

The Sign of Jonah

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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.*

The "Jonah Prophecy" has created many difficulties for students of the Word in harmonizing the Gospel accounts, and developing a chronology of Jesus' Passion Week. It has not only played a major role in determining the day of the week on which the crucifixion occurred, but also in determining the year. The Gospels state that Jesus kept the Passover the night before His crucifixion. Thus, He was crucified on the 14th of Nisan.¹ This date occurs on a Friday in the years AD 30 and AD 33. If Jesus was crucified on a weekday other than Friday, then the crucifixion could not have been in either AD 30 or AD 33 (the most commonly accepted years).

Jesus prophesied His death and resurrection on several occasions, always saying that He would be killed, and rise again "*on the third day.*"² 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.*"³ It is common knowledge that the Jews used inclusive reckoning. Such statements as these would require that only one day intervene between the day of the crucifixion and the day of the resurrection. Thus, all of these statements support a Friday crucifixion. In addition, the testimony of the early Church Fathers unanimously supports a Friday crucifixion.⁴

¹ Lev. 23:5

² Matt. 16:21; Matt. 17:23; Matt. 20:18-19

³ Luke 24:21

⁴ Justin Martyr – "*But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because ... 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.*" (Dialogue with Trypho, ch. 67)

The “Jonah Prophecy” speaks of three days and three nights – 72 hours. If this refers to Jesus’ time in the tomb, major difficulties arise with all of the other biblical data. For one thing, Jesus was resurrected at dawn on Sunday.⁵ Three days and three nights in the tomb would require His burial to have been on Thursday morning at dawn. Yet, Scripture says Jesus was buried just before sunset on the preparation of the Sabbath.⁶

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 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.

⁵ Some have claimed that Jesus rose on Saturday evening. But this is impossible, because Matthew 28:1-7 has the angel descending to roll away the stone at the time Mary went to the tomb. Mark 16:1-5 indicates that this was at dawn, after the sun had risen. Thus, Jesus was in the tomb until dawn on Sunday.

⁶ Luke 23:53-54

The “Sign of Jonah” is not about Jesus’ Burial or Resurrection

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.*”⁷ 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.

There are two major problems with the traditional application of this prophecy to Jesus burial and resurrection.

1. The “sign of Jonah” – Jesus’ being three days and nights in the heart of the land – was a sign to this “*evil and adulterous generation.*” Yet, no one saw Jesus leave the tomb. And no one ever saw Jesus after His resurrection except those who had already believed on Him. Jesus did not appear to anyone of that “*evil and adulterous generation*” after His resurrection. Paul listed all those Jesus appeared to after His resurrection, all of whom were “brethren.”⁸ Jesus Himself told the disciples on the night before His crucifixion, “*A little while longer and **the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me.** Because I live, you will live also. At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.*”⁹ If the “sign of Jonah” was given to that “*evil and adulterous generation,*” it seems rather odd that they did not see it.

2. Luke’s parallel passage has subtle details that make this prophecy completely incompatible with Jesus’ time in the tomb. Luke recorded that Jesus’ “sign” to “this generation” would be exactly like Jonah’s “sign” to the Ninevites. Yet, Jonah’s ordeal in the belly of a great fish happened in the Mediterranean Sea, on his way to Joppa. This was hundreds of miles from Nineveh. Jonah’s ordeal in the fish was never a sign to the Ninevites.

⁷ The word “earth” today often has the idea of the whole planet. But, in the Bible, this term always refers to the inhabited land exclusively, (Gen. 1:10). Its usual meaning is some particular “land” (or country), such as “the land of Israel” (Matt. 2:20-21).

⁸ 1 Cor. 15:3-8

⁹ John 14:19-20

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 parallel between Jesus and Jonah in this passage concerns preaching the impending destruction of the city. The word "as" (καθως) in the clause, "as Jonah ...," means "exactly 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. 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 hundreds of miles away? His message is stated plainly: God was going to destroy the capitol city in forty 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 three nights in the heart of the land*” – prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem. This destruction took place exactly forty years later. God gave Israel a year for a day, just as at Kadesh Barnea.¹⁰

Jesus’ began prophesying of Jerusalem’s destruction on the morning¹¹ 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 for three days and nights. He preached it at the Temple, proclaiming Jerusalem’s destruction in parables.¹² This continued 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.¹³ He last spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem as they left the Temple after sunset, going out to the Mount of Olives,¹⁴ concluding three days and three nights of prophesying.

Matt 23:31-39

31 “Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ guilt. 33 Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? 34 Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, 35

¹⁰ Num. 14:34

¹¹ 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.

¹² Matt. 21:33 – 22:7

¹³ Luke 21:20-24

¹⁴ Luke 21:37

that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

*37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! 38 See! **Your house is left to you desolate**; 39 for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'"*

Jonah began prophesying the destruction of Nineveh as he entered the city on the first day of his three day journey.¹⁵ 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 impending doom. He was a "sign" to that "evil and adulterous generation" exactly as Jonah was a "sign" to the Ninevites. This is why Jesus said in the very next verse: "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 men of Nineveh will condemn that evil and adulterous generation, because they repented at Jonah's preaching the impending destruction of Nineveh in 40 days. But the wicked men of Jerusalem condemned Jesus to death immediately after He concluded His three days and three nights of preaching the impending destruction of Jerusalem (in 40 years).

Some might ask how the ordeal of Jonah in the whale fits into this "sign," since Jesus mentioned that in Matthew's account. The answer is simple. Matthew's account parallel's Jesus' personal internal turmoil during those three days and nights with Jonah's personal internal turmoil in the great fish (for the same period of time). Jonah was in deep distress and anguish of soul for those three days and nights.¹⁶ Jesus was also in great anguish of soul during those three days and nights of preaching Jerusalem's destruction.¹⁷ "As Jonah was" in great turmoil of soul, "so also" was Jesus for the same period of time. Yet, in Luke's account, "Exactly as" Jonah was a sign **to the**

¹⁵ Jonah 3:3-4

¹⁶ Jonah 2

¹⁷ Matt. 23:29-39; Luke 19:41-44

Ninevites through preaching total destruction in 40 days, “so also” (in exactly the same way) Jesus was a sign to the Judeans, preaching the impending destruction of Jerusalem (in 40 years).

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.

The sign of Jonah gives us the exact length of time from Jesus’ crucifixion until the destruction of Jerusalem. Since there is unanimous agreement that Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, the crucifixion must have been in AD 30. Thus, this single sign settles the issue of the day of Jesus’ crucifixion as being Friday, giving us only AD 30 or AD 33 as possible years. It also eliminates AD 33, because of the necessary 40 year interval. Jesus was crucified on Friday, Nisan 14, AD 30.