

# IN THE BELLY OF SHEOL

Israel is plunged into the deep

**T**HE CROWD WAS ASTONISHED. THEY had brought a man who wasn't just blind, but mute too, and Jesus healed him right before their eyes by casting a demon out of him.

"Could this be the son of David?" they asked, gossiping about whether this street preacher might in fact be Israel's long awaited Messiah.

Some Pharisees saw the whole thing and wanted to put an end to this unholy mischief.

"You know, it's only by Beelzebul, the king of demons, that this man casts any demons out," they began telling the people.

Jesus, knowing what they were up to, spoke over them to the crowd, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste. No city, no house divided against itself can stand. If Satan casts out Satan, how can his kingdom stand? If I were to cast out demons by Beelzebul, then how do your exorcists do it? Yet, if I cast them out by the Spirit of God, then, what, the kingdom of God has come upon you."

The Pharisees huddled together and then spoke out, "Umm, teacher, we'd like to see a sign from you." They weren't interested in believing in him. They just wanted to test him.

Jesus' eyes flared. He shouted back so the whole crowd could hear him.

"Sign? You want a sign? An adulterous generation demands a sign. No sign will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and nights!"

The weight of his words were lost on them. And it's been lost on the modern church as well.

**W**hen Jonah received the Word of the Lord to preach to Nineveh, a Gentile nation who was Israel's arch enemy, he hastily packed his bags and fled in the opposite direction. He booked a ship in Joppa that was heading to Tarshish, the furthest place away he could go in the known world. Once the ship cleared the open seas, the Lord hurled a monstrous storm at it that threatened to tear the whole ship apart. The crew, horrified in discovering a runaway prophet of Israel aboard, reluctantly tossed him overboard to save the ship, and their own lives as well. Little did they know that they were players in a dramatic prophetic action that would find its way to Jesus' chewing out of the Pharisees some seven hundred years later.

Jonah, too, was an unwitting actor in the Lord's divinely created sign. When the Lord originally sent the Word, he knew that Jonah would turn and run. But he sent it anyway so Jonah could serve as a type of Israel. He had called Israel to be a light to the nations.

*I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as*

*a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*

*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

Jonah, knowing that the Lord would extend his mercy to the Ninevites who were outsiders to Israel's covenants of promise, sought to thwart that outcome by getting out from under the Lord's jurisdiction and escaping to Joppa. In doing this, he acted out Israel's own retreat. She was God's chosen people. The Lord had even called her his firstborn son.

*Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, 'Israel is my firstborn son.'"*

But Israel didn't want to share her election. She didn't want to be just his firstborn son; she wanted to be his only son. To hell with everyone else.

The fascinating thing about Jonah's escapade is that the type doesn't stop at the ship's ticket counter in Joppa. The Lord uses the recalcitrant prophet not only to show Israel her abnegation of his calling, but also how he ultimately uses her to bring salvation to those outside the covenant. So the crew's throwing the prophet overboard didn't break the type. It actually intensified it.

*But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

The progressive revelation of the New Testament builds out the framework of the sign. That is because Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection are its fulfillment or antitype.

**P**ilate had decided to release Jesus, but the Jews wouldn't let up.

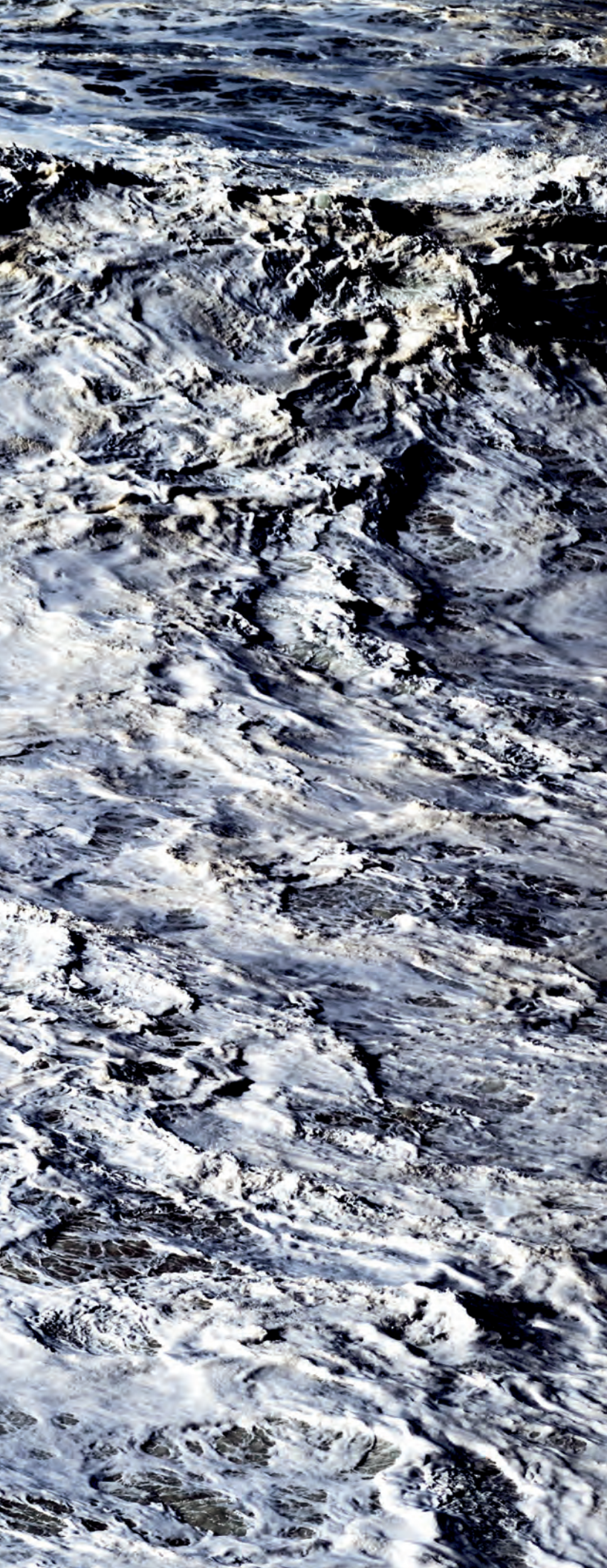
"If you release this man, you're no friend of Caesar! Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against Caesar," the Jews remonstrated.

When Pilate heard this, he took his seat at the judge's bench, and had Jesus brought before him out in front of the crowd. It was about noon on the day of Preparation, the day before Passover.

"Here is your king," he announced to the Jews.

"Away with him! Crucify him! We have no king but Caesar," they roared.





Pilate, seeing that it was no use trying to change their minds, consigned Jesus over to be crucified. The soldiers led him out to Golgotha, Jesus carrying his cross. They crucified him there, in between two thieves. Pilate had an inscription written and they nailed it over Jesus' head. It read: "Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews" in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. Many of the Jews saw it because Jesus was crucified just on the outskirts of the city. The chief priests became incensed when they heard this. They ran to Pilate.

"Don't write, 'The King of the Jews'! But say, 'This man said, I am king of the Jews.'"

"I have written what I have written," Pilate said flatly.

The gist of Pilate's inscription is blind to us because we don't live in an age of kings, but an age of presidents, prime ministers, congresses, and parliaments. In days past the king wasn't just a representative of his kingdom, he was the kingdom. And the people were summed up in their king. Here, the Jews show their idolatry by pleading to Pilate to crucify Jesus for sedition—"We have no king but Caesar!" When Pilate accedes to their demands and officially recognizes Jesus as king of the Jews and therefore a political threat to Rome, they become unnerved and beg him to change it. He refuses and so Rome crucifies Jesus as the recognized king of Israel. In other words, Rome crucified Israel when it nailed Jesus to the cross.

**J**onah had been a type of Israel when he first fled from the call, and he remained so when he hit the water. As Christ became Israel on the cross, so Israel became Christ in the water.

*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.*

Jonah didn't physically die when he was plunged into the water. He was swallowed whole by a fish appointed by the Lord, and afterward lifted up prayers out of its belly. But his plummet into the abyss of the sea was a metaphorical death for purposes of the type. And in the belly his cadence changes. The renegade nation becomes the faithful servant. Obdurate rebellion turns into loving praise. Animosity turns into trust and fidelity, even as the belly of the fish turns into the belly of Sheol.

*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.*

The Israelites were no strangers to Sheol. It was not the



place for the living, but the dark and gloomy underworld of the dead. The scriptures called it “the Pit,” a bottomless abyss, existing in the heart of the earth.

*So they with all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.*

The modern mind supposes that physical death is tantamount to the cessation of existence. A man puts a gun to his temple, and he ceases to exist. His body is buried; he “returns to the earth” and the world continues to spin. Revelation in the Word shows us something different. Physical death isn’t the cessation of existence. Men live on. We see this from the Mount of Transfiguration. There, once Jesus was transfigured, both Moses and Elijah appeared next to him, talking with him about his upcoming “exodus.” While some might say Elijah never died, having been whisked to heaven by that fiery chariot, there is no doubt that Moses did.

*The LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.*

The outer man may return to dust, but the inner man is eternal. The sublime revelation we find in Jonah’s metaphorical Sheol is that his prayers weren’t those of a recalcitrant prophet or even a madman. The attentive ear hears echoes of the psalms, but not just any psalms. These are psalms that resonate with foreshadowings of the Messiah. In fact, the New Testament apostles and prophets deemed some of them as being the very words of Christ Jesus himself.

*Those who worship vain idols  
forsake their true loyalty.  
But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!*

Here, Jonah swears that he will accomplish what he had vowed to do and praises the Lord for a deliverance that has not yet come. These few lines have befuddled theologians and preachers for centuries because Jonah had never vowed to do anything but run, and he had no guarantees of deliverance. But Jesus had vowed to finish the work the Father had given him: “My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.” And he

*As Christ became Israel on the cross,  
so Israel became Christ in the water.*

spoke of his trust in his deliverance before he died on the cross: Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit!” We see, too, that Jonah’s prayer also echoes the psalmist in the twenty-second psalm.

*From you comes my praise  
in the great congregation;  
my vows I will pay  
before those who fear him.*

Psalm twenty-two opens with the bone-chilling scream, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me!?!” Both Matthew and Mark bear witness that this was Jesus’ agonizing cry after the sky had darkened as Jesus became sin on the cross.

*And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice,  
“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God,  
why have you forsaken me?”*

“Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” recurs in the third psalm which also foreshadows Golgotha. The psalmist writes, “Many are saying of me, “There is no help for him in God.”” Matthew’s gospel dovetails these taunts—that Jesus couldn’t look to the Father for help in being crucified as an Israelite cursed under the strictures of Israel’s law.

*So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders,  
mocked him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save  
himself. He is the King of Israel? Let him come down  
now from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts  
in God? Let God deliver him now, if he wants to, for he  
said, ‘I am God’s son.’”*

The psalmist writes of his continued faithfulness in the face of crushing taunts from the people God called his own. He prays to the Lord for deliverance and reaffirms his confidence in the hands of the Father when he shouts, “Rise up, O Lord! Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” This foreshadows the Father’s deliverance through resurrection and Jesus’ own praises. Jonah prays as a man lost in the chaos of the sea even though he had been swallowed up straightaway by a fish sent by the Lord. His prayers aren’t chronological or linear. They reflect echoes, a mosaic of sorts, of being flung into a bottomless, watery abyss of judgment and isolation for three days and nights.

*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.*

The scriptures record David cutting off Goliath’s head, fighting the Philistines, fleeing from Saul, and bringing





the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, but they never record him being lost at sea. Yet, the eighteenth psalm reverberates with cries from the abyss and Jonah's own prayers.

*The cords of death encompassed me;  
the torrents of perdition assailed me;  
the cords of Sheol entangled me;  
the snares of death confronted me.*

*The waters closed in over me;  
the deep surrounded me;  
weeds were wrapped around my head  
at the roots of the mountains.*

*In my distress I called upon the LORD;  
to my God I cried for help;  
From his temple he heard my voice,  
and my cry to him reached his ears.*

*As my life was ebbing away,  
I remembered the LORD;  
and my prayer came to you,  
into your holy temple.*

Paul invokes this very psalm to implore the Christians in Rome to welcome new Gentile believers into the body and to selflessly bear one another's burdens. Fleshing out the mercies that God had shown the nations through the Gospel, Paul quotes one of the later periscopes of the psalm. What's jarring is that, without any predicate, without any introduction, without even as much as a warning, he recounts the psalm not as the words of David,

but as the first-person voice of Jesus himself.

*For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name."*

Yet Paul didn't do this with only the eighteenth psalm. He did it with the sixty-ninth psalm too. The psalmist there writes of having zeal for the Lord, but also having more enemies than he could count and suffering all kinds of insults and persecution for his faithfulness. He laments that the insults his enemies have for God "have fallen on me." Paul again writes these belong to Jesus.

*For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."*

Reading through the psalm, it is apparent that Paul didn't conjure this out of thin air. The psalmist writes about being consumed by zeal for the Lord's house and being given vinegar to drink. John recognized the psalm's application to Jesus when Jesus cleansed the temple, and both Luke and Matthew join John in recounting the soldiers giving Jesus vinegar at his crucifixion. Now that we understand the sixty-ninth psalm foreshadows Jesus' own words, what is fascinating is that the psalmist also writes of faithfulness, the abyss, and the Pit. It's clear that Jonah's cries for deliverance from the deep reverberate through these portions of the psalm.

*Save me, O God,  
for the waters have come up to my neck,  
I sink in deep mire,  
where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me.*

*With your faithful help rescue me  
from sinking in the mire;  
let me be delivered from my enemies  
and from the deep waters.*

*Do not let the flood sweep over me,  
or the deep swallow me up,  
or the Pit close its mouth over me.*

Jonah pictured himself at the very gates of the Pit. He was terrified that it could close upon him and he'd be lost forever.

*I went down to the land whose bars  
closed upon me forever;  
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,  
O LORD my God.*

He offered praises to the Lord for snatching him out from the mouth of the Pit which was about to close over him.

Peter, some seven hundred years later and just after God had poured out his promised Spirit, preached to the Israelites attending the feast of Pentecost and appropriated the sixteenth psalm to Jesus' own voice. His address echoed the sixty-ninth psalm and Jonah's psalms and sufferings.

*This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,*

*"I saw the Lord always before me,  
for he is at my right hand  
so that I will not be shaken;  
therefore my heart was glad,  
and my tongue rejoiced,  
moreover my flesh will live in hope.  
For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,  
or let your Holy One experience destruction."*

The fish's spewing Jonah out on the beach was a type and prophecy of Jesus' resurrection from out of the abyss.

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

*He reached down from on high,  
he took me;  
he drew me out of mighty waters.*

Once Jonah hit the beach, the word of the Lord came to him again, telling him to complete the original mission of preaching to the Ninevites. He preached the Word there, and the Gentile metropolis repented and turned to the Lord. The Lord then relented from the judgment they had coming. Jesus likewise brought the Gospel to the Gentiles. On the road to Damascus, he commissioned Paul to preach the Gospel to those outside the commonwealth of Israel, those without God and without hope in the world.

When the Pharisees looked to test Jesus by demanding a sign that day, he gave them more than they asked for. He challenged their imagination to see beyond an absurd story of a supposedly wayward prophet and to find a sign that would foreshadow the Son of Man's identification with Israel, his plunge into the pit, and his ensuing resurrection by the Father. The Gospel would finally go beyond the borders of Israel to all nations, everywhere, so the whole world would be filled with the glory of God. **b**

JONAH'S TOMB WAS DESTROYED BY ISIS ON 24 JULY 2014.