



Echoes of Jonah in the New Testament

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The book of Jonah is never quoted in the New Testament. Jesus does, however, make mention of the title character in one memorable passage, and key elements from the story's plot seem to surface here and there in the narratives of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts. In order to explore the book's range of influence on the New Testament as completely as possible, we will begin by noting the New Testament passages in which references or allusions to the book of Jonah might be made and will then proceed to discuss how themes from the book of Jonah may have been taken up in New Testament writings.

Eighteen verses in the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament contain marginal notes that cite a text from the book of Jonah as a cross-reference or parallel passage. These are listed in Figure 1, along with my own best guess at what the editors of that volume perceived to be the connections.¹ In some cases, linguistic similarities are more pronounced in Greek than in English (comparing the New Testament text to the Septuagint), but even then the similarities need not be taken as indicators of direct dependence. For instance, the phrase "God of heaven" is found in

¹I have made a correction to Nestle-Aland with regard to the second item listed. The Nestle-Aland New Testament actually lists Jonah 1:4 as a cross-reference to Matt 23:35; I believe this is an error, and that Jonah 1:14 is meant.

Several verbal similarities to Jonah may be found in the New Testament, but the most prominent connection by far is the Gospels' references to the "sign of Jonah" and the repentance of the Ninevites. Different emphases demonstrate how the Gospel writers related that theme to the people of their own day.

FIGURE 1: MARGINAL REFERENCES TO JONAH IN THE
NESTLE-ALAND GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

<i>Jonah text</i>	<i>cited as cross-reference for</i>	<i>apparent basis for citation</i>
1:4–6	Matt 8:24; Mark 4:37–38	someone is asleep in a storm at sea
1:14	Matt 23:35	prospect of being “guilty of innocent blood”
1:5	Acts 27:19	cargo tossed overboard to lighten load
1:9	Rev 11:13	phrase “God of heaven”
1:10, 16	Mark 4:41	fearful response to divine mastery over the sea
1:12–15	John 11:50	better for one person to die
1:15	Luke 21:25	sea is said to “roar” or “rage”
2:1	Matt 12:40; 16:4; 1 Cor 15:4	“belly of the fish” an image of burial
3:5	Matt 12:41; Luke 11:32	repentance of the Ninevites
3:5–6	Matt 11:21; Luke 10:13	“sackcloth and ashes” a sign of repentance
4:6	Matt 2:10	phrase “great joy” used to express one’s delight
4:9	Matt 26:38; Mark 14:34	phrase “grieved unto death”

both Jonah 1:9 and Rev 11:13 (and nowhere else in the New Testament except Rev 16:11), but this does not demonstrate that the Seer of the Apocalypse had Jonah’s reference in mind when he used that phrase, since it is also found many other places in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 24:7; 2 Chr 36:23; Neh 1:4; Dan 2:18).

In addition to the texts listed in Figure 1, we should mention Matt 16:17, in which Jesus refers to Peter as “Simon son of Jonah.” There have been many attempts to take this appellation as metaphorical, such that Peter would then be identified as the prophet Jonah’s successor (but in what sense?). It seems more likely, however, that the reference is literal and has nothing to do with the prophet: Jonah was the actual name of Simon Peter’s father. The only problem with this otherwise obvious explanation is that the Fourth Gospel refers to Peter as the son of *John* (John 1:42; 21:15–17). Still, the relationship between the names *Jonah* and *John* is unclear. It has been suggested that, by New Testament times, the name *Jonah* was sometimes regarded as a Semitic equivalent of John. The names could at least be confused, for “John” sometimes appears as a textual variant for “Jonah” in manuscripts of the Septuagint.²

The clearest references to Jonah in the New Testament are the passages in

²For discussion and bibliography, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997) 2:622–623.

FIGURE 2: THE SIGN OF JONAH

<p>LUKE 11:29–32 ²⁹ When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, “This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. ³⁰ For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. ³¹ The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here! ³² The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!</p>	<p>MATTHEW 12:38–42 ³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” ³⁹ But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! ⁴² The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!</p>	<p>MATTHEW 16:1–4 ¹ The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ² He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ ³ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴ An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” Then he left them and went away.</p>
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Matthew and Luke in which Jesus refers to a “sign of Jonah” that will be given (Matt 12:38–40; 16:1–4; Luke 11:29–30) and the accompanying texts in which Jesus compares his current generation unfavorably to the Ninevites, who repented at the preaching of Jonah (Matt 12:41; Luke 11:32). These texts are given in Figure 2, and their distinctive messages will be discussed more fully below. We may note already, however, that Matthew and Luke appear to have resolved the puzzle of the prophetic sign differently. This is most evident in the boldfaced verses in Figure 2, which are unique to the Gospels in which they appear: Luke 11:30 seems to identify the *person* of Jonah as a sign to the Ninevites and to indicate that in some parallel fashion the person of the Son of Man will be a sign to the current generation; Matt 12:40 connects the sign of Jonah with the *burial* of Jonah in the belly of the fish,

such that the parallel is now to the death (and, we may assume, resurrection) of the Son of Man. Further, in both Luke 11:32 and Matt 12:41, it is the *proclamation* of Jonah that is deemed significant. This is a bit confusing, but we should not expect absolute consistency with regard to an enigmatic saying that has passed through at least three cycles of tradition (Jesus, Q, the evangelists). Luke and Matthew agree that the sign of Jonah will be the *only* sign that is given and they both seem to presume the inevitable condemnation of the generation that receives it.

THEMES FROM JONAH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus' casual references to the story of Jonah presume familiarity with the book on the part of first-century Jews. We might think that the book's theological motifs (e.g., a need for repentance in the face of imminent judgment; the scandal of divine mercy shown to Gentiles) would have made it ripe for appropriation by Christians. It is somewhat surprising, then, that Jonah does not feature more prominently in the New Testament canon than it does. Still, some of the story's thematic and narrative elements do find echoes in the early Christian writings.

1. *The call to preach to Gentiles (Jonah 1:1–3)*

In Acts 10, Peter receives a call to preach to Gentiles that begs comparison to the Jonah tale.³ Both Jonah and Peter are told to “Get up and go”—the wording in Acts 10:20 is almost identical to the Septuagint text of Jonah 3:2—and both respond to this summons by taking leave from the city of Joppa (Jonah 1:3; Acts 10:23). A few scholars have thought that Peter's initial hesitation over eating what is unclean (Acts 10:14) parallels Jonah's reluctance, but I suspect Luke is more interested in contrast than comparison (cf. Acts 10:29). Peter is the antitype of Jonah, for he sets out from Joppa *toward* the Gentile audience to which he has been directed (whereas Jonah headed in the opposite direction). Later, he is pleased that the mercy of God comes to Gentiles as a result of his proclamation (Acts 10:44–48). Not everyone is pleased, however, and Luke is able to present the “circumcised believers” who criticize what has occurred as reacting in a manner similar to that for which Jonah had been rebuked (Acts 11:2–18; cf. Jonah 4:1–11).

2. *The storm at sea (Jonah 1:4–16)*

There are a number of parallels between the story of the storm in Jonah and certain New Testament narratives. First, we may compare the Jonah account to the “stilling of the storm” narrative in Mark 4:35–41. Jonah boards a boat headed in the opposite direction of the nation to which he has been directed to prophesy; Jesus sets off in a boat toward the “other side,” leaving behind a crowd that presses upon him (cf. Mark 3:20; 5:24; 6:45). Both Jonah and Jesus fall asleep in their respective boats, unperturbed by the storms that threaten to sink the crafts. Both are awakened rudely by scared shipmates, and once the storms stop with no lives lost,

³See Robert W. Wall, “Peter, ‘Son’ of Jonah: The Conversion of Cornelius in the Context of Canon,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29 (1987) 79–90.

the shipmates in both stories exhibit fearful awe in response to their deliverance by a divine power that remains foreign to them.

Similarities may also be discerned between this portion of the Jonah story and the tale of Paul's sea voyage in Acts 27. In both accounts, a ship large enough to feature a captain, crew, and passengers is hit by a great or violent wind (Jonah 1:4; Acts 27:14) in the Mediterranean Sea. The sailors in both stories toss the ship's cargo into the sea to no avail (Jonah 1:5; Acts 27:18). There is, however, one striking contrast: whereas Jonah's presence on the first ship is what causes it to be in peril (Jonah 1:7–10, 12), Paul's presence on the second ship is what prompts God to grant safety to all on board (Acts 27:23–25).

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3. *The adventure with the fish*

The most celebrated (or at least best-known) aspect of the Jonah story in our modern world is the prophet's three-day sojourn in the belly of the fish, and this was true in Jesus' day as well. Analysis of Jewish texts that can be dated to the first century reveals that relatively little attention was paid to Jonah's initial reluctance, to his later preaching, to his anger over the city being spared, or to the subsequent lesson he learns from the worm and the gourd.⁴ Second Temple Jews, like Christians ever since, were primarily interested in his miraculous rescue from the sea monster (or from drowning, by *means* of the sea monster). This is taken as symbolic for the salvation of Israel or, sometimes, for the salvation of all humanity. One Jewish homily that appears to be independent of the New Testament but dates to about the same time period likens the belly of the fish to a womb and refers to Jonah's emergence from the fish as both “a sign of rebirth” and as a “sign of the truth.”⁵ To the extent that Jonah is understood to have been in Sheol (see Jonah 2:2), his deliverance is also viewed as a resurrection. Indeed, a widespread tradition identified Jonah as the widow's son raised by Elijah in 1 Kings 17:17–24. As one first-century writing puts it, Elijah raised Jonah from death “for he wanted to show him that it is not possible to run away from God.” Thus, the death of the widow's son in 1 Kings 17 is viewed as a repeat performance of Jonah's descent into Sheol in Jonah 2:2. Death is understood as a human attempt to depart God's presence, and resurrection as a divine remedy that foils such feeble endeavors.

All of this provides a backdrop for what we find in Matthew's Gospel: Jonah's

⁴For a survey of the treatment of Jonah in Jewish traditions contemporary with the New Testament, see Simon Chow, *The Sign of Jonah Reconsidered: A Study of Its Meaning in the Gospel Traditions* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiskell, 1995) 25–44.

⁵The document is *De Jona*, an Armenian translation of a Jewish homily, dated around the middle of the first century C.E. See Chow, *Sign of Jonah*, 34–37.

temporary stay in the belly of the fish is a prophetic analogue for the death and resurrection of Jesus (explicit in Matt 12:40 and assumed in Matt 16:4). This should be the only sign Israel requires, but as Matthew tells it, the sign is obstinately rejected. Later in this Gospel (but only in this Gospel), the religious leaders of Israel actually learn of the resurrection of Jesus (Matt 28:11–15). They are thus confronted with the promised sign of Jonah, but they respond not with repentance but with duplicity that only intensifies their opposition to the will and ways of God.

4. The repentance of the Ninevites

As indicated above, the second half of the book of Jonah (chap. 3–4) received considerably less attention in the world of Jesus than the first half (chap. 1–2). It is striking, therefore, that Jesus seizes upon an element in the latter part of the story in his saying about the repentance of the Ninevites, preserved for us (identically) in Matt 12:41 and Luke 11:32. That repentance, furthermore, is explicitly described as a response to the preaching of Jonah. The book of Jonah itself does not present the prophet as much of a preacher, but that may just be the point. Jonah spoke only five words to Nineveh and the nation was transformed; Jesus has gone throughout Galilee preaching the good news of the kingdom without the same success. Since his preaching is greater than that of Jonah, the problem must lie with the obstinacy of his audience: this evil generation is worse than Nineveh, as will become clear at the final judgment.

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This saying derives from Q and can almost certainly be traced to the historical Jesus. Alongside the saying in Luke’s Gospel, however, we find the curious statement that Jonah himself “became a sign to the people of Nineveh” (Luke 11:30). In terms of the Jonah story, this does not make much sense, since there is nothing in that story to indicate that the *person* of Jonah somehow contributed to the city’s repentance. Luke allows this much license to score a theological point: the kingdom of God announced in the preaching of Jesus is also manifested in his very person. Furthermore, Luke’s use of the future tense (“so the Son of Man *will be* to this generation” [v. 30, italics mine]) points inevitably to the parousia. Thus, for Luke the “sign of Jonah” seems to have become a multivalent symbol for Jesus himself and for the mission of Jesus that began with his earthly preaching and would conclude with his glorious return. It is notable that with such a broad sweep of application, he does *not* seize upon the fairly obvious analogue to the death and resurrection motif that Matthew discovered in the first part of the book. In tension with both Jewish and early Christian tradition, but in sync with the historical Jesus,

Luke is more focused on the latter part of the book (repentance of the Ninevites) than on the first part (adventure with the fish). We may reasonably guess that this is due to his interest in the Gentile mission, for which Jonah's success among the Ninevites provides a proleptic paradigm.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEW TESTAMENT'S USAGE

Although the book of Jonah is never quoted outright in the New Testament, a handful of verbal similarities to the book may be detected in New Testament writings. Certain plot elements may also have exerted some influence on New Testament narratives. Still, the theological richness of the book does not appear to have been exploited by the earliest Christian writers as thoroughly as we might have expected. This could be due in part to an overriding fascination with the first half of the book and a concomitant neglect of the latter half, where such themes as the urgent need for repentance and divine mercy for Gentiles come to the fore. In any case, the most prominent New Testament connection to Jonah by far is to be found in the Gospel pericopes dealing with the "sign of Jonah" and the repentance of the Ninevites. The basic point comes to us with three different interpretations:

- for Q: the sign of Jonah = the preaching of Jonah = the preaching of Jesus
- for Luke: the sign of Jonah = the person and mission of Jonah = the person and mission of Jesus, which will conclude with his parousia
- for Matthew: the sign of Jonah = the prophet's sojourn in the belly of the fish = the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In every case, however, the sign of Jonah is the only sign that the evil generation will receive and it is given to no avail. The accent is on the judgment to come upon those who reject this all-sufficient sign.⁶

This accent may owe to the words of the historical Jesus as preserved in Matt 12:41 and Luke 11:32, but when spoken by one Jewish peasant to other Jewish peasants in pre-70 Palestine those words would have had a different tone than when read in post-70, largely Gentile churches. In its original context, Jesus' remark, while defensive, was no doubt satirical: those who ignore his words are worse than the Ninevites, who repented at the grossly inferior preaching of Jonah. The note of absurd hyperbole (the Ninevites may end up being their judges in the day of reckoning) indicates that his comments retain the ironic spirit that characterizes the book of Jonah itself. His interest was not to promote the righteousness of Gentiles at the expense of Israel but to shock Israel into the realization that they were not living up to reasonable expectations (cf. his "*even* the Gentiles" saying in Matt 5:47, italics mine). The "something greater" theme would thus apply to Israel as much as to himself: his preaching may represent something greater than that of Jonah, but then the covenant people of God are (or should be) something greater

⁶The most important full-length studies of this topic are Chow, *Sign of Jonah*, and Richard Alan Edwards, *The Sign of Jonah in the Theology of the Evangelists and Q* (London: S.C.M., 1971).

than the people of Nineveh. So there is a double irony: the Son of Man's preaching is turning out to be less effective than that of the reluctant prophet, and the covenant people of God are revealing themselves to be more obstinate than the notorious Ninevites. The point of so satirical a characterization (of himself and his audience) is simply, "This should not be!"

Matthew and Luke provide us with early interpretations that add new dimensions of christological meaning. Both retain the basic sense of the sign of Jonah as "the preaching of repentance" but add something else to this. Luke expands the image logically: preaching is but a part of the total mission, so we must consider all that Jesus did and does and will do, and indeed who he was and is and will be. This works, but it loses touch with the Jonah story itself, since there are no bases for comparison between Jonah and Jesus with regard to the amplified sense of person and ministry that Luke wants to assert for Jesus. Matthew adds new meaning exegetically, by searching the Jonah tale to find another prominent analogue: Jesus is not only like Jonah insofar as they both preached repentance but also in that they both experienced death and resurrection. On the surface, this expansion appears to lack the logical progression of Luke; the two meanings for the sign (death and resurrection; preaching of repentance) are simply set beside each other. There may, however, be a salvation-historical connection that is assumed without being spelled out: the sign of Jonah was initially manifested in Galilee through the earthly preaching of Jesus, but now it is manifested in the Matthean community through the message of his death and resurrection.

Picking up on that last comment, we can probably say that both Luke and Matthew connected the sign of Jonah for their own day with "the preaching of the church." It would be consistent with the theology of Luke to define the content of the church's preaching as a call to repentance (Luke 24:47) grounded in a story of Jesus' life and mission (Acts 1:1). It would be consistent with the theology of Matthew to define the content of the church's preaching as being more focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is what grants him the authority to establish the new community of disciples with whom he abides until the end of the age (Matt 28:18–20). ⊕

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