

## Item #58 (God's Sign in the Synoptics)

In Item #14 (Some Signs of God in the Synoptics) I gave what I thought was a plausible explanation (then modified) of my view of the Sign of Jonah in Matthew and Luke, and its absence in Mark. Further thought has given me reason to amplify and modify my previous views as follows.

**Matthew. 1.1.** As I understand the Gospel of Matthew it is destined to be understood as focused primarily on Jews. This seems indicated above all by the genealogy of Jesus Christ as given in Matthew 1,1-16, that begins with tracing of the genealogy back to David and then to Abraham, and ends with the term "Christ". For Jesus who is the Christ is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham that in his "seed" all the nations of the earth will be blessed (see Galatians 3,15-16).

1.2. Another text from Matthew's Gospel that can be used to support the claim that Matthew is writing his Gospel primarily with regard to the Jews is Matthew 10,1-4 where Jesus designates twelve of His disciples to be the principal preachers of His Kingdom. The number "twelve" indicates that the Church of which they are the principal preachers is the fulfillment of ancient Israel which consisted of twelve tribes based on the twelve sons of Israel (see also Matthew 19,28).

1.3. Jesus insists that all of His followers need to love Him more than any member of their family. I quote from Matthew 10,34-39:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it."  
(*The New Testament. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible. Revised Standard Version. Second Catholic Edition. Pp. 24-25*)

Here, obviously, the cross of Jesus is being used to express deliberate pain willed by Jesus as regards family relations. And not just temporary pain, but continual pain: a permanent state of affairs. I think that what is happening here is that Jesus is describing Judaism in the state of existing no longer made up of twelve tribes but made of followers of Jesus divided into the followers of one of the twelve Apostles or one of their successors (see Matthew 10,1-4). The number twelve signifies the legitimate succession involving replacement of the twelve tribes. But the passage quoted above (Matthew 10,34-39) presumes the free choice of those who wish to follow Jesus and the free choice of those who do not. Hence the

gravity of what is being described and the relative permanence. The words of Jesus presume that there will always be Jews who will follow Jesus and Jews who will not as long as, in the context of divided families, life will involve taking up a cross. For Jesus' taking up His cross involves a division between those of the tribe of David who follow Him and those who do not.

Just how do the blessings promised by God to Abraham come to the Jews? They come to the Jews as physical descendants. This is the *cause* of their receiving the fruits of the promise (see Genesis 15,1-6). But the *condition* of their taking advantage of the cause (God's promise) is faith, as Abraham had when he accepted God's promise (Genesis 15,6). All Jews are eligible to receive God's promise simply because they are Jews, but only those who actually believe actualize this eligibility.

But how do the blessings promised by God to the Jews come to the Gentiles? They come to the Gentiles as spiritual descendants. This is the *cause* of their receiving the fruits of the promise. But again, what is the *condition* of actualizing this cause? Faith is the condition. How do non-Jews become spiritual children of Abraham? By imitating Abraham in believing that God controlled life and death. Just as Abraham believed God when God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22,1-18), so all those who believe that God can raise each of them from the dead is a spiritual descendant of Abraham (see my book *Hebrews—An Interpretation* (Subsidia biblica 47; Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2016. Pp. 89-91). Where did Abraham first come to believe that God was the master of life and death? When his son Isaac was born despite the fact that both he and his wife Sarah were well beyond the time for producing offspring. (See Genesis 17,17.) Because of the way Isaac was born Abraham could believe that God could raise Isaac from the dead if He so willed. (See Hebrews 11,19.) This belief was the foundation of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's testing command.

(1.4. All of this prefigures the passage involving the Sign of Jonah in Matthew 12,38-42:

Then some of the Scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 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 arrive at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold

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something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.” (*The New Testament*. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible. Revised Standard Version. Second Catholic Edition. P. 29)

There are two elements involved in the Sign of Jonah in Matthew: 1) the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and, 2) the preaching of Jesus to the Gentiles of His generation and their conversion. The implication is that the Jews of the generation of Jesus will not be converted as a significant whole, not that none of them will be. For those who will be converted the passage Matthew 10,34-39 (quoted above) is applicable: for those who become Christian the previous ordering into tribes is no longer valid and they live accordingly; for those who do not become Christian but remain Jews loyal to the Law as they see it the previous ordering into tribes seems to be valid but is not. In both cases there is obviously much pain from the disruption of tribal ties. Non-Jews who are converted by the preaching of the apostles do not experience such tribal division. Objectively, the validity of the Mosaic Law for all Jews is canceled by the death of Jesus on the Cross, a fact that is witnessed to by the sign given by God in the Resurrection of Jesus. The superiority of that which the Resurrection witnesses to over the world of the Mosaic Law is attested to by the superiority of “something greater” that is “here”, that is, in Jesus and His Life, Death and Resurrection, over the wisdom of Solomon.

**Luke. 2.1.** As I understand the Gospel of Luke it is destined to be understood as focused primarily on Gentiles. This seems indicated above all by the genealogy of Jesus Christ as given in Luke 3,23-38, that ends with tracing of the genealogy back to Adam and then to God, implying that Jesus is the new Adam. Thus, by implication, the work of redemption is to affect all of humanity of whom Adam is the symbol, and is caused by God. In Matthew, on the other hand, the focus is on Abraham and Jesus as Christ, implying that the work of redemption is to be achieved by God through the Jews.

2.2. Another text from Luke’s Gospel that can be used to support the claim that Luke is writing his Gospel primarily with regard to the Gentiles is Luke 10,1 which alludes to Jesus’ appointing seventy of His disciples to be secondary preachers of His Kingdom. The number “seventy” indicates that the Church of which they are the secondary preachers is the fulfillment of the ancient nations of Genesis 10. (See Luke 24,47.) It is my

understanding also that the Transfiguration (Luke 9,24-38) uses the figures of Moses and Elijah to signify the Church (Jesus as Transfigured is a result of the Resurrection) as a union of those who formerly lived under the dispensation of the Mosaic Law (Moses) and those who lived as Gentiles (Elijah).

2.3. Also in Luke Jesus insists that all of His followers need to love Him more than any member of their family. I quote from Luke 12,49-53:

“I came to cast fire upon the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother; mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law”. (*The New Testament*. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible. Revised Standard Version. Second Catholic Edition. P. 133)

This passage is parallel to Matthew 10,34-39, but with differences. Here in Luke Jesus speaks of “one house”, implying that the difference from the result of His death and resurrection has to do not with a part of a tribe but with a part of a single family. In Matthew the redemption of the tribes of Israel was something awaited, whereas in Luke it is not. Hence the connotation of newness in the words “fire” and “baptism”.

2.4. All of this prefigures the passage involving the Sign of Jonah in Luke 11,29-32:

“When the crowds were increasing he began to say, ‘This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the men of Nineveh, so will the son of Man be to this generation. The queen of the South will arise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold something greater than Solomon is here. 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.’” (*The New Testament*. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible. Revised Standard Version. Second Catholic Edition. Pp. 130-131)

The major difference between the Sign of Jonah in Luke and the sign of Jonah in Matthew is the absence of the mention of Jonah being in the belly of the whale. This absence seems to match the absence of the pairing of Abraham and Christ that characterizes the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew. The inference would seem to be that only through the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of Abraham's son Isaac, is salvation available for mankind. Whether by Jew or Gentile, refusal to listen to the message of the contemporary Jonah who is Jesus will result in failure to attain the fruits of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

**Mark.** 3.1. As I understand the Gospel of Mark it is designed to be understood as focused on Jewish and Gentile converts in Rome. Mark explains Jewish customs that Gentiles would not otherwise understand (Mark 7,3-4 14,12). And as for the Resurrection of Jesus, Mark so presents it (Mark 16.1-8 [Mark 16,9-20 are non-Markan additions] that in terms of the Mosaic Law there is no proof that it happened, though Mark clearly believes that it did. The Gospel of Mark was probably written in connection with the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Nero in the sixties to show that the Roman emperors are not of divine descent, but that Jesus Himself gives the sign that He is.

3.2. In Mark 8,11-13 Jesus takes up the question of a "sign from heaven", that is, a sign from God of the legitimacy of His ministry:

"The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit, and said, 'Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.' And he left them, and getting into the boat he departed to the other side." (*The New Testament*. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible. Revised Standard Version. Second Catholic Edition. P. 79)

In the following passage (Mark 8,14-21) Jesus warns His disciples (they are "in a boat", that is, in a symbol of the Church to come) of the dangers of the narrow views of the Pharisees and Herod. He excoriates them for not understanding the symbolism of the two multiplications of bread He had brought about: the twelve baskets (see Mark 6,41-44) symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel that are brought into the Church, and the seven baskets (see Mark 8,1-10) symbolize the seven Gentile nations that occupied the land of Canaan with Israel that are brought into the Church. Which is to say, the Pharisees and Herod are blinded by their presuppositions, but the disciples have no presuppositions to be blinded

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by, for they are constantly living in the world of the presuppositions of Jesus.

3.3. Signs. In Matthew the matter of a sign from God signifying approval for the life and work of Jesus is handled in this way, as presented above:

“Then some of the Scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” 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.” (Matthew 12,38-39)

In Luke, the matter of a sign from God is handled in this way, as presented above:

“This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” (Luke 11,29b)

In Mark, the matter of a sign from God is handled in this way, as presented above:

“The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit, and said, ‘Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.’” (Mark 8,11-12)

But then goes on to describe how Jesus says He has equivalently given a sign to His disciples, as explained above.

But the matter of a “sign” in Mark needs elucidation. In Matthew as a prelude to His death Jesus is brought before the high priest, Caiaphas, as recounted in Matthew 26,63b-64a:

“And the high priest said to him, ‘I adjure you by the living God, .tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so.’” (*The New Testament. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible. Revised Standard Version. Second Catholic Edition. P.57*)

In Luke 22,70 the answer of Jesus is substantially the same:

“And they all [that is, the Council] said, ‘Are you the Son of God, then?’ And he said to them, ‘You say that I am.’” (*The New Testament. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible. Revised Standard Version. Second Catholic Edition. P. 151*)

Contrast these answers in Matthew and Luke with the answer of Jesus in Mark 14,61c-62a):

“Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Christ the Son of the Blessed?’ And Jesus said, ‘I am . . .’” (*The New Testament*. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible. Revised Standard Version. Second Catholic Edition. P. 94)

By the time the Gospels were written all orthodox Christians believed that Jesus was God and that His Resurrection from His redemptive death was God’s approval of all that He had said and done. Jesus’ explicit use of the standard Septuagint identification for God—“I am”—reinforces this belief and in Mark reassures the Christians of Rome that Jesus, not any Roman emperor, was truly a Son of God. Further, Mark conveys the truth of the Resurrection indirectly as regards the Mosaic Law, thereby conveying the truth that the Mosaic Law was no longer applicable to those who believed in the implications of one of the fruits of the Resurrection: the end of the Mosaic Law. (**August 4, 2010**)