

The Enigma of the Sign of Jonah

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The Church fathers thought that the sign of Jonah was Jesus' resurrection, but that hypothesis has been discarded by modern theologians. According to Richard Edwards: *There are few synoptic pericopes¹ which have caused more difficulties than the sign of Jonah. ... The central problem is raised by the lack of agreement between Matthew and Luke in their respective explanations of the meaning of the Sign of Jonah. [1]*

Simon Chow, writing in his book *The Sign of Jonah Reconsidered*, expressed a similar view:

What the sign means has long been a puzzle for New Testament exegetes. It is designated as a "riddle," or something "enigmatic ... hardly possible to discover a certain interpretation ..." [2]

German theologian Beate Kowalski concluded:

The sign of Jonah is one of the open questions and desiderates left open by modern exegetes. ... Recent articles on the issue summarize the problems but do neither offer an own approach nor an appropriate solution. ... The Sign of Jonah will remain an enigma in Matthew's gospel. [3]

In Luke 11 Jesus gave one description of the Sign of Jonah:

For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the son of man be a sign to this generation.

A concise analysis of how this statement should be interpreted was provided by Tyson: *Now if we possessed only the third Gospel, I imagine the answer would be clear and unambiguous, namely, that they [Jonah and Jesus] were both accredited preachers sent from God, and as the one was recognized by the men of Nineveh, so should the other be by the men of his generation. ... It is difficult to see how St. Luke's words could be clearer. [4]*

However, this interpretation appears to be contradicted by Matthew 12, in which Jesus gave a different description of the Sign of Jonah:

For just as Jonah remained in the belly of the sea-monster for three days and three nights, so will the son of man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.

This verse is a prophecy that Jesus' burial would last more than 24 hours but less than 72 hours. Two issues prevent that event from being a Sign of Jonah in the first century: 1. Only a few people were present at the opening of Jesus' sealed tomb, and the Sign of Jonah was supposed to be given to a generation. 2. The first century slot for the Sign of Jonah was already filled by Jesus' ministry.

¹ A pericope was originally an extract from the Bible, chosen to be read at a church service; nowadays it applies more to extracts used by scholars in discussion of scripture.

A little noticed anomaly allows for the mitigation of issue number two. Jesus delegated the Matthean Signs of Jonah to “an evil and unfaithful generation” rather than to “this generation.” The words, “a generation,” could refer to any era, *including our own*. [5] The temporal conflict between the Lukan and Matthean explanations is resolved by the unlikely hypothesis that Matthew’s two signs of Jonah were not extant in the first century but were reserved for some future era.

Images of a corpse: a Sign from Jesus

The Gospels record that Jesus’ corpse was covered by a shroud, and that cloth, if still in existence, ought to have forensic evidence regarding the duration of his burial. For that purpose, this study will accept the Shroud of Turin as Jesus’ authentic burial shroud and will regard the Shroud’s images of his corpse as miraculous. William Meacham wrote:

The [Shroud’s] image was found to be anatomically flawless down to minor details; the characteristic features of rigor mortis, wounds, and blood flows provided conclusive evidence to the anatomists that the image was formed by direct or indirect contact with a corpse. ... It is clear that the cloth was in contact with the body for at least a few hours, but not more than two or three days. ... There is no evidence of initial decomposition and no decline in rigor mortis. ... The lack of decomposition staining of the cloth indicates that ... the Shroud was removed from the corpse after 24 hours but before 72 hours. [6]

Mark Antonacci: *The body obviously left the Shroud and did so within two or three days for there are no decomposition stains anywhere on the cloth ... if the cloth had been removed by any human or mechanical means, it would have broken or smeared some, most, or all of the edges of its blood marks. [7]*

Giulio Fanti: *The image does not show any sign of decomposition. That implies that the Man was enveloped in the sheet for a short time—according to specialists for no longer than about 40 hours. This hypothesis is supported also by the signs of rigor mortis, which usually disappear after this lapse of time. [8]*

Some scholars have speculated that a few disciples secretly removed Jesus’ corpse from a supposedly temporary tomb. But Jewish law required that post-mortem blood issues be interned with the corpse, and that was one of the functions of a burial shroud. The idea that men could carry away a 170-pound corpse but be unable to remove three pounds of essential cloth is not tenable.

The Shroud’s images have validated Jesus’ prophecy of a less than 72-hour internment. The Shroud was photographed in 1898 and in 1931. The photos of the miraculous images of Jesus’ corpse have been distributed world-wide in the 20th century. Therefore, these photographs ought to be understood as the second Sign of Jonah, a sign hidden from first century Israel and reserved for the people of the 20th century. The Shroud’s miraculous images contradict the prevalent philosophy of naturalism and have facilitated the acceptance of Jesus’ ministry for many people.

The Signs of the Times

In 1988 three laboratories evaluated a corner piece of the Shroud of Turin for carbon fourteen ratios. Through the analysis of these ratios a date of origin for an artifact may often be postulated. The data must pass strict mathematical tests designed to eliminate the possibility of a systematic error. The laboratories sent sixteen C-14 readings taken from Shroud samples to the British Museum for interpretation. We will label these readings 'signs of times' because each reading may be represented as a date:

Oxford: 1155, 1205, 1220.

Zurich: 1217, 1228, 1271, 1311, 1315.

Arizona: 1197, 1249, 1249, 1274, 1318, 1344, 1376, 1410. [9]

The Museum's mathematicians and scientists concluded that the flax plants from which the Shroud's linen cloth had been made were harvested in the 14th century. However, the premise of this study is that the Shroud originated in the first century, and a corollary of that assumption is that the Museum's conclusion of a medieval date was erroneous.

Jesus' prediction of a Sign of Jonah in Matthew 16:1-4 has been regarded as lacking a description of that sign, but that is not the case. His words are a prophecy that the British Museum's scientists would err:

Matthew 16:3: *You know how to interpret the face of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*

The scientists were not able to interpret the Shroud's signs of times because they refused to consider an alternative hypothesis. In 1989 Dr. Philips of Harvard University advised the Museum's scientists that a neutron flux would have enhanced the Shroud's C-14 ratios. Oxford's Dr. Robert Hedges replied that the Museum's scientists would not consider that possibility because it would have necessarily been the result of a miracle, and they did not like that idea. [10] Dr. Phillips replied:

To not permit the possibility that the image on the Shroud was caused by a unique physical event, which may have had other consequences including a neutron flux, is a serious scientific bias, especially when there are historical records which support the occurrence of such an event. [11]

Instead of accepting Dr. Phillips' advice, the Museum's mathematicians manipulated the Shroud's C-14 data and expanded the laboratories' measurement uncertainties in order to force the Shroud's sixteen 'signs of times' to pass the mathematical tests that are used to confirm C-14 ratios as indicators of a date [12]. Dr. Michael Tite was on the podium with Dr. Hedges and Dr. Hall in 1989 for the public announcement of a medieval date for the Shroud. Dr. Tite later stated:

I suppose that if there were a flux of neutrons it could have influenced the date. If one accepts that there was some supernatural event ... but I don't believe in that. [13]

Hedges' and Tite's comments reflect the biases of the scientists who did not want to evaluate the Shroud's C-14 ratios for indications of having been enhanced by a neutron flux. That mental blockage confirms Jesus' prophecy: *You cannot interpret the signs of the times.*

As the first part of this prophecy Jesus said: *You know how to interpret the face of the sky.* An important element of carbon fourteen dating is the correction necessary for the varying amounts of that isotope in the earth's atmosphere. The scientists at the British Museum knew how to "interpret the face of the sky" because they knew how to make those atmospheric corrections.

Jesus' prophecy of a Sign of Jonah in Matthew 16 is validated by the abilities and biases of the scientists who interpreted the Shroud's 'sign of times'. However, a connection must be established to the prophet Jonah.

A Tale of Two Plants

The prophet Jonah risked an unpleasant death when he preached destruction to the enemies of Israel in Nineveh. He survived the ordeal and waited in expectation of Nineveh's destruction. When God accepted the repentance of Nineveh's population, Jonah became so upset that he wanted to die. God then caused a castor bean plant to grow up over Jonah in just a day. Jonah was pleased by this miraculous gift. But when God caused that plant to suddenly wither, Jonah once again became so aggrieved that he asked for death. God used Jonah's obsession with the castor bean plant to illustrate to the prophet that he was mentally blocked by his hatred for Nineveh, and, therefore, not able to understand God's point of view.

Interviewer to Dr. Tite (1989):
In iconography as early as the sixth century we see icons of Christ with characteristics similar to the Shroud face. How do you explain that?

Dr. Tite:
I don't know, you tell me! (Ha, ha.) I personally believe that we should leave relics as relics. The only specific date is by C-14. [14]



Prof. Edward Hall, Dr. Michael Tite and Dr. Robert Hedges announcing the result of the Shroud C-14 Radiocarbon Dating test

The scientists' fixation on the carbon atoms of the flax plant can be likened to the prophet Jonah's fixation on his castor bean plant. Both the bean plant and the flax plant were affected by miraculous time anomalies. The bean plant's

overnight growth caused it to appear much older, while the flax plant's linen fibers appeared to be about 1400 years younger by virtue of a neutron flux from a human corpse.

Conclusion

The assumption of authenticity for the Holy Shroud has enabled three compatible and interdependent solutions to the enigma of the Sign of Jonah. They are so mutually supportive of each other that they can be understood as one unified sign. Rucker's MCNP computer program has predicted dramatic results when further carbon fourteen studies are done, and they will be the final validation of the Sign of Jonah.[15]

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