

4. WHERE IS CHRIST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

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So, Jesus definitely saw himself in the book of Daniel as both the future glorified Son of Man reigning over God's earthly kingdom on behalf of the saints (Dan. 7: 13f), and yes, he also saw himself as the crucified Messiah who **must first** be **cut off** without initially inheriting that kingdom (Dan. 9: 24f). But where did he find himself in those sacred pages foretelling his bodily resurrection?

WHERE IS THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS PREDICTED IN THE OT?

Jesus knew his Bible predicted his bodily resurrection;

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead" (Lk. 24:45).

After the resurrection the disciples learned that Jesus' resurrection was predicted in the OT;

Then the other disciple who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead (John 20: 8-9).

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (I Cor. 15: 3-4).

We must ask the inevitable question. Exactly where in the OT Scriptures did Jesus see himself raised again after being dead for 3 days? To the best of my knowledge there is no *explicit* prophecy of the Messiah being raised again on the third day!

Some commentators appeal to the obscure passage in **Hosea 6: 1-2** which speaks about a group of people being raised up to life on the third day. However, this does not seem to fit the individual Jesus, for the context refers to a resurrection of the people of Israel after a national repentance. The idea seems to be that of a regathering of the twelve tribes after a time of exile --- reasonable imagery where national restoration is pictured as a coming back from the dead.

So, let's press the question again. What Scripture(s) does Jesus' resurrection from the dead on the third day fulfill? There surely must be some other place where the connection is more obvious? Well, I think Jesus himself gave the clue when the unbelieving scribes and pharisees challenged him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you" (Matt. 12:38-41; Lk. 11: 29-32).

But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The men of Nineveh will arise 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."

Evidently in Jesus' mind there was a real parallel between Jonah's cryptic **sign** and his own resurrection after three days and three nights in the grave --- or as Jesus put it --- **in the heart of the earth.**

Perhaps I am not alone in imagining that Jonah's being preserved alive **in the belly of the great fish** --- or, **the sea monster** as it may equally well be translated --- didn't seem like such a big deal.

There is no denying it would be a miracle for a man to be kept alive in the belly of a huge sea creature for three days. In my Sunday school days I used to imagine Jonah inside a very dark, humid, and very smelly stomach with the seaweed wrapped around his ears! I imagined Jonah's own stomach pitching as that huge fish dove to the depths as he desperately cried out to God. Some joyride!

True. Many skeptics dismiss Jonah's preservation as an unlikely tale. But even for those of us who take the authority of the Scriptures seriously, what's the big deal about that monster spitting Jonah up onto the beach after being "pickled alive" three days and three nights in that tomb-like prison?

Our Lord took Jonah's story as an account of actual history. He believed his Hebrew Bible on many questions which today's society dismisses as pure fable or religious myth. Jesus believed for instance, that our cosmos was the work of an intelligent Creator, his heavenly Father, and not the product of blind chance. He believed in the historicity of Noah and the Great Flood. He believed Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and in this case Jonah, were real space-time men whose stories were real.

JONAH ACTUALLY DIED!

Then one day the lights came on for me. I actually read carefully Jonah's prayer as he descended into the depths of the raging ocean. What happened is a lot more dramatic and more impossible (!?) than even being preserved alive inside a great sea monster for three days.

Let's take a close look at what actually happened as Jonah was tossed into the raging sea by the sailors. (The Greek version follows the Hebrew very closely, by the way.) As he was sinking into the dark depths of the ocean, Jonah felt he was drowning under the curse of God.

Now here's the question. Did that fearsome sea monster, **which the LORD had commanded to swallow Jonah up**, swallow him before he drowned --- before he died --- so he could get a gulp of air inside that great fish? Hmm.

If you would have asked me that before a closer reading of the text, I would have answered that Jonah was swallowed alive --- thus preserved alive --- by that sea monster. It's probably the impression we have all received through childhood impressions. But now I have changed my mind (it's been well said that he who does not change his mind about anything never changes anything!). I think the text shows that Jonah was scooped up dead from the bottom as his corpse lay entangled in the weeds. Don't rush over this;

"I bellowed out [*eboesa*] to the LORD out of my distress, and He answered me. I cried out for help **from the depth of Sheol** [*ek koilias adou*] ; You did hear my voice. For You cast me into the depths of **the heart** [*kardias thalassees*] of the seas, and the current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me.

"So I said, 'I have been expelled from Your Presence. Shall I look again toward Your holy temple?' Waters closed in over me --- to my very soul [*psyche*]. Into the fissures of mountains I descended into the depths [*abussos* ... i.e. abyss] of the earth whose bars hold tight forever. Yet, O LORD my God, You brought up my life **from the Pit** [or, according to the LXX, **brought up my life from corruption**].

"My soul [*psyche*] was failing [or, **fainting** ... *ekleipein*] me; I remembered the LORD ..." (Jonah 2: 2-8).

A gripping, dramatic, ripper of a story for sure! However, if we take it that Jonah was scooped up alive by the fish before hitting the bottom of the ocean drowned-dead, wouldn't you think Jesus was stretching the facts to teach this event was the only **sign** he would give to the unbelievers of his generation to prove his Messianic claims?

Taken this traditional way, Jonah's story would at best be a metaphor for resurrection. It might even add weight to the skeptic whose theory is that Jesus only "swooned", and did not actually die. As another theologian has admitted,

But this didn't seem to me to be the most impressive prophecy of the resurrection you could come up with ... And do you know what I found? I found that the problem wasn't with Jesus; it was with me. (I'm learning that this is usually the case.) For if you read the book of Jonah carefully, you will discover something interesting: *the author of the book never claims that Jonah remained alive for three days and three nights in the fish.* ¹

Let's see how the text explicitly reveals that Jonah **died**. Did you notice that Jonah cried out to God **from the depth of Sheol** [*ek koilias adou* literally could be taken as "from the belly of Sheol"]? Bible students know that Sheol (or as is often translated, the Pit) is the stock standard Hebrew term for the realm of the dead --- or if you prefer, the grave (e.g. Ps. 139: 7-8; Job 17: 13-16; 33: 22-30).

But you might say, perhaps this was just a near-death experience? Lots of folks claim to have been "dead" but have come back to tell the story. Wasn't this all that happened to Jonah? He *nearly* died.

In the Bible, to be in Sheol, to be in the grave, is to be in a state of irreversible corruption. That word applies to a dead person --- body and soul cease to exist except in God's remembrance for a future day!

This cannot mean that Jonah's 'soul' was conscious in Sheol as is popularly held today. Jonah says he was called up from **corruption**. That word **corruption** also brings to mind the famous text about Jesus being in Sheol in a state of total decay --- **You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your holy One to undergo decay/corruption** (Acts 2:27). To be in Sheol is to be dead, in a place of corruption. Same words as used for Jonah!

Let's continue with the text before coming to any firm conclusion;

When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple. And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry ground. Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, [anasteemi in the Greek but cumi in the Hebrew] go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the proclamation I am going to tell you. So Jonah arose [anestee] ... (Jonah 2: 7, 10 - 3: 1-3).

Did you also notice that Jonah says, "**My soul [psyche in the LXX but nephesh in the Hebrew] fainted [ekleipein]?**" This is another classic Hebrew way for saying Jonah died. His very life was *gone*.

JONAH WAS RESURRECTED TO LIFE AGAIN.

But God had other plans. All was not hopeless and lost. His first word to Jonah **from the depth of Sheol** is the same Semitic word that Jesus uses when he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead --- **Arise!** Jesus' word to the dead girl is, "**Talitha cumi**" which is to say, "**Little girl, I say to you arise!**" Or as it appears in our Greek text, "**Talitha koum, which being interpreted is, Girl, I say to you, Arise [egeire]**" (Mark 5:41). The girl came back from the dead.

¹ Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and historical Evidence for Christ*, Image, NY, 2016, p 186. (Emphases mine). Brant Pitre is the first one I have read who confirms my own thinking on this interpretation, but I am sure there must be others out there who also see that the impression from the movies and children Bibles is not what the text actually says!

Just so, when God commands Jonah to **“Arise!”** I think we are seeing a resurrection of the prophet from the dead. We note that the very same word is used of Jesus’ own resurrection. Which is to say, when that great fish vomited Jonah up onto the dry land, it vomited up a corpse awaiting God’s command to live again!

God resurrected the dead body of Jonah from the beach with the command, **“Jonah, arise [from the dead]!”** And in typical NT language, Jonah “stood up on his feet from the dead”, which is the very term used of Jesus’ resurrection!

It’s only now that we can truly grasp the significance of Jesus’ **sign** to the unbelieving world; **“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**

BUT WAIT, THERE’S MORE! ²

But there’s more to Jonah’s miraculous sign of arising from the dead after three days. For First Century Jews the greater miracle in the Book of Jonah is the momentous miracle of the pagan Gentile city of Nineveh’s repentance!

In response to Jonah’s preaching that **in forty days’ Nineveh will be overthrown, the people of Nineveh believed in God, and they called a fast, and put on sackcloth**, and they humbled themselves before God and repented of their wickedness (**Jonah 3: 4ff**). This was a universal response from the king all the way down the line to the least servant. It was also a genuine heart-response for the king of Nineveh commanded all the people to **call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from violence ...**

We cannot overestimate the impact this miracle had on a Jew reading the Book of Jonah. Remember what it did to the prophet Jonah himself! Remember, Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire --- Israel’s fierce and implacable enemy (e.g. see **2 Kings 15-17**)! As **Pitre** remarks,

Once the identity of the Ninevites is clear, it becomes apparent that the real miracle in the book of Jonah is the repentance --- one might even say the “conversion” --- of the Gentiles. ³

THE SIGN OF JONAH WAS IN TWO PARTS

Now we can begin to see why Jesus loved the story of Jonah’s death and resurrection so much.

When the scribes and Pharisees demanded **a sign** to prove Jesus’ messianic credentials, Jesus in effect tells them that after his own death and resurrection, the rest of the great sign of Jonah will be the miraculous repentance of the pagan Gentiles! Both aspects belong to **the sign of the prophet Jonah**.

The sign of **the Son of Man** will be that after his own resurrection from the dead on the third day, the Gentiles will repent and barge down the door into his kingdom! Again, as **Pitre** remarks,

According to Jesus, it is not just his resurrection from the dead that will be a reason for believing in him. It is also the inexplicable conversion of the pagan nations of the world --- the Gentiles. As Jesus says: the pagans “repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matthew 12:41; Luke 11:32). In Jonah’s case, only one Gentile city repents, and that only for a time.

² I acknowledge Brant Pitre for much of the following thoughts. See *Ibid*, pp 188

³ *Ibid*, p 188

In Jesus' case, countless Gentile nations, cities, even empires would go on to repent, cast away their idols, and turn to the God of Israel. ⁴

Most of us, I feel sure, do not appreciate the powerful impact this complementary aspect of Jesus' sign communicated to the Roman world in the first few centuries. For whenever the early Christian apologists argued with their pagan contemporaries about the truthfulness of their claims for Christ Jesus, they regularly pointed to how the pagan world around them was turning from its idols and various gods and goddesses to the God of Israel --- the God of the Jews!!

For instance, consider these words of the Fourth-Century Christian apologist **Eusebius of Caesarea**;

Behold how today, yes, in our times, our eyes see not only Egyptians, but every race of men who used to be idolaters ... released from the errors of polytheism and the demons, and calling on the God of the prophets! ... Yes, in our own time the knowledge of the omnipotent God shines forth and sets a seal of certainty on the forecasts of the prophets. You see this actually going on, you no longer only expect to hear of it, and if you ask the moment when the change began, for all your inquiry you will receive no other answer but the moment of the appearance of the Saviour ...

And who would not be struck by that extraordinary change --- that men who for ages have paid divine honour to wood and stone and demons, wild beasts that feed on human flesh, poisonous reptiles, animals of every kinds, repulsive monsters, fire and earth, and the lifeless elements of the universe should after our Saviour's coming pray to the Most High God, Creator of Heaven and earth, the actual Lord of the prophets, and the God of Abraham and his forefathers? ⁵

Eusebius' sentiments could be reproduced from a long list of the early Church apologists. But let's not miss the impact. For the early Church it was not only the empty tomb that verified Jesus' sign of Jonah the prophet before the unbelieving world. To them, just as grand a miracle was the fact that the Gentiles had in huge numbers begun to believe and repent at the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Messiah.

The sign of the prophet Jonah which Jesus loved and applied to himself, is still here 2,000 years on. God is still gathering out from among the nations a mighty redeemed host of people unto Himself through Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus the Son of Man definitely saw himself, the Christ, in these OT events and predictions.

Because I have borrowed so heavily from the writings of **Brant Pitre**, it is appropriate that I conclude with his own summation; **Indeed, how does one explain the universality of the Church?** I guess you could argue that it was a coincidence. I guess you could claim that the many passages in the Old Testament prophesying that one day the pagan nations of the world would turn and worship the God of Abraham just happened to take place after the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Isaiah 2: 1-3; 25:6-8; 66:18-21; Jeremiah 3: 15-18; Micah 4: 1-2; Zechariah 8: 20-23).

I guess you could also claim that these mass conversions among the pagans just happened to coincide with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who just happened to live and die at the very time that the book of Daniel said the Messiah would come. And I guess you could believe that after Jesus was crucified, the tomb just happened to be inexplicably empty and hundreds of disciples of Jesus began claiming to have seen him alive again in his body. I guess you could claim all this.

⁴ Ibid, p 189, original emphasis

⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Proof of the Gospel*, 1.6.20-21 as quoted by Brant Pitre, Ibid, p 190

I, for one, prefer the simpler explanation. Jesus of Nazareth was right. The Son of Man was crucified. The Son of Man was buried. The Son of Man was raised the third day. The tomb was empty. It still is. And the Gentiles turn to the God of Israel in droves. Because something greater than Jonah *is* here. ⁶

No wonder Jesus saw himself in the Old Testament through the prophet Jonah!

⁶ Ibid, p191