

Awake at the Gates

Submitting to the Sign of Jonah

April 21, 2013

Last week we took a look at Mount Hermon, which was about 30 miles from Jesus's main office in Capernaum, off the shore of the Sea of Galilee, which is fed by the Jordan, from Mount Hermon.



Caesarea Philippi was located here. And in Jesus day, water ran from the mouth of that cave, and because of that, it was believed to be the fertility gods' gateway to the underworld. Herod the Great's son, Philip¹ (who married the woman responsible for beheading John the Baptist), made this his seat of power and built a temple to Pan, a half-man, half-goat god. To entice the gods to return each spring, animal sacrifices were thrown into a natural chasm in the back of *Pan's Grotto*, where they fell to underground waters. And, if no blood appeared in the stream, the gods had accepted the sacrifice.

Public devotion was so explicit and vile that *no devout Jew* would be caught dead anywhere near the shrine-adorned cliff, called the *Rock of the Gods*. Guess where Jesus brought His young, stunned, disciples!

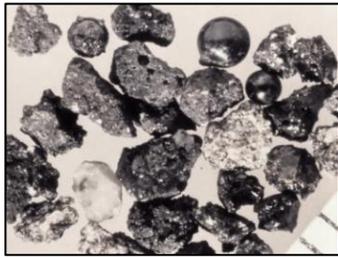
When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, [against *this backdrop of distorted worship, and unembarrassed by the activities on display*] he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon *Peter* answered ... – Matthew 16:13-16a NIV

The first thing Jesus said to Peter when they met, was, "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Rock/Peter." (John 1:42) It was prophetic for *this* moment, at the foot of the mountain, at the gates of hades.

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon *son of Jonah*,² [I think Jesus is giving Peter another new moniker] for this was not *revealed* to you by *man*, but by *my Father* in heaven. [This moment was perfectly orchestrated] And I tell you that you are *Peter*, [Petros: pebble, little rock (Strong's G4074)] and on this *rock* [Petra: massive rock, cliff, mountain of defense (Strong's G4073)] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." – Matthew 16:16-18 NIV

¹ The Herodian Tetrarchies of Judea were formed following the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE, when his kingdom was divided between his three sons. Philip I became Tetrarch/ruler of the northern portion.

² There are three possible explanations for Jesus calling Simon's dad "Jonah": 1. Peter's dad had two names. 2. The same name is transliterated differently. 3. Jesus is making a point, the same as He did with Simon's *first* name.



Jesus brought ‘em to the most sinful place, among the filthiest sinners, to show ‘em where He’s establishing His church, who He’s taking on, and who He’s going after to rescue! Petros is the pebble, set in stone by a concrete confession, on the Petra, the *Capstone*, the *Cornerstone*, (Mat 21:42) the *Sure Foundation*. (Is 28:16) We were made from dust and we’ll return to dust. That’s a photo of dust. And when it comes to Christ’s unshakable grace, **I’m a dust speck on the Marble Foundation of my Savior.**

Jonah fled because *Nineveh* was morally filthy. Later, he was “greatly displeased” with God, “Is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God.” (Jonah 4:1-2) What a self-righteous jerk!



But, *that’s* the moral of the story. He sure appreciated that grace and compassion when he was crying out from inside the fish!

To the roots of the mountains **[like Caesarea Philippi]** I sank down; **[like in Pan’s Grotto]** the earth beneath barred me in forever. **[like The gates of Hades]** But you brought my life up from the pit ... – Jonah 2:6a NIV

Mercy triumphs over judgment. **Anytime I self-righteously condemn someone, I’m playing God.** Except, only God can perfectly temper righteous judgment with gracious mercy. **God alone can judge rightly, because God alone sees our heart.** I have a hard enough time just trying to figure out my own motives, let alone *yours!* I reread Jonah, to see how the rock fits in; other than Jonah sank like one! And the Lord answered *my cry*: in the fish, Jonah prays the middle of David’s Psalm of Deliverance.³ (2 Sam 22 and Psalm 18)



“The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge ... He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior ... **[Then he goes into]** The waves of death swirled about me ... torrents of destruction ... the snares of death confronted me. ... I called out to my God. From his temple he heard my voice ... He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. ... **[then it ends]** who is the Rock except our God? ... The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God, the Rock, my Savior!” – 2 Samuel 22:1-47 NIV

Condemning is one of the most self-centered things we can do, because **we use condemnation to lift ourselves up by putting others down.** When we condemn others, we condemn ourselves, because **we almost always condemn in others what we dislike in ourselves.** The story of Simon-Peter bar Jonah’s statement in Caesarea Philippi *actually* begins 12 verses earlier.

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied ... “A wicked and *adulterous* generation looks for a miraculous sign, but *none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.*” – Matthew 16:1-4a NIV

Jesus often speaks of the sign of Jonah, (Mat 12:39, Luke 11:29-30) and of Himself as One greater than Jonah. (Mat 12:41, Luke 11:32)

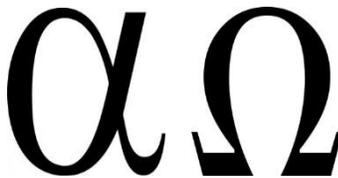
³ Jonah was active during the reign of Jeroboam II, c.786-746 BC; David wrote his Psalms about 250 years earlier.

[Luke offers something Jesus said in response to Peter, that Matthew didn't] And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." [And that's the sign of Jonah] – Luke 9:22 NIV

There's another Jonah symbol: a fish. The Ichthys, [ick-thoos] you see on bumper stickers. It's the *earliest* Christian symbol, predating the cross by a couple hundred years.



It was a common sign before John wrote his Gospel. Early believers saw a fish-emphasis. Jesus uses a fish to symbolize His resurrection, He calls fishermen to be fishers of men, He fills their fishnets, (Luke 5:6, John 21:6) fish are multiplied to feed multitudes, (Mat 14:17-18, 15:32-38) He sends Peter to catch a fish with a coin in its mouth for the Temple tax, and after his resurrection He eats some fish on one occasion (Luke 24:41-43) and cooks some on another. (John 21:9-14)



When John recorded Jesus' words, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End," (Rev 22:13) did he think it odd, that lowercase alpha and uppercase Omega are the only Greek letters that look like the sign of Jonah? And, this is going too far, but, isn't it funny that the good fat, the oil of health, is *fish oil* ... and it's called Omega *three*?



When persecution came, the Ichthys helped Christians identify each other. According to one ancient story, when a believer met a stranger on the road, he might draw an arc in the dust to see if the stranger drew an opposite arc. It was a fish code.⁴ The word fish, in Greek, formed an acronym for Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Savior.

So, back to the beginning of the story of Peter's statement.

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied ... "A wicked and *adulterous* generation looks for a miraculous sign, but *none will be given it except the sign of Jonah*." Jesus then left them and went away. [To where? Through Bethsaida [bayth-psy-DAH] ('House of Fish' – Strong's G966) (Mark 8:22-30), where Simon Bar-Jonah was born (John 1:44), to Caesarea Philippi, in Galilee. And on their way, across the Sea of Galilee, Jesus reminded them of the loaves (and fishes) He multiplied, and warns] ... "But be on your guard against the yeast [hypocritical teachings] of the Pharisees and Sadducees." – Matthew 16:1, 4, 11b NIV



Hypocritical condemnation is appealing. **We love to accuse others in order to excuse ourselves.** Jesus challenged His disciples to not repeat Jonah's error, as the religious leaders were. Instead, they're to storm the gates of hades, wherever they may be, and humbly rescue those being pulled down into the abyss. Just before He was crucified, Jesus showed them how to storm the gates of hades, in the least likely of place. The Temple!

⁴ Christianity Today, Elesha Coffman, "Ask the Editors", October 26, 2001

At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman *caught in adultery*. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. – John 8:2-5a NIV

According to the command, (Deut 22:24) the trial had to take place at the city gates; but, in Jerusalem it took place at the Temple gates, right at the front gates, to the court of women, just a stone’s throw from the Holy of Holies. The priest would write the broken laws and names on something not permanent. The dust on the marble floor was commonly used. But, to bring only the woman, was a violation of the law.

Now what do you say?” They were using this question *as a trap*, in order to have a basis *for accusing him*. – John 8:5b-6a NIV

If He doesn’t condone her death, He’s accused of breaking Moses’ Law. If he condones it, they report Him to the Romans, because Jews weren’t allowed to authorize capital punishment. So, she stands before Jesus, perfectly representing what? The adulterous generation, the *bride* He’s come to die for! I can hear Jonah’s prayer: “The snares of death confronted me. ... From his temple he heard my voice ... He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out ...”

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. **[Have you ever noticed He only makes a partial mark?]** – John 8:6b NIV

There’s an interesting verse in Jeremiah, regarding the Messiah coming to search the hearts and minds of His people, Israel.

Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord ... – Jeremiah 17:13b NIV

Want to know the best reason not to condemn? **We’ll be judged by the same standards we use to judge.** (Mat 7:1) When we accuse and condemn, we’re doing the devil’s work for him. **We’re most like the accuser when we self-righteously condemn.** Remember when Jesus was told to quiet his followers, and He said, “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out”? (Luke 19:39-40) Well, **don’t throw stones unless you want ‘em to cry out against you to their Creator.**

[His first marks have no effect] When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” **[Even His words have no immediate impact]** Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. **[But here, whatever He adds to what He began, carries such a punch, and so drives home His words, that]** *At this*, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. – John 8:7-9 NIV

What did He finish writing or drawing that could so convict such hardened religious hearts? Some say He wrote their names or their sins, but how? It’s a mob. Write “John” and that’s half of ‘em!

It has to be uncomplicated and unexpected. Like a simple arc. No one guesses what it is. Then His words. Then one more swoosh, and it’s ... the sign of Jonah, the only sign He said He’d give ‘em.

The one teaching already drilled into them. Jonah! The prophet God rebuked for the very explicit, vile act *they're* about to commit, as veneration, in the Temple: adultery against God! "Drop your rocks and go out with your hands down, or God will write your name in the dust!"

I don't know if that's what it was. But, I *think* John told me it was. At least, it's what I found, when I did what he said to do. Just before this, the Pharisees are *greatly displeased* because the people like Jesus, "This mob knows nothing of the law – there is a curse on them." (John 7:49) And Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) warns them not to condemn Him. And when the Pharisees respond, in the last verse, just before Jesus makes His mysterious marks that makes 'em drop their little rocks of condemnation, John writes that ...

They replied, [to Nicodemus] "Are you from Galilee, too? *Look into it,* [NAS: "*search, and see*"] and you will find that a prophet does not come [NKJ: "*no prophet has arisen*"] out of *Galilee.*" – John 7:52 NIV

So, I did. And they're wrong. A prophet did come out of Galilee. "[God's] servant Jonah ... the prophet from Gath Hopher." (2 Kings 14:25a) Gath Hopher means "winepress of the well." (Strong's H1662) You go to draw water, but you get wine! Just like the miracle Jesus did to announce His ministry, at the wedding in Cana ... in Galilee. If His Place was the center of Cana, the center of Gath Hopher would be, "Red Robin" (3,200 feet). They overlap. Jesus' main office was in Galilee. He calmed the storm, and walk on the water, in the Sea of Galilee.

And He took His disciples to the root of the Mountain, at the Gates of Hades, at the Rock of the God's, in *Galilee*, and called Peter the little rock, the son of the true Jonah, the big rock who will sink and rise, to establish the true church for those who are sinking in sin.

Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." – John 8:7-11 NIV

Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. (James 2:13)