

The Sign of Jonah

Introduction

The **most recognizable** symbol of modern-day Christianity is the cross. In essence, almost every Christian church – and most Christian-based organizations – display crosses on their buildings and in their literature, as part of identifying themselves as Christians. (Note that Catholic organizations often display *crucifixes*, rather than crosses. A crucifix is a cross which is depicted *with* the body of Jesus on it.)

Interestingly, the earliest Christians did not use the symbol of the cross **at all**, to identify themselves as Christians. In fact, the cross did not become widely used by Christians until the early 4th century – during the time of Emperor Constantine.

So, the use of the cross as a symbol of Christianity is *yet another* example of Christianity **changing** dramatically, during the first few centuries after the apostles.

Issues with the Cross as a Symbol

There are a number of reasons why the earliest Christians did not use the cross as a symbol of their faith. There are two *specific* reasons that are of prime importance, however. First of all, the Greek word that is translated as “cross” – *stauros* – may **not** actually mean a cross at all! Basically, many scholars have the opinion that *stauros* actually means a “stake” – i.e., a single, vertical piece of wood – with **no** cross beam at all. If that theory is correct, then Jesus was executed on a straight, up-and-down stake – rather than on a cross. Of course, if that is true, then there definitely would not be *any* reason for Christians to use a “cross” symbol at all.

Just for the sake of the argument, though, let’s assume that *stauros* actually *does* mean a cross – and that Jesus was executed on a cross. Even if that is true, there is another, even more important reason why Christians would not use the cross as an identifying symbol. The easiest way to explain this reason is with an example. Let’s say that your best friend – and greatest mentor – was murdered by being stabbed with a knife. In that case, would you want to remember your friend by creating a *replica* of the knife that your friend was stabbed with – and then by *displaying* that replica in your home? Or, would you want to *wear* a symbol of that knife as a necklace? No, of course not – you would want to remember your **friend**, *himself*, and the *good things* that he did – i.e., you would **not** want to remember the *weapon* by which he was *murdered*.

Of course, in the case Jesus, it is true that Jesus *gave his life* for all of us – so that all of us have the opportunity to be saved. However, Jesus himself told us that we should remember **him** - as opposed to remembering the *cross* on which he died:

Luke 22:19-20 (ESV):

¹⁹ And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

In addition, the apostle Paul explicitly stated that the very *basis* of our faith is the **resurrection** of Jesus – not the *death* of Jesus:

1 Corinthians 15:13-14 (ESV):

¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

Of course, the cross is **not** a symbol of Jesus’ *resurrection* – just the opposite; it is a symbol of his *death*. As a result, it is completely obvious *why* the earliest Christians did not use the cross as a symbol of their faith – it is because the *basis* of the Christian faith is the **resurrection** of Jesus!

Other Symbols of Christianity

As mentioned, the earliest Christians did not use the cross as a symbol of their faith. So, that raises an obvious follow-up question: what symbol(s) **did** the early Christians use? Historical documents and archaeological evidence show us that a number of different symbols were used; some of the more common ones were the **anchor**, the **lyre**, and the **ship**. Needless to say, those symbols are not in use *at all* in modern-day Christianity.

However, there is one other symbol that was *also* used by the earliest Christians; that symbol is the **fish**. Of course, the symbol of the fish **is** used *today* as well; for example, fish outlines that have “Jesus” inscribed within them can often be seen on car bumpers.

Given that fact, it is useful to investigate the “meaning” behind the fish symbol. In other words, to determine why the fish was chosen as a symbol of Christianity.

The most common explanation that I have seen, about the meaning of the “fish” symbol, is that it refers to the “loaves and fishes” miracles of Jesus. In other words, the theory is that the fish *reminds* people of the fact that Jesus miraculously “multiplied” a few small fish (and a few loaves of bread) to feed *thousands* of hungry people, on **two** separate occasions – one time to feed 5,000 people, and another time to feed 4,000 people. Two accounts of those two miracles are located in Mark 6:30-44 and Mark 8:1-10.

The loaves and fishes miracles were certainly very “memorable” to the early Christians, of course. In addition, those miracles have *some* “symbolic” significance – because they point to the fulfillment of some prophecies in the Old Testament. However, as mentioned above, the basis of the Christian faith is the **resurrection** of Jesus – and as a result, one would expect that the early Christians would use a symbol

that would *remind* them of the resurrection. The loaves and fishes miracles do not have anything to do with Jesus' resurrection, of course.

So, let's investigate further into Scripture, to see what Jesus, himself, stated about the "signs" that he would give to people.

The Sign of Jonah

In several passages of Scripture, Jesus stated that he would only give **one** "sign" to the people that lived during his generation. In each of those passages, Jesus refers to the sign in question as the "sign of **Jonah**".

Of course, Jonah was one of the prophets in the Old Testament. God gave Jonah a very *specific* task – to warn the people in the city of Nineveh that God was about to destroy them, because of their *extremely* evil behavior. Jonah did **not** want to warn Nineveh, however, so he tried to "escape" from God, by getting on a boat headed for Spain. God then caused Jonah to get *swallowed* by a whale – and Jonah remained "imprisoned" in the whale for three days. After those three days, Jonah cried out to God for help – and God then freed him from the whale.

Here is a very *relevant* passage from the Book of Jonah, which **describes** Jonah's time in the whale:

Jonah 1:17; 2:1-2,17 (ESV):

¹⁷ And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

¹ Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying,

"I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,

and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried,

and you heard my voice.

¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

There are **three** very important items to note, about the above passage:

- First, Jonah refers to his imprisonment as being "in the belly of **Sheol**". The Hebrew word *Sheol* refers to the **grave** – i.e., it is a generic term which refers to death and burial. So, Jonah *symbolically* refers to his imprisonment in the whale as him being "dead and buried" – and therefore, when God **freed** Jonah from the whale, that *symbolically* brings Jonah "back to life".

- Second, note that the **time** of Jonah's imprisonment is specified as "three days and three nights". In other words, Jonah was in the whale for **three full days, and three full nights** – i.e., 72 hours.

- Finally, most people *assume* that Jonah was imprisoned in a **whale**. However, the Hebrew word that is used in Jonah does *not* actually specify a whale – the word in question actually means... a **fish!**

With all of the above information in mind, take a look at the following passage from Jesus – in which he describes the "sign" that he will give to people:

Matthew 12:38-40 (ESV):

³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." ³⁹ But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

As shown above, Jesus stated that the *one and only* "sign" that will be given to people is the sign of Jonah. As mentioned, Jonah was symbolically "dead and buried" for three days and three nights – and **then** God symbolically "resurrected" him. In the above passage, Jesus "links" Jonah's **symbolic** death and resurrection with his own, **literal** death and resurrection.

Of course, Jonah's imprisonment was in a **fish** – and as a result, it stands to reason that the early Christians would use the *fish* symbol, to remind themselves of the death – and **resurrection** – of Jesus!

Conclusion

Modern-day Christianity uses the cross as the symbol of the Christian faith. However, the earliest Christians did **not** use the cross *at all* – and that is not surprising, because the cross is a symbol of Jesus' **death** – while the *basis* of the Christian faith is Jesus' **resurrection**.

Not only that, but Jesus himself told us that the **one** – and **only** – "sign" that will be given to people is the "sign of Jonah" Of course, Jonah was *symbolically* "dead and buried" for three days – and he was *symbolically* "resurrected" after that time. Also, Jonah's "imprisonment" was in a **fish**.

The other item to note is that one of the most common symbols that the early Christians did use was the symbol of the **fish**. As a result, from all of the above information, it certainly appears logical to me that the reason **why** the fish was used as a Christian symbol is because it refers to the "sign of Jonah" – and that sign, in turn, refers to Jesus' **resurrection!**

I hope that this article was useful to you!