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The Sign of the Prophet Jonah
Matthew 12: 38-41

The sign of the prophet Jonah DIG: Why do you think the Pharisees wanted to see a miracle? How does Jesus feel about this generation? Why? What is the sign of Jonah? How is Yeshua greater than Jonah? How might the Pharisees have interpreted this?

REFLECT: Have you ever asked God for a sign? Is it biblical? Is there a difference between confirmation from ADONAI and a sign? Where do we get confirmation from?

After hearing **Christ's** words of rebuke and judgment for blaspheming **the Holy Spirit**, **some of the Pharisees and Torah-teachers** (**to see link click Co – Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralyzed Man**) tried to retake the offensive by saying: **Teacher, we want to see a sign from You (Mt 12:38).** That **they** answered **His** sharp denunciation by asking **Him** a superficially respectful question indicated that **they** were biting **their** tongues were determined to give the impression of civility until determining the best time to attack **Him**.

The Rabbi from Galilee categorically refused to grant **them a sign**, but directed **them** back to **two incidents** in the TaNaKh. **The first incident is the account of the prophet Jonah** who was raised from the dead after being swallowed by a whale (see my commentary on **Jonah Ar – The LORD Prepared a Great Whale to Swallow Jonah**). **The second incident that Jesus referred to concerns Solomon** (see **Ep – The Queen of the South will Rise with This Generation and Condemn It**)**. Jesus** was greater than **Jonah** and greater than Solomon. The queen of Sheba heard of Solomon and traveled from the ends of the earth to hear his wisdom. Conversely, **Messiah** had come from heaven, and yet **the Pharisees and Torah-teachers** would not listen to **Him**.669

The Pharisees and Torah-teachers did not consider anyone outside of **their** own party to be qualified to teach **them** anything. So, when **they** addressed **Yeshua** as **teacher**, **their** response was both sarcastic and hypocritical. It was sarcastic

because **they** considered **the Nazarene** to be a heretic and blasphemer, and merely looked for a way to expose **Him** as a false **teacher**. It was hypocritical because **they** mocked **Him** in front of the crowd.

The kind of **sign they** wanted was not specified, but it must have been a whopper, probably something on a worldwide magnitude. **The miracle-working Rabbi** had already performed three messianic miracles (see my commentary on **Isaiah Gl – The Three Messianic Miracles**). But, **they** wanted more on an even greater scale.

The rabbis teach that a rabbi named Eliezar was challenged about his authority to teach. To prove his qualifications, he is said to have made a locust tree move 300 cubits and a stream of water flow backwards. When he caused the wall of a building to lean forward, it was returned upright only by the bidding of another rabbi. Finally, Eliezar cried out, "If the Torah is as I teach, let it be proved from heaven." At that time (as the story goes), a voice came out of the sky saying, "What have you to do with Rabbi Eliezar? The instruction is as he teaches."

It was not that the Pharisees and Torah-teachers really expected Yeshua to perform any such sign because their very purpose was to prove He could not do such a thing and thereby to discredit Him in the eyes of the people. Even though no prophecy in the TaNaKh ever foresaw that **the Meshiach** would perform a **sign** on the magnitude **they** demanded, **the Jewish leaders** gave the impression to the people that it did.[670]

The maverick Rabbi responded to **their** sarcastic challenge by first declaring that the very fact that **they** were *asking* **for a sign** reflected the **evil** expectations of **their wicked and adulterous generation (Mt 12:39a)**. **Their** flawed acceptance of **the Oral Law** (see **Ei – The Oral Law**), led **them** into a superficial, self-righteous, and legalistic belief system. The Great Sanhedrin (see **Lg – The Great Sanhedrin**) had led the nation astray.

Consequently, **Jesus** said that **no** such **sign would be given (Matthew 19:39b).** It wasn't possible for **Christ** to perform the kind of miracle that **the Pharisees and Torah-teachers** wanted – not because **He** didn't have the power to do so, but because it was totally contrary to **ADONAI'S** nature and plan. **God** was not, and is not, in the business of satisfying the whims of wicked people who have no relationship with **Him**.

Nevertheless, **the Lord** declared that another kind **of sign** would be given: **the sign of the prophet Jonah. Yeshua** had already changed **His** policy regarding signs (see **En – Four Drastic Changes in Christ's Ministry**). So, as a result of this new policy, **He** now said: **For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a whale** (see my commentary on **Jonah At – Jonah's Prayer**)**, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:39c-40). God** brought **Jonah** out of darkness and death into the light and life. **Jonah's** experience was a snapshot of the coming burial and resurrection of **Jesus**. **The religious leaders** from Jerusalem would not understand the illustration, but, those of faith would.

Continuing with **His** illustration from the life of **Jonah**, **Christ** contrasted the response of the pagan **Ninevites** to **Jonah's** message with the response of **the Pharisees and Torah-teachers** to **His**. In one of **His** most biting rebukes, **the Nazarene** told the self righteous **Jewish leaders**, who thought **they** were the cream of the crop **of God's** people, that **the men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here (Mattityahu 12:41).**

Despite **Jonah's** reluctance to preach **God's** message to the evil and idolatrous Assyrians **of Nineveh**, when **the prophet** finally began to preach, **Ha'Shem** produced an unparalleled response: **The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.** Covering oneself with **sackcloth** and sitting **in the dust** was **their** way of showing genuine sorrow and repentance for sin. **When God**

saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened (Jonah 3:5-10).

The men of Nineveh were not only Gentiles, and had no part of **YHVH's** covenant or Torah, but were especially evil and cruel, even by pagan standards. **They** did not know **ADONAI** or **His** will, however, **they** were redeemed by **their** sincere repentance, and spared destruction as proclaimed by the prophet's harsh message: **Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown (Jonah 3:4)**.
Jonah performed no miracles and gave no promise of deliverance; however, on the basis of **his** brief message of destruction the people of **Nineveh** threw themselves on the mercy of **the LORD** and were saved.

Isra'el, on the other hand, was the chosen covenant people of **God**, privileged to have been given **His** Torah, **His** promises, **His** protection, and **His** special blessings in ways too numerous to list. Yet her people would not repent and turn from their sin even when **ADONAI's** own **Son, something greater than Jonah**, preached to them in gentle humility and gracious love, performed three messianic miracles, and offered **God's** gracious forgiveness and eternal life with **Him** in heaven. Nevertheless, **His** chosen people chose to turn their backs on **Him**. And for that they would stand under the condemnation of former pagans at **the judgment** (see my commentary on **Revelation Fo – The Great White Throne Judgment**).

The word **sign** is used many times in the TaNaKh; **Isaiah** uses it 11 of those times. When we look at all these passages we see that it is used three different ways. First, it is used in the sense of heavenly bodies; the stars are used for navigation **(Genesis 1:14)**. Secondly, it is used in the sense of positive proof. Not the miraculous, but merely positive proof**.** Here **God** speaking to Moses says: **I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain (Exodus 3:12).** Now that in and of itself is no miracle, but it did serve as a sense of positive proof. Thirdly, it is also used in the sense of the miraculous **(Exodus 4:6-9).** Several people were associated with **a sign** in the TaNaKh.

Abraham sent **Eliezar** to find a bride for **his** son Isaac from among **his** people. How would **his chief servant** know the right one? **Abraham** had put all **his** faith in **the LORD**, and **his servant** did also as **he** prayed with urgency: **O ADONAI, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my**

master Abraham. See, I am standing besides this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. Because of the custom of hospitality toward strangers, **he** knew that almost any woman would agree to give **him a drink** of **water**. But, what if she would voluntarily offer to **water his ten** thirsty **camels**? **He** decided to ask for a specific **sign**.

Eliezar thought: **May it be that when I say** to her: **Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,** she will say: **Drink, and I'll water your camels, too. Her** willingness to go the extra mile and offer to **water ten camels** also, would **say** a lot about **her** character, for **camels** guzzle huge amounts of **water**. So **he** continued to pray: **Let her be *the one You have chosen* for your servant Isaac. The chief servant** realized this bride was foreordained. **By this sign I will know that You have shown kindness to my master** (see my commentary on **Genesis Fy – God of My Master Abraham, Give Me Success Today**)**.**

The **servant** did what **Gideon** would do a thousand years later, **put out a fleece.** It worked for **him**, but, don't try this at home! This is not the best way for **God's** people to determine **His** will, because the conditions we lay down for **the LORD** to meet might not be in **His** will. Here it did, but we might be walking by sight and not by faith, and we may end up tempting **God**. If we try to put **ADONAI** on a leash and call **Him** to heel, we will be sadly disappointed. Unlike the bold prayers of the Psalmists who call on **God** to be **God**, to **put out a fleece** can be manipulative because we get the feeling that *we* are calling the shots. The fact the **LORD** sometimes condescends and accommodates our weaknesses and ignorance is a demonstration of **His** grace, not a license to play **God**. **He** is not obligated to respond to our whims. We don't have the big picture. **He** does.

Gideon's apparent lack of faith in seeking a miraculous sign from **God** seems strange for **a man** who is listed in the hall of faith **(Hebrews 11:32)**. In fact, **Gideon** already had **a sign** from **ADONAI** at the time of **his** commission **(Judges 6:17** and **21).** It is important to note that **Gideon** was not using **the fleece** to discover **God's** will, for **he** already knew from divine revelation what **the LORD** wanted **him** to do **(Judges 6:14)**. **The sign** related to a confirmation, or assurance, of **His** presence or empowerment for the task at hand. **God** acquiesced to **Gideon's** weak faith and saturated **the wool fleece** with **dew**, so much that **Gideon wrung out . . . a bowlful of water**. Perhaps **Gideon** had second thoughts about the uniqueness of **his** confirmation, so **he** requested the opposite. **That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry and the ground all around was covered with dew (Judges 6:36-40).** Thus reassured, **Gideon** continued

with his assignment.[671]

As a means of strengthening **his** faith, the prophet **Isaiah spoke to king Ahaz,** saying: **Ask the LORD your God for a sign.** It would be a demonstrable miracle that would confirm **God's** spoken word. **The king** could choose any miracle **his** heart desired, **whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights (Isaiah 7:10-11)**. The way the word **sign** is used here, the context of the **sign** was to produce faith in **Ahaz** (and from what we know of **Ahaz** that would take a miracle). But, **Ahaz** did not want such a **sign**. Why? Because **he** was going to trust both **his** and **his** nation's fate to Assyria. Any **sign** provided by **Isaiah** would only be an embarrassment to him, so he attempted to avoid the dilemma with an appeal to piety (see my commentary on **Isaiah Ca – Ask the LORD your God for a Sign**).

Hezekiah had asked for **a sign** when **Isaiah** prophesied of his recovery and fifteen additional years of life. The prophet gave him the **sign** he asked for by causing the shadow cast by the sun to go backwards ten steps instead of forwards (see my commentary on **Isaiah Gy – Hezekiah Became Ill and was at the Point of Death**).

A problem with asking for a sign or setting out a fleece is that it does not take into account that our situation is really not comparable to those in the TaNaKh. **As believers, we have two powerful tools for confirmation and assurance in our lives that they lacked. First, we have the complete Word of God** that we know is **God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (Second Timothy 3:16-17). ADONAI** has assured us that **His Word** is all we need to be **thoroughly equipped for** anything and everything in life.

Secondly, we have the Ruach Ha'Kodesh, who is **God Himself**, residing in our hearts to guide, direct and encourage us. Prior to the Feast of Weeks and the birth of the Church, the righteous of the TaNaKh had **God's** Word and was directed by **His** providential hand. But, now we have **His** completed Scriptures and **His** indwelling **Presence** in our hearts.

Rather than seeking signs or putting out fleeces, we should be content to know **God's** will for us in every situation. Rabbi Sha'ul gives us three scriptures to guide us in this regard. First: **Let the Word of Messiah, in all its richness, live in**

you, as you teach and counsel each other in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude to God in your hearts (Colossians 3:16).

Secondly: **Always be joyful. Pray regularly. In everything give thanks, for this is what God wants from you who are united with the Messiah Yeshua (First Thessalonians 5:16-18).**

Thirdly: **And whatever you do or say, do in the name of the Lord Yeshua, giving thanks through Him to God the Father (Colossians 3:17).**

If these things characterize our lives, and with godly counseling from mature believers, the decisions we make will be in accordance with **God's** will. **He** will bless us immeasurably with **His** peace and assurance, and there will be no need to ask for **a sign** or put out **a fleece**.