

Three Days and Three Nights in the Tomb

By Steve Ray

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”
(Matt. 12:38–40)

Skeptics claim to have discovered an error in the New Testament —claiming Jesus was not in the tomb for three full 24-hour periods like he prophesied. He was buried Friday afternoon and rose early Sunday morning, being only one full day and two nights. Has the sceptic found an error in the Bible? How does one respond?

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”



It is clear that Jesus rejects the call to perform various signs before the Jewish leaders in order to justify his claims and actions. Jesus would not give them signs, however, for he did not come primarily to be a wonder-worker but a Savior. His miracles were performed to display his power and identity and out of mercy to help the poor and sick. Jesus performed many miracles in private and with a warning not to tell others about them. Yet, one great miracle would be given as a definitive sign. This would be the “sign of Jonah,” his resurrection from the “heart of the earth.”



The main problem encountered in Matthew 12:38–40 involves the temporal designation “three days and three nights.” Interpreting this designation literally, some try to solve the “problem” by arguing that Jesus was really crucified on Thursday rather than Friday. A Friday crucifixion and a Sunday resurrection do not provide sufficient time for three days and three nights.

There are numerous ways of figuring out the day-night scheme for this period of time, but it is clear that three separate days and nights cannot be obtained by a Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection scheme. Yet, it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus was crucified on Friday, the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath” (Mark 15:42) and raised on Sunday, the “first day of the week” (Mark 16:2). If the temporal designation of Matthew 12:40 is taken literally, a conflict does exist between the time indicated in this verse and the time indicated in the accounts of the passion story.

But should the expression “three days and three nights” be interpreted literally? Three arguments indicate that it should not.

First, it appears that this expression is another way of stating “on the third day” or “in three days.” This can be illustrated from 1 Samuel 30:12–13. The same Greek expression is found in 1 Samuel 30:12 in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) as in Matthew 12:40. Verse 13 refers to this three-day and three-night period as “three days ago” or, as the LXX literally states, “the third day today.” If “three days and three nights” can mean “on the third day,” there is no major problem in our passage. By Jewish reckoning Jesus could have been crucified on Friday and raised on Sunday, the third day. Friday afternoon = day one; Friday 6 PM to Saturday 6 PM = day two; Saturday 6 PM to Sunday 6 PM = day three.’

A *second* argument against a literal temporal interpretation is the fact that Matthew did not see any conflict between this expression and either a third-day resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19) or a Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection scheme (Matt. 27:62; 28:1). For him, as well as for the other Evangelists, expressions such as “three days and three nights,” “after three days,” and “on the

third day” could be used interchangeably.

Picture: Church of the Holy Sepulchre built over Calvary and Tomb of Christ.



Finally, it should be pointed out that the main point of Jesus’ analogy in Matthew 12:40 does not involve the temporal designation but the sign of the resurrection. Only one miracle or sign will be given to this evil and adulterous generation. That sign will be Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. The temporal designation is much less significant. Perhaps Jesus refers to three days and three nights because this expression is found in the Old Testament passage which he wants to quote (Jonah 1:17).

Understood in the context of biblical Judaism—and knowing the idioms and figures of speech in the designation “three days and three nights”—there is no problem with the Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection scheme described in the passion narratives. It is only if a twentieth-century reckoning of time is imposed or if the idiomatic nature of this temporal designation is not understood in its context that a problem appears.