, we may amend this option by suggesting that the sign is Jesus *preaching* a message of judgment. This has better support from Luke, which uses Jonah's preaching to the Ninevites and their subsequent repentance as a foil for Israel's present hardheartedness (11:32). It also fits the contexts of critique in both Matthew and Luke—the religious leaders and crowds requesting a sign will receive nothing but a Jonah-styled message of judgment. However, there are reasons to question this as Luke's interpretation and altogether doubt it as Matthew's. The future tense of Luke 11:30 (ἔσται—the Son of Man "will be" a sign) has caused some to be suspicious of any present proclamations in view.<sup>36</sup> The Son of Man has already been sent to Israel and has preached a message of repentance to it; the sign must be some act of Jesus yet to occur.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>36</sup> See France, 492, and Allen, 195.

<sup>37</sup> To this, one might respond that the future tense simply has in mind the future proclamation of judgment because Israel has rejected the present proclamation of the kingdom.

separation in Luke of the sign (11:30) and the Ninevites' repentance (11:32) by the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon (11:31) suggests that the sign and the preaching are distinct (or at least not identical).<sup>38</sup> Finally, the interpretation of the sign as preaching must account for Matthew's fascination with the fish miracle in 12:40, which is in closer proximity to, and contains some logical relationship with (hence the connective γάρ), the sign in v. 39.

For these reasons the resurrection of Jesus is a more natural and convincing interpretation of the Matthean sign of Jonah.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, immediate context seems to demand that the resurrection be involved: "For just as Jonah was in the belly of the sea creature three days and three nights, so the son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights" (12:40). The sign would thus be the resurrected Jesus, the prophet delivered from the realm of death by a miracle of God.<sup>40</sup>

But must the sign be the resurrection exclusively? A more nuanced conclusion is that Matthew's sign of Jonah is not a single analogue in the Jonah story, but Jesus himself functioning as a Jonah-styled prophet.<sup>41</sup> This allows for Jesus' preaching of repentance, deliverance from death, and warnings of judgment all to be evoked by the sign.<sup>42</sup> Here something like Leon Morris' suggestion of a genitive of apposition ("the sign that is Jonah") is helpful.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> France, 490.

<sup>39</sup> And, while the meaning of Luke's sign is less evident, the resurrection is a plausible there as well.

<sup>40</sup> Such is the view of France, 490, and Allison and Davies, 2:355.

<sup>41</sup> Perhaps in the sense that John the Baptist "was" Elijah and evoked several images of the figure, from his dress to his prophecy to his role as a forerunner of an even a greater figure.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Talbert offers a similarly twofold view: the sign is both Jesus preaching and resurrected. Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 156.

<sup>43</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 325. This translation is also offered by Blomberg, 206.

Thus the religious leaders will be given no sign but Jonah himself—a prophet delivered from death, dooming the unrepentant to judgment. This interpretation is compatible with the other instance of the “τὸ σημεῖον plus genitive” formula in Matthew; the “sign of the Son of Man in heaven” (24:30) is quite plausibly epexegetical as well.<sup>44</sup>

This interpretation avoids a criticism sometimes leveled against the resurrection-only view. Since Luke requires the Son of Man to be a sign to Israel in the same way that Jonah was a sign to Nineveh, it is argued that preaching must be in view and not deliverance. There is no indication in the story that the Ninevites were ever aware of the sea creature. The miracle was not a sign to them, but the prophet himself.<sup>45</sup> This is would be a formidable objection if the sign of Jonah is and only is his rescue, but if we take it as referring to the experience of Jonah more generally, no issues arise. The sign Nineveh received was Jonah, the preaching prophet rescued from death by God; Nineveh’s knowledge or ignorance of the miracle is of no consequence. The sign Israel will receive is Jesus, the preaching prophet rescued from death by God—and Jerusalem’s clear knowledge of the miracle (28:11-14) only magnifies its stubbornness.<sup>46</sup>

Jewish interpretive traditions surrounding Jonah also permit elements of deliverance and judgment to be simultaneously at play. Jewish writers at the time of Jesus were especially interested in the rescue experience.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Jonah was frequently evoked as a salvific symbol

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<sup>44</sup> France, 925

<sup>45</sup> Davies and Allison, 2:353.

<sup>46</sup> To be fair to the resurrection-only view, this assumes that the Ninevites did not know of the miracle and, moreover, that first-century Jews would have been concerned with whether the Ninevites knew. See France, 491, who insists that this kind exegetical precision need not be expected of first-century Jews.

<sup>47</sup> France, 490.

for Israel.<sup>48</sup> And yet the prophet also was associated **with the judgment** of the wicked, even of Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> Josephus in his own summary of Jonah **gives attention** to the miracle as well the pronouncement of doom.<sup>50</sup> This historical awareness of **both themes** allows for the sign to be broader than a single association.

Certainty on this issue is elusive. Even so, **interpretively little** is at stake in choosing between these two most reasonable conclusions, the **sign of Jonah** being either the resurrection specifically or Jesus as a Jonah-prophet more generally. **The former** is of course included in the latter. But even if the sign itself is merely the resurrection, **echoes of Jonah's preaching** are hardly absent from the text (see, after all 12:41). They **may simply** be seen as typological developments of a primary Jesus-Jonah comparison. **The sign itself** may not "contain" these additional elements, but it immediately summons them. **What is more**, the vindication of Jesus' message and the establishment of Jesus as judge are **key consequences** of the resurrection. With the resurrection bringing to mind Jesus' preaching and **warnings** anyway, it seems appropriate to speak of the sign in terms of all the Jonah echoes it evokes.

Though its identity is not made overwhelmingly **clear to readers**—and this may even be an intentional effect inviting readers to look for Jonah **in later** developments of the Gospel—the coming sign will certainly be rejected by Jesus' generation. Jesus forewarns that the Ninevites and Queen of the South will both arise and condemn his **contemporaries** (12:41-42), which is unaware that the most important prophet of all has arrived in Israel. The prediction is immediately followed by a story about a **demon leaving its host** only to return to with seven

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<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of such texts, see David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Luke," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 324.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

others worse himself. The implication is that “this generation,” though now visited by the kingdom of God, is destined (hence ἔσται) for worse misfortune than had plagued it before.<sup>51</sup>

All this establishes a condemnatory context for the sign of Jonah in 12:40. No sign will be given that will convince the religious leaders of Jesus’ identity. Indeed, no sign—not even the greatest miracle in history—*could* accomplish this. Thus the sign of Jonah functions nothing at all like a concession to the religious leaders’ request. It is instead the overthrow of their final expression of resistance, a resurrection which pronounces doom on those who refuse to repent and surprising pardon for those (even the worst of Gentiles) who embrace it.

### **The Sign of Jonah in Matthew 16**

The above conclusions are supported by the second occurrence of the sign of Jonah in Matthew (16:4). Here Jesus, following the faith of a Canaanite woman and the spectacular feeding of the four thousand, is confronted by an unlikely mixture of Pharisees and Sadducees who have joint interests in “testing” (πειράζοντες) him.<sup>52</sup> Resembling the prior group of scribes and Pharisees, these leaders request a “sign from heaven.” Again, they likely have in mind a sign clear and spectacular enough to remove all public doubt surrounding Jesus’ identity.<sup>53</sup> Their test rings Satanic, evoking the second temptation in the wilderness to prove himself the Son of God (4:5-7). And yet Jesus refuses to cooperate. He responds with a lesson from meteorology: these Jews are able to read the skies but not the “signs of the times” (σημεῖα τῶν καιρῶν—likely

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<sup>51</sup> Exactly how Israel’s fate will become worse is not directly stated, but it is likely that judgment at the last day and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple are involved. In rejecting the eschatological Jonah-prophet, eschatological doom is sealed.

<sup>53</sup> Davies and Allison, 2:580.

referring to the signals of the eschatological kingdom which has broken in with Jesus' ministry).<sup>54</sup> They are completely imperceptive to the intentions and activity of God.

Jesus repeats his refusal from 12:39: "A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then leaves, concluding the pericope with no further explanations, indicating that there is no great difference in the meaning of the sign in 12:39 and 16:4.

The significance of 16:1-4 for our discussion is not that it offers any great new perspective on the sign of Jonah's identity, but simply that it mentions it a second time. At first glance, the episode seems redundant—various parties of Israel's religious leadership are testing Jesus yet again, and after highlighting their imperceptiveness, he responds with the same rejection formula involving Jonah. Matthew stands alone in including this second episode, implying that it is not accidental to his narrative. It firstly contributes to an ongoing characterization of Israel as remarkably resistant to Jesus. But it also establishes the sign of Jonah as something more significant than a one-off parallel. Matthew is insistent upon a Jonah-shaped role that Jesus must play, and the sign prompts readers to read the Gospel with special sensitivity to the Jonah narrative.

### **ECHOES OF JONAH IN MATTHEW'S ETHNIC REVERSALS**

Matthew's conception of Jesus as the new Jonah activates other parallels to the Jonah story. This is done explicitly in 12:41, where, immediately after explaining the sign, Jesus shames Israel by contrasting it to Nineveh. But a subtler parallelism runs throughout the Gospel. Again and again we find the most unlikely of Gentiles responding positively to God and his

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<sup>54</sup> France, 606.

prophet. And yet the leaders of Israel, graced with God's presence and offered his deliverance, merit the Gospel's harshest criticism. This suggests a more nuanced Jonah typology than is usually expressed. Jesus as the new Jonah is greeted by the shocking faith of new sailors and Ninevites. Meanwhile, all the critique of the old Jonah—to which Jesus as his superior is immune—falls upon Israel.

To develop this reading of Matthew, five passages will be examined.<sup>55</sup> In each of them, Gentile figures shame Israel by being more responsive to Jesus than the nation's leaders. Of course, we are unable to contend with certainty that Matthew was considering Jonah in every passage. But we can demonstrate how mindful readers might see similarities between the two books, and it is not unreasonable to imagine how Jonah might have influenced Matthew's rhetorical strategies.

### **The Genealogy and Magi**

Hints of Jonah-like irony appear in the very first scenes of the Gospel. The genealogy of Jesus contains references to four Gentile women: Tamar (1:3), Rahab (1:5), and Ruth (1:5), the wife of Uriah (1:5). Each in her Old Testament context serves as surprising foil of or example for the Israelites. Tamar functions to correct Judah (Gen 38:1-27), Rahab is hailed for her assistance of the spies (Josh 2:1-24), Ruth contrasts bitter Naomi and faithless Israel in the period of the judges (Ruth 1:1), and, as innocents, Bathsheba and her husband condemn David (2 Sam 11:1-27). These figures alone suggest that Gentiles will play a startling role in the narrative.

This role begins to unfold shortly thereafter. Following Jesus' birth, magi from the East arrive in Jerusalem to investigate the one born "king of the Jews" (2:2). The unsavory reputation

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<sup>55</sup> This is hardly an exhaustive list. These are simply the most prominent passages featuring Jewish-Gentile role reversals.

of magi (μάγοι) among a Jewish-Christian audience heightens the surprise: they come intending to worship this king (ἤλθομεν προσκυνῆσαι αὐτῷ).<sup>56</sup> Ironically, those in Israel—Herod and all of Jerusalem with him—are completely unaware of their king’s birth. The news that elicits “great joy” from the magi (2:10, ἐχάρησαν χαρὰν μεγάλην) in fact troubles (ἐταράχθη) Herod and the entire city (2:3). The king whom the religious leaders recognize will “shepherd my people Israel” (2:6, ποιμανεῖ τὸν λαόν μου τὸν Ἰσραήλ) is unwelcome in Israel to begin with. Instead, while the magi alone offer a tribute fitting of God’s messiah, Herod attempts to kill the infant such that his family must relocate to Egypt (2:13).<sup>57</sup> Thus, by the second chapter of Matthew, the rhetoric of Jonah is already beginning to take shape. Like the sailors and Ninevites, the magi treat God with the esteem he deserves. But like Jonah, Israel is in conflict with God from the very beginning.

### Jesus and the Centurion

The second passage in Matthew which prominently features a Gentile accomplishes a similar effect. Upon entering Capernaum, Jesus is approached by a centurion who requests that his servant (παῖς) suffering paralysis be helped (8:5). Jesus responds with a question of his own—should he himself go and heal this Gentile’s servant?<sup>58</sup> A Jewish audience would likewise

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<sup>56</sup> France, 66-67.

<sup>57</sup> France, 62, detects parallels with the Queen of Sheba hearing Solomon’s wisdom and presenting a gift of gold and spices (1 Kings 10:1-10). This anticipates Jesus’ pronouncement that “something greater than Solomon is here” (12:42). And yet even in 12:41-42 the Queen joins the Ninevites in condemning Israel. The magi function not only to glorify the newborn king but to foil the people of God, who resist the advent of their savior.

<sup>58</sup> While many translations render Jesus’ response (Ἐγὼ ἐλθὼν θεραπεύσω αὐτόν) as an indicating intent (“I will come and heal him”), the NIV along with France, 313, and Morris, 192, treat it as a question suggesting surprise (“You want *me* to come and heal him?”). This is consistent with the fronting of ἐγὼ, makes good sense of the resulting dialogue, and parallels Jesus’ second Gentile interaction in Matthew (the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28).



hesitate at the thought of Jesus entering the unclean house of an ally of Rome.<sup>59</sup> As an emblem of pagan power and violence, a centurion was the kind of person the messiah was expected to conquer, not assist. In this respect he resembles a Ninevite.

Upsetting ethnic expectations once more, the centurion's response displays remarkable confidence in Jesus. He admits his own unworthiness but recognizes Jesus' authority to heal with a mere word (8:8-9). This amazes Jesus (*ἐθαύμασεν*), a response elicited nowhere else in the Gospel.<sup>60</sup> He announces that he has not encountered this kind of faith anywhere among his own nation (8:10). He then reveals a critical plot twist in the story of Israel: "Many from the east and west will come to share the banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom will be thrown out into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (8:11-12). But while this pronouncement echoes Jonah's final reversal—repentant Gentiles receiving compassion while the Israelite sits miserable, isolated, and accused—it is a considerably worse outcome. The Jonah story never threatens the loss of God's presence and covenant. Matthew, however, insists that this is the fate of those who reject Jesus. Thus Israel has not only been shamed in this episode. Its very identity has been threatened.

### **Jesus and the Canaanite Woman**

The story of the Canaanite woman (15:21-28) continues the theme of ethnic reversal. In its immediate context, the passage follows Jesus' critique of the Pharisees on ritual purity. The

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<sup>59</sup> Unlike Luke's account of the episode (7:1-10), Matthew is unaware of or uninterested in stressing the centurion's Jewish sympathies. This highlights the shock of Gentile inclusion in Jesus' healing ministry.

<sup>60</sup> France, 315.

faith of the Canaanite woman, then, promptly foils the Pharisees' hollow religiosity. While they come to find fault with Jesus, this woman comes to seek healing.<sup>61</sup>

The episode begins with Jesus withdrawing to Tyre and Sidon, possibly to avoid danger from the Pharisees (as is frequently the connotation of ἀναχωρέω in Matthew—see especially 2:12-14 and 12:15). Precisely to where Jesus goes is unknown, but the mere mention of these cities is more than enough to unsettle biblically literate readers. And yet already it is ironic that Jesus must be driven from Israel into these regions. To this end, Matthew adds “Sidon” to Mark’s “Tyre” (Mk 7:24), perhaps to strike a note of parallelism with 11:21. The Gentiles of these cities, Jesus insists, would have responded rightly to the kingdom if they had been given the chance. Now that the narrative offers one, Jesus’ words come true.<sup>62</sup>

Conflict is introduced as a Canaanite woman appears and cries out for the healing of her daughter. Matthew is careful to label her a Canaanite rather than the more contemporary designation “Syrophenician.” This evokes all the ugliness of Israel’s archenemy, forging immediate associations with idolatry and impurity. And yet the woman’s petitions are based in her surprising recognition of Jesus’ identity. She calls on him repeatedly as Κύριε, and while this can function simply as a polite address, readers are likely to feel its full confessional weight.<sup>63</sup> That a Canaanite should recognize Jesus’ lordship is surprising, but it is even more so that she should identify him specifically as “Son of David.”<sup>64</sup> Thus the woman is another type of Ninevite—a Gentile that evokes the worst but surprises with the best.

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<sup>61</sup> This brings to mind Jonah’s own religious façade, which is in turn shamed by the Ninevites’ legitimate repentance.

<sup>62</sup> France, 591-92.

<sup>63</sup> Compare with the religious leaders in Matthew, who call no one κύριος but Pilate (27:63).

Jesus first responds with cold silence (15:23), next claims to have only been sent to Israel (15:24), and then likens granting the request to throwing a children's meal to the dogs (15:26).<sup>65</sup> The "children" undoubtedly represent Israel to whom Jesus was called. The "dogs," then, stand for Gentiles. This resistance from Jesus makes her unflinching faith all the more praiseworthy. The woman's reply is remarkably clever—she takes Jesus' exclusivist table image and finds within it a new inclusivity. While continuing to call Jesus κύριε, she insists that crumbs should fall from the master's table. Her persistence also echoes 7:7-12 with its talk of asking, seeking, and knocking.<sup>66</sup> It is surprising indeed that a Canaanite should display this kind of Sermon-on-the-Mount awareness. It resembles the Ninevites' own intuitions of God's character (3:9)—both appeal to his mercy as earnestly as possible.

Jesus' at last grants the request. Having gone to great lengths to resist the woman, he now goes to great lengths to assure her. Matthew, who had created more tension than Mark, now reports more praise. Jesus applauds her faith as "great" (μεγάλη, in an emphatic position). This is the only instance in the Gospel of "great faith," and together with the centurion, the woman is the only person to be publically praised because of faith.<sup>67</sup> Placed in contrast to Israel, the woman contributes hugely to the Matthew narrative's Jonah-shaped twist.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Matthew's critique of Israel is ultimately sharpened by the "go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" motif (10:5-6). Jesus in Matthew has his sights set on Israel, and Gentiles like the Canaanite woman are forced to struggle for inclusion. And yet the presence of Gentiles hounding the kingdom table for a scrap proves embarrassing to the children who spurn their bread. And that the "children" are given special priority proves all the more troubling when their "dogs" show more loyalty to the master. Compare with Jonah's own proximity to God's word being shamed by distant Gentiles, and it is clear that similar strategies are being used.

<sup>66</sup> This is ironic indeed, since 7:7-12 is immediately preceded by the warning against giving that which is sacred to dogs. In 15:21-28, we have a "dog" defying these categories with exemplary persistence.

<sup>67</sup> Morris, 405.

<sup>68</sup> The relationship of 15:21-28 to its subsequent section is a fascinating one and depends on the identity of the crowds therein. Jesus ascends a mountain and is greeted by masses coming to receive healing (15:29-30). He shows compassion and performs a second feeding miracle, this time for four thousand with seven baskets left over.

## The Roman Trial and Centurion at the Cross

Themes and images of Jonah persist and become apparent again at the trial and crucifixion scenes. While it is the Jewish leaders who ultimately require Jesus' death, Gentile powers facilitate it. And yet here the Romans recall the sailors who brought about the old Jonah's "death"—they try their best to spare the prophet and finally claim innocence of his blood (Jon 1:13-14). Following their orchestration of the prophet's death, they recognize God in a way that shames Israel (Jon 1:16). These striking parallels suggest that Matthew was aware of Jonah in his storytelling, but at the very least they accomplish similar rhetorical effects. The religious leaders' behavior becomes absurd and pitiable, while Gentiles quickly recognize what Israel is so bent on denying.

Pilate is the primary analogue to the sailors at the trial and crucifixion. For all Pilate's notoriety as a brutal governor, the narrator presents him as surprisingly resistant to killing Jesus. He first offers the Jewish crowd an alternative Jesus to punish: Jesus Barabbas, according to the custom of releasing a prisoner (27:16-17). He does this recognizing that the Jews do not seek justice but act "because of envy" (21:18, διὰ φθόνου). Even his wife emerges as another Gentile attesting to Jesus Christ's innocence. Yet the crowds are persuaded by the religious leaders into asking for Jesus' death. Pilate presents the alternative once more but is told to release Barabbas. He then asks about Jesus' fate, attempting to be as passive an agent as possible, but is urged to crucify. He asks yet again what Jesus has done to deserve death, but his voice of reason is drowned in a chorus of Σταυρωθήτω ("Crucify him!"). Perceiving that he is powerless to stop the

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Some commentators as far back as Augustine perceive the crowd to be Gentile. France, 587-88, echoes this claim, citing as evidence Jesus' prior dealings with the Canaanite, Mark's mention of the Decapolis in his parallel account (7:31-8:10), possible numeric significance (four corners of the world, and seven representing completeness), praise offered to "the God of Israel" (v.31), and the otherwise redundant literary function of the second feeding. If this is indeed the case, then Jonah-shaped irony is present here as well. The Gentiles are turning to God quickly and with shocking numbers.

mounting riot, Pilate relents but washes his hands of the matter. “I am innocent of this man’s blood” (27:24), he announces, reminding readers of the sailors who begged God not to “put against [them] innocent blood” (Jon 1:16). Jesus’ death becomes Israel’s responsibility (just as the Jonah’s “death” at sea was purely his fault). Matthew concludes the dialogue with the crowds’ chilling resignation: “His blood is on us and on our children!” (27:25).

Following Jesus’ crucifixion, a Gentile foils the mockery of the chief priests (27:43). Having hurled Jesus into the tides of death and seen the spectacular result, the centurion realizes that “this one truly was the Son of God” (27:54, Ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν οὗτος). He becomes like the pagan sailors of Jonah, honoring the God which Israel—chronically disobedient like the Jonah of old—claims to know but has scorned.

### **The Sign’s Rejection and the Great Commission**

The aftermath of the resurrection brings our Jonah typology to its climax. At long last the Sign of Jonah is given to Israel. Jesus is presented as the prophet delivered from death, his preaching vindicated, the judgment of his enemies secured. This reaches the ears of the chief priests and elders through the report of the guard at the tomb (28:11). Apparently unable to disprove the account, the religious leaders must bribe soldiers to propagate a lie still circulated at the time of Matthew—“his disciples came at night and stole his body while we were asleep” (28:13). Like Jonah at the end of his story, Israel’s leadership is shown to be deceitful and without argument. Like Jonah, they have been offered gracious rescue from disobedience, but they refuse. The resurrection thus seals their fate as hopelessly opposed to God. In the same way that Jonah’s experience in the belly of the fish shames him in the grand scheme of his narrative, Jesus’ experience in the belly of the earth shames Israel in the grand scheme of its.

Moreover, in the same way that Jonah's deliverance extends God's compassion to the unlikely Ninevites, Jesus' deliverance extends the kingdom mission to all nations. Israel's attempt to cover-up the resurrection is immediately followed by the Great Commission that completes the Gospel. Jesus commands that discipleship spread to πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ("all the nations" or "all the Gentiles"). This conclusion authenticates the faith of the Gentiles which, until now, had been in tension with Israel's. In that sense the commission resembles God's proclamation at the end of Jonah—like the Ninevites, the Gentiles of Matthew are now defended as worthy recipients of divine grace.<sup>69</sup> A particularism surrounding God's mercy is resisted.

### CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDY

As we have seen, the story of Jonah provides readers of Matthew with more than a mere shadow of Christ. Jonah's irony and rhetoric are in fact **deeply ingrained** in the First Gospel, especially as it contrasts Jews and Gentiles. Both works **cast otherwise** heinous Gentiles as positive examples of faith. Both chastise the actions and **attitudes** of Israel. And both conclude with God challenging a **deep-rooted** particularism.

These conclusions invite further study. Would a **careful examination** of Jonah in the Septuagint yield new parallels? Might Peter be intended as a **type** of Jonah?<sup>70</sup> What is the role of Jonah typology in other New Testament texts (e.g. **Luke-Acts**)? How does Matthew use other typologies in his particularist-universalist conversation? **These** and other questions show the intersection of Matthew, Jonah, and typological studies to be **fertile ground** for research.

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<sup>69</sup> And not merely of compassion, but of full participation in the ecclesial people of God.

<sup>70</sup> Whereas Jesus resembles Jonah as the delivered **prophet preaching** judgment, and whereas Israel embodies the prophet's hate and hypocrisy, Peter stands **between them** as an instrument of God in desperate need of correction. He too must be rescued from sinking in the storm (14:30). And like Jonah, Peter's emphatic claims to be on God's side (26:35) are quickly dissolved in emotion (26:40, 69-75). Yet his confession (after which he is provocatively identified as "Simon, son of Jonah," 16:17) **marks him as crucial** to the unfolding church. As one with Jonah-like tendencies, Peter must to demonstrate the **steadfast obedience** that his father's namesake lacked.

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