

The Sign of Jonah

Nineveh to be Destroyed in 40 Days, Jerusalem to be Destroyed in 40 Years

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Matt 12:39-41 NKJV

*39 But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except **the sign of the prophet Jonah**.*

*40 For 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**.*

41 The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.

This passage of Scripture has created many difficulties for students of the Word in harmonizing the Gospel accounts. Advocates of a Wednesday or Thursday crucifixion use this passage as their primary support.

Yet, Jesus prophesied His death and resurrection on several occasions, always saying that He would be killed, and rise again "*on the third day*."¹ Likewise, on Sunday afternoon, when the two disciples on the road to Emmaus recounted the story of Jesus' crucifixion, they said, "*today is the third day since these things happened*."² It is common knowledge that the Jews used inclusive reckoning. Such statements as these would naturally point to a Friday crucifixion.

Jesus' prophecies about His resurrection cannot accommodate 72 hours in the tomb in Jewish reckoning. Three full days and three full nights, counting back from dawn Sunday morning, would have the disciples putting Jesus' body in the tomb Thursday morning at dawn!

Other statements in the Gospels require a Friday crucifixion. The women began to prepare spices for his burial on the afternoon of His death. Luke tells us that they rested

¹ Matt. 16:21; Matt. 17:23; Matt. 20:18-19

² Luke 24:21

on the Sabbath day according to the commandment. They then went early on Sunday morning to the tomb to apply the spices.

Luke 23:52-24:3 NKJV

52 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

53 Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before.

*54 **That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near.***

55 And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid.

*56 Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And **they rested on the Sabbath** according to the commandment.*

24:1 Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared.

2 But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb.

3 Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

If Jesus was crucified on Wednesday or Thursday, there seems to be no good reason why the women would wait until Sunday to go to the tomb with their spices. Some claim that there were two Sabbaths back to back, the Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Friday) followed by the weekly Sabbath (Saturday). Yet, the word “Sabbath” and the word “commandment” are both singular, referring to a single Sabbath and a single commandment to observe it.

The problem presented by Jesus’ statement about being “*three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*” can be resolved, however, by noticing some very subtle points. First, the assumption that “*in the heart of the earth*” means either a burial or a descent into Hades, has absolutely no support anywhere in Scripture. The entire Greek clause is more accurately translated “*in the heart of the land.*”³ We are familiar with the common term “heartland” even today – referring to the central geographical location of a particular country. In the context of Jesus’ ministry, the “heartland” (or “*heart of the land*”) would be Judea in general, and Jerusalem in particular.

³ The word “earth” today often has the idea of the whole planet. But, in the Bible, this term always refers to the inhabited dry land exclusively, (Gen. 1:10). Its usual meaning is some particular “land” (or country), such as “the land of Israel” (Matt. 2:20-21).

Luke's parallel passage has subtle details that are incompatible with the idea that Jesus was likening His burial to Jonah's 72 hour ordeal in the belly of the great fish.

Luke 11:29-30, 32 NKJV

20 And while the crowds were thickly gathered together, He began to say, "This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet.

30 For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. ...

32 The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.

The word "as" (καθως) in the clause, "as Jonah ...," means "just as." The words "so also" (ουτως) means "in this way." Jesus said that He would be a sign to this generation in the same way that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites. This raises the question, did the Ninevites know of Jonah's previous ordeal? Did Jonah go around preaching to the Ninevites that he had been three days and nights in the whale's belly? His message is stated plainly: God was going to destroy the city in 40 days!

Jonah 3:3-5 NKJV

3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent.

4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

Notice that the length of Jonah's punishment was the same as his trip through Nineveh, prophesying its impending destruction. Apparently, God had punished Jonah for the same period of time he should have been proclaiming the appointed message. So, the three days in the belly of the great fish and the three days of prophesying Nineveh's destruction are parallel to each other.

The fact is, the only “sign” given to Nineveh through Jonah was his 3 days of prophesying that it would be destroyed in 40 days. The “*sign of Jonah*” was carried out by Jesus for “*three days and nights in the heart of the land*” – prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem. And this destruction actually took place 40 years later. God gave Israel a year for a day, just as at Kadesh Barnea.⁴

Jesus’ began prophesying of Jerusalem’s destruction on the morning⁵ of Palm Sunday, as He rode the donkey down the Mount of Olives.

Luke 19:41-44

41 Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it,

42 saying, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.

43 For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side,

44 and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

Jesus continued to proclaim Jerusalem’s destruction until Tuesday evening, three days and three nights from His triumphal entry. He spoke of it on the Temple Mount with His disciples on Tuesday.⁶ He last spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem as they left the Temple after sunset, going out to the Mount of Olives,⁷ concluding three days and three nights of prophesying.

Jonah began prophesying the destruction of Nineveh as he entered the city on his three day journey. Jesus began proclaiming the “*sign of Jonah*” as He entered Jerusalem on the donkey. He concluded the “*sign of Jonah*” when leaving the Temple on Tuesday night. Thus, Jesus was “*three days and three nights in the heart of the land*” – that is, at ground zero of the coming destruction – proclaiming its destruction. Those with insight enough to recognize the connection to Jonah’s preaching might have actually understood that

⁴ Num. 14:34

⁵ John 12:12 indicates that the Triumphal Entry took place “*the next day*” after Jesus spent the night at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus at Bethany on the Mount of Olives. Therefore, His descent most likely occurred early in the morning.

⁶ Luke 21:20-24

⁷ Luke 21:37

the 40 day delay in God's destruction of Nineveh in Jonah's prophecy would equal a 40 year delay in the destruction of Jerusalem.

There is no difficulty harmonizing the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Just as He said, He was resurrected "*on the third day*" (Sunday) from His crucifixion on Friday.

Finally, it ought to be noted that the earliest Christians universally placed Jesus' crucifixion on Friday. The following quote from Justin is typical.

*"But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly ... and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things..."*⁸

⁸ Justin, First Apology, ch. 67