

## Topic 1: The sign of Jonah

Verses: Matthew 12:38-42; 16:1-2, 4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:16, 29-32

Chong Ho Yu

### Differences and similarities between Gospels

- Mark simply said the Pharisees came to question Jesus. Matthew's account includes the Pharisees, teachers of the law, and the Sadducees. Luke's account is the most ambiguous one. He said that "others" tested Jesus but it is unclear who they are.
- Mark and Luke bluntly said that the questioners tested Jesus. Matthew didn't say so in the first instance.
- In Matthew, Jesus uses the phrase "a wicked and adulterous generation" but in Luke the word "adulterous" is omitted.
- Mark's account that "Jesus sighed deeply" is not mentioned by Matthew or Luke.
- In Mark's account Jesus's reply is very brief. In Matthew's and Luke's stories Jesus made references to the Old Testament. But the sequences are different. In Matthew the order is: Jonah, the Niveites, and the Queen of the South. In Luke the sequence is: Jonah, the Queen of the South, and the Ninevites.
- In Matthew Jesus called Jonah "the prophet" but in Luke Jesus omitted this title.
- Matthew interpreted the sign of Jonah: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." However, Luke simply wrote, "For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation." In Luke's narrative the sign of Jonah has one implication, whereas in Matthew there are double-implications: Jonah as a prophet calling for repentance and also a sign for the dead and resurrection of Jesus.

### Context

- In Mark the immediate context of testing Jesus is that Jesus performed the miracle by feeding four thousand people with a few loaves of bread and a few pieces of fish. Afterwards, they went to the region of Dalmanutha and encountered the Pharisees who tested Jesus.
- In Matthew and Luke the immediate context of testing Jesus is that Jesus drove out a demon that was mute. Some people said that he did so by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons. And therefore they tested Jesus by asking for a sign from Heaven, a convincing demonstration of divine power.

### Form of the story

**Pronouncement:** One of the forms of the three stories is the pronouncement. Usually a pronouncement is composed of two parts. The first part is a **story** that sets up the stage and the second part is to introduce an **authoritative pronouncement** by Jesus.

**Story reveals the essence of Jesus:** In this mini-genre the narrative aims to reveal something about the identity of Jesus. In this passages Jesus reasserts his authority by saying that He is someone greater than Solomon and Jonah.

It is important to note that calling for repentance is by no means a unique mission of Jonah. The resemblance between Jonah and Jesus might be more than preaching repentance. According to Alexander (2000), besides that both Jesus and Jonah preached repentance and re-emerged after three days, other aspects of Jonah can further reveal the nature of Jesus's ministry. By preaching to the Gentile population in Nineveh, Jonah became the messenger of God's mercy to the nation that defeated Israel in 722 BC. It is possible that in his reference to the "sign of Jonah" Jesus implied that his forthcoming salvation would extend to Gentiles, regardless of what the Romans would do to the Jewish Temple in 70 AD (cf Luke 21:24).

**Eschatological:** In this min-genre, Jesus spoke in an eschatological tone to imply that He is the Messiah that will judge the world. Originally, the story of Jonah conveys a message of hope. The people of Nineveh repented and evaded the judgment of God, and so they experienced divine mercy. However, Jesus turned this upside down by converting the notion of hope and mercy to a sharp warning. Because the listeners fail to read the sign from God, it would result in condemnation from the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South. The stakes become even higher because the decisive eschatological judgment is a response to ignoring the one "greater than Solomon" and "greater than Jonah" (Carroll, 2012).

## Setting

Pronouncement form and story about Jesus's ministry: The early church might use Matthew 12:38-42, 16:1-2 and Luke 11:16, 29-32 to preach the message that **Jesus Christ is the Messiah prophesized by the Old Testament**, because in the passages Jesus made reference to the Old Testament and asserted that his resurrection had been signified by the sign of Jonah. At the beginning the identity of Christians had not been established. To many it is not clear whether there is any **continuity** between Judaism and the new faith, and therefore this pronouncement story is essential to affirm the continuity.

**Eschatological form:** The early church believed that **the second coming of Christ is imminent**, and therefore it is possible that the passage in Matthew written in an eschatological tone was used to remind Christians about the forthcoming judgment of God.

## Bibliography

- Alexander, T. D. "Jonah (Person)." In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Ed. T. Desmond Alexander & B. S. Rosner. 605–606. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- Carroll, John T. *Luke: A Commentary*. New Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012.
- Smith, R. H. "Sign of Jonah." In *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Ed. J. B. Green & S. McKnight. 754. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992.
- Strauss, Mark L. *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.