



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Sign of Jonah  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp 54-59)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:  
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### Christian Reflection

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# The Sign of Jonah

Jesus' mysterious invocation of "the sign of Jonah" became, for Christians facing persecution and death in the early third century, a promise of God's ultimate act of grace and deliverance: resurrection from the dead.

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading: Matthew 12:38-41**

### Responsive Reading†

The LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish:

**I called to the LORD out of my distress and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.**

Then he said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" The waters closed in over him; the deep surrounded him; weeds were wrapped around his head at the roots of the mountains.

**I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you raised me up from the Pit, O LORD. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!**

Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

### Reflection

"In their speaking, art, and writing, in their music, hear God's voice. Why composer, painter, poet, why the note and color choice?" begins Terry York's new hymn (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 51). The Jonah marbles, which are a rare artistic creation dating to the third century A.D., and the many appearances of Jonah scenes on early Christian sarcophagi and catacomb paintings, indicate this story was one of the first narratives depicted in Christian art. These artistic expressions reveal important clues about the early church's theological imagination.

"Early Christians interpreted Old Testament prophecies and events as announcing and prefiguring the ministry of Jesus or the church." writes Hornik. "Their interpretation of the book of Jonah was inspired by Jesus' mysterious rebuke of some religious leaders demanding a prophetic sign."

Their demand followed Jesus' healing of a man's withered hand (Matthew 12:9-14), curing crowds of sick people (12:15), and returning speech and sight to a demoniac (12:22-23). By asking for a "sign," the religious leaders were not seeking additional miraculous healings; even Beelzebul can perform miracles and wonders, they charged (12:24)! Instead, they demanded an



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exceptional signal that would prove Jesus was God's messenger.

"No sign will be given," Jesus warned them, "except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (12:39). Jesus saw the time he would spend in the belly of the earth, between his death and resurrection, as prefigured by Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish.

Four of the Jonah marbles, *Jonah Swallowed*, *Jonah Praying*, *Jonah Cast Up*, and *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine*, depict this sign. The Jonah motif bore rich meaning for early Christians during persecution. They found hope in the "sign of Jonah," which pointed to the resurrection of Jesus and so promised their own deliverance from death.

What are we to make of *The Good Shepherd*, the fifth marble figure in the set? Including the Good Shepherd reminded believers that the same Christ who offered his life for the salvation of the world also watched over them as they faced persecution and death. Jesus Christ is the loving shepherd and savior of those who believe in him.

### Study Questions

1. Compare two Gospel passages, Matthew 12:38-42 and Luke 11:29-32, that mention the "sign of Jonah." What similarities and differences do you find in these passages?
2. The sculptor of the Jonah marbles integrated well-known motifs from pagan culture, Hornik notes. What benefit did this have for the early church? Could this jeopardize the Christian message? Do contemporary artists use non-Christian motifs in ways that successfully communicate the gospel?
3. After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313, artists portrayed Christ less as a simple shepherd and more as a majestic Caesar. Reflect on this development in the church's visual art and theology.

### Departing Hymn: "Praise Him, Praise Him" (verses 1 and 3)

Praise Him! Praise Him! Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!  
Sing, O Earth, His wonderful love proclaim!  
Hail Him! Hail Him! Highest archangels in glory;  
Strength and honor give to His holy Name!  
Like a shepherd, Jesus will guard His children,  
In His arms He carries them all day long.

*Praise Him! Praise Him! Tell of His excellent greatness.  
Praise Him! Praise Him! Ever in joyful song!*

Praise Him! Praise Him! Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!  
Heav'nly portals loud with hosannas ring!  
Jesus, Savior, reigneth forever and ever.  
Crown Him! Crown Him! Prophet, and Priest, and King!  
Christ is coming! Over the world victorious,  
Pow'r and glory unto the Lord belong.

*Fanny Crosby (1869)*

†Adapted from Jonah 1:17-2:10 (NRSV).

# The Sign of Jonah

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To interpret Jesus' mysterious citation of 'the sign of Jonah.'
2. To reflect on how the early church interpreted an Old Testament prophecy and event in light of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
3. To appreciate the relationship between Christian artistic imagination and theological reflection.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 14-15 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Locate the hymn "Praise Him, Praise Him" in your church's hymnal.

## Begin with a Quote

Read the quote from N. T. Wright found on p. 61 of *Prophetic Ethics*. It begins, "Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bringing to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament." In this lesson members can consider Wright's comment with regard to the prophetic message and symbolic acts of Jesus and Jonah.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with thanksgiving to God for the promise of new life in Christ, our Savior and Shepherd.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 12:38-41 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Jesus chose to reveal his identity and mission cryptically with mystifying remarks, rebukes, and allusions. This is another way in which Jesus was like a number of Israel's prophets. A string of these obscure revelations leads up to the "sign of Jonah" reference in Matthew's gospel. Jesus deliberately violated the Pharisee's interpretation of the sabbath: he and his disciples plucked grain (Matthew 12:1-2) and he healed numerous people (12:9-10, 15, 22). This occasioned a biting accusation from the religious teachers that he was breaking God's sabbath command to rest from all work. In succession, Jesus proclaims "something greater than the temple is here" (12:6), hints that something greater than the sabbath is at hand (12:12), and declares "something greater than Jonah is here! ... [and] something greater than Solomon is here!" (12:41-42). To those who doubted Jesus' authenticity as God's messenger, only the "sign of Jonah," a remarkable deliverance from the power of death, would reveal him to be the Christ. And some would not even accept that demonstration (see Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, especially verses 30-31).

The Jonah Marbles show an early Christian interpretation of the “sign of Jonah.” *Jonah Swallowed*, *Jonah Cast Up*, and *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* reference events in the book of Jonah to represent the death, resurrection, and paradisaical bliss of Jesus. *Jonah Praying* may depict Jonah’s petition from the belly of the fish, which is quoted in the responsive reading, or his prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance from the fish.

### Study Questions

1. Although these passages share a number of similarities, members may note a curious difference. In Matthew, Jesus clearly identifies the “sign of Jonah” as the prophet’s deliverance from the belly of the fish after three days and nights. Just as God rescued Jonah from apparent death, God would raise Jesus from the grave (12:40).

What Jesus meant by the sign of Jonah, according to Luke’s account, is less clear. “For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh,” he says, “so the Son of Man will be to this generation” (Luke 11:30). How was Jonah a sign to Nineveh? Perhaps the people of Nineveh heard of his miraculous experience at sea, but would not believe such a wild tale from an Israelite. Perhaps the sign of Jonah was the prophet’s proclamation of God’s impending wrath for Nineveh’s evil ways and love of war (cf. Jonah 3:8b). Just as Jonah announced God’s coming judgment against people’s love of sin and violence, so too did Jesus warn “this generation” and call them to repentance. Therefore, since one greater than Jonah is here, the consequences for ignoring Jesus’ message are all the more dire for those who harden their hearts and do not repent.

2. Hornik observes that the sculpture not only incorporated the well-known *contrapposto* stance (one weight-bearing leg straight and the other slightly bent) from the fifth-century B.C. artist Polykleitos, but that *The Good Shepherd* figure shares many characteristics with the pagan criophorus figure, or the ram-bearer. The large fish in *Jonah Swallowed* and *Jonah Cast Up* is the Greek Ketos, a sea monster that is part animal and part fish. Jonah’s posture in *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* resembles river gods from Greek and Roman mythology and evokes the Greek myth of the shepherd Endymion. In this piece the sculptor substitutes a creeping gourd, which, in Roman art, symbolized resurrection, for the bush that shaded the prophet Jonah from the sun’s intensity.

Brainstorm for other examples of artists incorporating non-Christian sources into their art to convey distinctively Christian messages. By borrowing from popular pagan motifs, Hornik suggests, early Christian artists preserved the integrity of the Christian message while not attracting unnecessary attention during periods of persecution. Are there other reasons for a Christian artist to incorporate non-Christian motifs?

3. The church went through an astounding metamorphosis, both of character and theology, after the Edict of Milan in 313. Emperor Constantine ended state-sponsored persecution of the church throughout the Roman Empire and bestowed legal status upon Christianity. Emperor Theodosius I (A.D. 379-395) declared Christianity the official and only religion of the Empire. During the fourth century, Hornik says, there is a dramatic transformation in artistic portrayals of Christ. Encourage members to discuss how Christians’ relation to their culture—whether they are actively persecuted, are an influential majority, or have official government support—influences their theological understanding. Discuss how this influences the visual art they create.

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.