



“THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS”

Studies about “three days and three nights” commonly focus on how to properly explain the time Jesus was in the tomb. Some insist, quite logically, that from Friday evening until Sunday morning is *not* three days *and* three nights. Others point out that by Jewish reckoning, a *part* of a day can count as a whole.

But there is something else that should be carefully noticed in Matthew 12:39,40. Jesus said: “As Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three day and three nights *in the heart of the earth.*” Where? *In the heart of the earth!*

It is commonly assumed that Jesus’ use of the term “heart of the earth” referred to the rock-hewn tomb in which he would be buried. If so, this would have unmistakably implied that he was going to *die*. But it is evident this was *not* the meaning conveyed to the disciples in Matthew 12. It was not until *later*—in Matthew 16—this was first revealed.

“From that time forth *began* Jesus to show unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, *and be killed.*”

Notice Peter’s reaction upon hearing this:

“Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from you, Lord: this shall not be unto you” (Matt. 16:21-23).

This was the *first* time the disciples heard that Jesus would be killed. They were surprised, shocked! Apparently, then, Jesus’ earlier statement about “the heart of the earth” did not *automatically* convey the meaning of a *tomb*.

On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that JERUSALEM was considered the heart or center of the earth.

Greek scholars agree that the word translated “heart” (in Matthew 12 and elsewhere) refers to that which is *central* in man, and so, by analogy, the *middle* part of anything, even though inanimate. Some present-day examples may be seen in expressions like

“the heart of a watermelon,” “the heart of a matter,” “the heartland,” etc.

In somewhat the same way, the word “navel” has also been used. According to a Jewish Midrash: “As the navel is set in the middle of a person, so is Israel the navel of the world, and Jerusalem is its center.”

In Ezekiel 38:12, the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel spoke of Israel, and by extension Jerusalem, as being in “the midst of the earth,” “the center of the earth,” “the middle of the earth,” “the heart of the country,” “the navel of the earth,” etc. (See various translations). The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament—often quoted in the New Testament—used the word “navel” in this place.

Long before the Christian Era, as the *Encyclopedia Judaica* says, Jerusalem was believed by Jewish people to be “situated in the center of the land of Judah, and was regarded as the center of the world, the *tabbur ha-arez* (‘the navel of the earth’).” The *Jewish Book of Jubilees* says the same.

Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher who lived at the time of Christ, described Jerusalem “as situated in the center of the world” (*Legatio ad Gaium*, 294).

Also writing in the first century, the Jewish historian Josephus, having mentioned the borders of Judea, said: “The city Jerusalem is situated in the very *middle*; on which account some have, with sagacity enough, called that city the *Navel* of the country” (*Wars of the Jews* 3,3:5).

According to the Jewish *Talmud*, the wording of Song of Solomon 7:2, “Thy navel is like a round goblet wherein no mingled wine is wanting,” referred to the Sanhedrin. The question is then asked: “Why was it called ‘navel’? Because it sat at the navel-point of the world”—Jerusalem.

Eusebius mentions that Constantine, as a follower of Apollo, had believed Delphi was the navel or center of the world. But upon professing Christianity, this position was given to Jerusalem.

Just as Cicero had referred to the town of Enna as the “navel” of Sicily—because of its *central* location—so Jerusalem was called the navel of the land of Israel.

When Pope Urban sought support for the First Crusade to conquer the Holy Land, he declared: “Jerusalem is *the navel of the world.*”

Psalms 74:12: “For God is my King of old, working salvation *in the midst of the earth,*” is a possible reference to Jerusalem which was called “the city of the great King” (Matt. 5:35).

According to Midrashic legend, the Temple was situated in the center of the world, at Jerusalem.

The Jewish Encyclopedia says Rabbis interpreted the phrase “midst of the nations” (Ezek. 5:5) as referring both to Palestine and to Jerusalem as the center of Palestine.

Wesley’s Notes, citing this same verse, says Jerusalem was set in the midst of the nations to be as the *heart* in the body, to invigorate Divine life.

An article in *Decision* magazine (March, 1996), also citing Ezekiel 5:5, refers to Jerusalem as the center of the earth.

The article goes on to mention the Church of the Holy Sepulcher at Jerusalem, where a mark on the floor—equidistant between the sepulcher and the place where the cross is supposed to have been—is called “the center of the world.”

Byzantine hymns spoke of the Cross being “planted in the center of the earth.”

According to a Jewish legend, Melchizedek was brought by the angel Michael “to Jerusalem, the center of the earth.”

Solomon Ben Isaac Jarchi (a noted rabbi born A.D. 1104) taught that Jerusalem was *literally* the center of the world.

Warder Cresson, a convert to Judaism, wrote a book in 1844: *Jerusalem, the Center and Joy of the Whole Earth*.

Hayyim Selig Slonimski (1810-1904) argued that the dateline should be fixed, not from Greenwich, but from Jerusalem, *the center of the earth*, according to the *Talmud*.

An in-depth PBS documentary on Jerusalem was titled: *Jerusalem: Center of the World*.

During the Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for maps to picture Jerusalem at the center. Some maps employed a three-leaf clover design—representing the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa—the three drawn

together by a ring encircling Jerusalem at the center.

Because Jerusalem was regarded as the center, middle, navel, or heart of the earth, directions—east, west, north, and south—were figured from there. The disciples were to be witnesses “in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8), “beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). Jerusalem was the center; the uttermost parts of the earth were the most remote places *from there*.

In Matthew 12 (the chapter that mentions the three days and three nights), the queen who came to hear Solomon’s wisdom in Jerusalem, came there from the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Matt. 12:42), wording which, again, places Jerusalem at the center.

It is evident, then, from a *variety* of sources: *Jerusalem was regarded as the heart or center of the earth*.

According to George Lamsa, Bible translator and expert on expressions used in his native East, the experience of Jonah provided the basis for a proverbial saying: people who were caught in a perplexing situation would say they were “in the whale’s belly.” In similar circumstances, we might speak of being in a jam, in a tight squeeze, in a pickle, in a pinch, in a crunch, etc. But in the eastern Aramaic culture, they would say they were in the belly of the whale.

So, did Jesus experience a difficult predicament—a belly of the whale experience—that lasted three days and three nights? And, did this predicament of three days and three nights occur “in the heart of the earth”—in *Jerusalem*?

Jesus told his disciples that “he must go unto *Jerusalem*, and suffer many things of

the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed” (Matt. 16:21); that in “*Jerusalem...the Son of man shall be betrayed...and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him*” (Matt. 20:17-19). His “decease” would be “at *Jerusalem*” (Luke 9:31).

When the beginning of the three days and three nights ordeal in Jerusalem swiftly approached, Jesus said: “Behold, the hour is *at hand*, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (Matt. 26:46).

Until this precise time, Jesus had always experienced Divine protection. As a baby, he was protected from Herod by the flight into Egypt. In the temptation, when Satan would have destroyed him, angels ministered unto him. On the Sea of Galilee he was protected from the wrath of the storm. At Nazareth, when a mob was ready to throw him over a cliff, he escaped their plot.

But *now*, on the night before the crucifixion, he would be arrested—and not escape. Twelve legions of angels could be dispatched to save him (Matt. 26:53)—but this would not happen. He would be mocked, beaten, and finally die—the “cup” would not be taken from him (Matt. 26:42).

Things began to close in. He spoke of past blessings, “*but now*” things were different (Luke 22:35-37). It was crisis time. As the mob approached to take him, he said: “When I was daily with you in the temple, you stretched forth no hands against me: but this is *your hour*, and the *power* of darkness” (Luke 22:53). The forces of darkness would swallow him up. With the Divine protection lifted, they were able to bind him (John 18:12) and Pilate was granted *power*

“*from above*” to condemn him to be crucified (John 19:11).

The *beginning* of this unique period in the life of Jesus is clearly defined—it was the night before his crucifixion. The *end* of this period, when the Divine protection was restored, was clearly demonstrated by his resurrection! (cf. Acts 1:3).

If, then, we include these things that led up to Jesus’ death as a part of his “belly of the whale” experience—and not just the time in the tomb—we can account for three days and three nights. On the first night, he was betrayed and delivered into the hands of men. The next day he was crucified and buried. Night followed, and another day: the Sabbath. Another night followed (now three nights) and the resurrection occurred the next morning (now three days).

If this explanation of “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”—*at Jerusalem*—is correct, there is no more hassle about how to reconcile two conflicting sets of scriptures. All of the *twenty* references about “the third day” or “in three days” can be taken to mean just that: Friday, Saturday, Sunday. The longer period involving “three days and three nights”—mentioned in only *one* New Testament verse—is freed to have its own unique beginning one night earlier: on what we call Thursday night.

For some this explanation may qualify as a “theory,” while others may find it stronger than that. We are content to let every believer be persuaded in his own mind (Rom. 14:5). Far greater than some details we may (or may not) understand, is the fact that Jesus *did* come forth from the tomb, he lives today, and because he lives we can live also—*forever!* —Ralph Woodrow



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