

Matthew 12:39

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:

Analysis

'But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas.' Jesus refuses their demand, calling them 'evil and adulterous generation' (γενεὰ πονηρὰ καὶ μοιχαλίς/genea ponēra kai moichalis). The phrase 'adulterous' metaphorically describes spiritual unfaithfulness—Israel was God's bride (Hosea 1-3), now unfaithful through unbelief and rejection of Messiah. Reformed theology sees 'sign-seeking' as symptom of evil: demanding proof while rejecting evidence reveals hardened hearts. Jesus promises only one sign: 'sign of prophet Jonas' (τὸ σημεῖον Ἰωνᾶ τοῦ προφήτου/to sēmeion Iōna tou prophētou)—explained in v.40 as death and resurrection. This is ultimate sign: resurrection validates Christ's claims definitively. Yet many rejected even this (Matthew 28:11-15). The verse warns: those demanding signs often reject them when given. It also shows Jesus's authority: He doesn't submit to their demands but determines what evidence He'll provide.

Historical Context

Calling Israel 'adulterous generation' has Old Testament roots: prophets consistently used marriage/adultery imagery for covenant relationship. Hosea married prostitute symbolizing Israel's spiritual adultery (Hosea 1-3). Jeremiah accused Judah of adultery (Jeremiah 3:6-10). Ezekiel 16 and 23 contain extended metaphors of Jerusalem/Samaria as unfaithful wives. Jesus applies this to His

generation: despite covenant relationship, they rejected Messiah. The request for sign echoes Numbers 14:11: 'How long...will they not believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?' Same pattern: abundant evidence rejected, more signs demanded. Jonah's sign would be Jesus's three days in heart of earth (death/burial) followed by resurrection—ultimate vindication. Yet even resurrection was rejected by authorities (Matthew 28:11-15). Paul later writes: Jews demand signs, Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:22-23)—gospel offense to both groups. Church history confirms: resurrection is sufficient sign for those with eyes to see, insufficient for hardened hearts.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. What does the 'adulterous generation' metaphor teach about the seriousness of spiritual unfaithfulness and rejection of Christ?
2. Why is resurrection the ultimate sign—what makes it sufficient evidence for those willing to believe?
3. How do you avoid the pattern of demanding more evidence while dismissing what God has already revealed?

Interlinear Text

ο δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτῷ Γενεὰ πονηρὰ καὶ
G3588 But he answered and said to it generation An evil and
G1161 G611 G2036 G846 G1074 G4190 G2532

μοιχαλὶς σημεῖον ἐπιζητεῖ καὶ σημεῖον οὐ
adulterous a sign seeketh after and a sign there shall no
G3428 G4592 G1934 G2532 G4592 G3756

δοθήσεται αὐτῷ εἰ μὴ τὸ σημεῖον Ἰωνᾶ τοῦ
be given to it εἰ μὴ τὸ σημεῖον Ἰωνᾶ τοῦ
G1325 G846 G1487 G3361 G3588 a sign Jonas G3588
G2495

προφήτου
of the prophet
G4396

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 16:4 (Prophecy): A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed.

Isaiah 57:3 (Parallel theme): But draw near hither, ye sons of the sorceress, the seed of the adulterer and the whore.

Mark 8:38 (Parallel theme): Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

James 4:4 (Parallel theme): Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.