

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 μοιχαλίζ/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 Ἰωάν̄ 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

ὁ	δὲ	ἀποκριθεὶς	εἶπεν	αὐτῇ	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	αὐτῇ	εἰ	μὴ	τὸ	σημεῖον	Ἰωνᾶ	τοῦ
be given	to it	G1487	G3361	G3588	a sign	Jonas	G3588
G1325	G846				G4592	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.