

The Unappreciated Sign
Matthew 12:38-42
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In Matthew 12, the narrative shifts from the indifference of the people of Israel to their Messiah to the opposition of the religious leaders of Israel to their Messiah. The Pharisees first sought to discredit Jesus by attacks over the Sabbath. They criticized His disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath in Matthew 12:1-8 and criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath in Matthew 12:9-21.

The Pharisees then denounced the miracles of Jesus as coming from the ruler of the demons in Matthew 12:24, triggering the climax of their opposition to the Messiah. His condemnation of the Pharisees in the remainder of Matthew 12 will result in Jesus turning His ministry toward the disciples and away from the Jewish leaders in Matthew 13.

Matthew 12:37 concluded the previous section with, “*by your words you will be condemned.*” The words of the Pharisees, “*this man cast out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons,*” were what Jesus was referring to in the context. Matthew 12:38-42 speaks to this condemnation.

The sign demanded (12:38)

The connection between Matthew 12:37 and 38 with the word “then” is more thematic than chronological. The word translated “said” (APEKRITHESEAN) can mean “answered,” implying a continuation of the interaction. Certainly, Matthew placed this section of condemnation immediately after the climatic opposition by the Pharisees.

In this section, the scribes join with the Pharisees in the request for a sign. The scribes were writers, copyists of the text and writers of legal documents in Israel. Being a scribe was more of a profession than necessarily part of a religious sect, like the Sadducees and Pharisees. Matthew wrote more about the Pharisees, while Mark often included the scribes, even calling them “*scribes of the Pharisees*” in Mark 2:16. Yet in Mark’s parallel, he only includes the Pharisees (Mark 8:11). Obviously, many scribes were Pharisees but many were not. But from now on, we will see scribes aligning with others (and often with the Pharisees) to oppose Jesus.

The scribes and Pharisees address Jesus with the respectful term, “teacher.” This certainly was more perfunctory rather than a designation of true deference.

A sign is an attesting miracle. Yet Jesus had performed countless miracles prior to this point in time. Some of those miracles had been performed in their presence. Why were they asking for a sign now when they had an overabundance of attesting miracles from which to draw conclusions?

In the Old Testament, the use of signs were regarding the immediate miraculous manifestations of prophecy that were quickly fulfilled (1 Samuel 2:30-33; 1 Kings 20:1-14; Isaiah 7:10-25). Therefore, these Jewish leaders were asking for more than another miracle to be done by Jesus. They were looking for a particular type of miracle, that is, something to be prophesied that would immediately happen.

This request showed their dismissal of the abundant miracles Jesus had performed. They desired a miracle upon demand after they had already concluded that His miracle of healing the blind and mute man in Matthew 12:22 was done by the power of the devil. They did not believe that Jesus would produce such a sign as they demanded and this would further discredit Him.

The sign of Jonah (12:39-40)

Jesus did not reserve His rebuke for the specific people who asked Him for a sign, for He condemned the “*evil and adulterous generation.*” Jesus viewed these leaders as representative of the generation of Israel as a whole. The people of Israel were complicit in this rejection of their Messiah, as will become evident at the crucifixion account.

Jesus’ brother James would later also decry this generation of Jews as “*you adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?*” (James 4:4). The term “adulterous” portrays the people as those who are unfaithful. Adultery is often used as a metaphor in the Old Testament for those who had become apostate and were falling away from devotion to God (Isaiah. 50:1; 57:3; Jeremiah 3:8; 13:27; 31:32; Ezekiel 16:15, 32, 35-42; Hosea 2:1-7; 3:1; 7:13-16).

Jesus did not provide this evil generation with what they craved. He knew their desire for seeing Him do their bidding was not consistent with faith. In His rejection of their request, He told them there would be “*no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet.*”

The “sign of Jonah” was described by Jesus as the Son of Man being “*three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*” The use of the term “Son of Man” points to Himself as the Messiah, who is the suffering servant of Israel (Isaiah 53; Matthew 8:20). This is compared to Jonah 1:17, “*And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.*” Thus Jonah is considered as a type of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection which the three days and three nights in the heart of the earth obviously implies.

Just as Jonah was delivered by God from certain death in the stomach of the great fish, so Christ was delivered by God from actual death through the resurrection. Just as Jonah was “*in the heart of the seas*” (Jonah 2:3), Jesus was in “*the heart of the earth.*” This sign of Jonah points people to the power of God to conquer death and bring life. Furthermore, Jonah was sent to the Gentiles, the people of Nineveh, whereas “*God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son*” (John 3:16).

Matthew 12:40 has led to a great deal of discussion regarding when Christ was crucified. If not for the phrase, “*three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*” there would be no controversy at all regarding whether Christ was crucified on Friday or earlier. If this phrase requires Christ to be in the grave for a full 72 hour period, the traditional view of a Friday crucifixion and Sunday morning resurrection is impossible.

However, neither a Wednesday nor a Thursday crucifixion solves the time problem that interpreting Matthew 12:40 as a 72 hour period creates. If Jesus was crucified on Wednesday, then he must have risen prior to 6:00 p.m. on Saturday or else He would have risen on the fourth day. Yet the Christian celebrated His resurrection on Sunday (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). In addition, Jesus rose “on the third day” and not after the third day, on the fourth day (Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:64; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46; John 2:19-22; Acts 10:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4).

There are four passages which say Christ’s resurrection came “*after three days.*” When we compare each occurrence of “*after three days*” in Mark’s Gospel with its parallel passage in the other Gospels, we discover that this is the equivalent of saying “the third day” (Mark 8:31 with Matthew 16:21 and Luke 9:22; Mark 9:31 with Matthew 17:23; Mark 10:34 with Matthew 20:19 and Luke 18:33). Thus, both phrases mean a period extending to the third day.

In Matthew 27:63 where the chief priests and the Pharisees tell Pilate that Jesus said *“after three days I will rise again,”* they then request Pilate to *“give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead’”* in the next verse. The phrase “after three days” must have been equivalent to “the third day” or otherwise the Pharisees would have asked for a guard of soldiers until the fourth day.

If Jesus was crucified on Thursday, we still have the same problem as a Friday crucifixion, only with three full nights and two full days and one partial day. Like the Wednesday crucifixion theory, the Thursday view has to resolve why the Jews wanted to expedite Jesus’ death so that the body *“would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath”* (John 19:31). This points to a Friday crucifixion.

Mark 15:42-43 specifically describes Christ’s death as occurring before Friday evening, *“When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.”* Those holding to a Thursday crucifixion view this Sabbath as the day of Unleavened Bread and thus the day before the weekly Sabbath. However, there is no scriptural support for the day of Unleavened Bread called a Sabbath.

If not for Matthew 12:40, there would be no compulsion to view the crucifixion on Wednesday or Thursday. The best way to understand the phrase *“so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* is to recognize the Jewish perspective of counting days. One Rabbi (Eleazar ben Azariah) who lived around 100 AD stated, *“a day and a night are an Onah [a portion of time] and the portion of an Onah is as the whole of it.”* Therefore, any part of a day was considered to be a day.

We see the same practice used in Genesis 42:17-20, *“So he put them all together in prison for three days. Now Joseph said to them on the third day, ‘Do this and live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die.’ And they did so.”*

This view of a partial day as being a whole day is also seen in 1 Kings 20:29, where Israel and Syria “*camped one over against the other seven days. And on the seventh day the battle was joined.*” Also, Esther asked the Jews to “*not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king*” (Esther 4:16) and she actually goes in to the king on the third day (Esther 5:1). Similar usages occur in 1 Samuel 30:12-13 and 2 Chronicles 10:5, 12. Thus, the Old Testament considered three days as being two full days and part of a third day.

If any part of a day was considered to be a day, then there is no issue reconciling Matthew 12:40 with the crucifixion accounts in the Gospels. Jesus was buried on Friday, the day He was crucified (John 19:42) and rose from the dead on Sunday morning.

The sign rejected (12:41-42)

The next comparison between Jonah and Jesus regarded the reception of their message. Judgment follows the resurrection of the dead in Revelation 20 and here Jesus speaks of the judgment upon the generation He addressed after He first spoke of His resurrection.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and was in northern Iraq in the modern day city of Mosul. The people of Nineveh responded to Jonah’s proclamation, “*Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them*” (Jonah 3:5). This stands in sharp contrast to the response of the scribes and Pharisees who demanded a sign from Jesus.

The people of Nineveh will testify at the judgment against these unbelieving Jews because “*they repented at the preaching of Jonah.*” If the people of Nineveh repented, with far less revelation, far less history of the faithfulness of God, and far less of a preacher than the Messiah, then this testifies in condemnation against this Jewish generation. In the words of Jesus, “*something greater than Jonah is here,*” referring to Himself.

Likewise, the Queen of the South will also rise up against the generation of Jews. The Queen of the South is the Queen of Sheba from 1 Kings 10:1-13. She visited Jerusalem in response to reports of the great wisdom of King Solomon.

The “South” was the Arabian peninsula in modern day Yemen, which the Jews considered to be the ends of the earth. *“For what purpose does frankincense come to Me from Sheba and the sweet cane from a distant land?”* (Jeremiah 6:20; cf. Joel 3:8). Her willingness to travel such a great distance to listen to Solomon stands in great contrast to the scribes and Pharisees who refused to listen to Jesus, who dwelled in their very midst.

This queen came to listen to Solomon who was only a wise king, not the Messiah. This is why Jesus said *“something greater than Solomon is here.”* Just as Jesus is greater than any prophet, such as Jonah, He is also greater than any king, such as Solomon.

Earlier, Jesus spoke in the same way to the Pharisees, *“But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here”* (Matthew 12:6). To describe Himself as greater than Jonah and Solomon would be just as unwelcome a statement for these Jewish leaders to hear as His description of Himself as greater than the temple. Also, in the cases of Jonah and Solomon, it was Gentiles who were responsive to God and not the Jews. This would be true as the ministry of Christ unfolds in this Gospel.

Certainly by using Jonah’s preaching to the Ninevites and the Queen of the South’s travel from the ends of the earth as the basis for the condemnation of the Jews, Jesus validated the historicity of the Old Testament. While the Queen of Sheba’s existence is debated among historians today, modern scholars typically scoff at the biblical story of Jonah, classifying it as mere mythology.

Jesus not only viewed the Queen and Jonah as real people, He viewed the account of Jonah’s three days and three nights in the stomach of the great fish as an actual event. Beyond this, Jesus actually compared His greatest miracle of the resurrection with the story of Jonah’s escape from the great fish.

Because of how Jesus used the account of Jonah, it is wholly inconsistent to view Jesus as our Lord and His resurrection to be real if we deny the reality of Jonah in the stomach of the great fish. We must either conclude that Jesus was ignorant of the fictional nature of this story or we must conclude that Jesus was complicit in the deception of His listeners by perpetuating this myth. Either conclusion destroys (1) His authority over the proper understanding of the Scripture, (2) the significance of Christ’s death as the perfect, sinless sacrifice for the sin of man and ultimately, (3) Christ’s deity. We must uphold the integrity of the word of God.

Conclusion

Those who are against God are discontent, stiff-necked and clamor for more things from Him. His marvelous deeds are taken for granted and His revelation is unappreciated. Those who value God's great works and who heed God's great words are a rebuke to those who are indifferent.

One test of our true faith is how much we desire to hear the word of God. Like the Queen of the South, those who are willing to travel to hear and learn reflect a greater faith than those who are unwilling to hear the word of God in their own backyard. Similarly, like the men of Nineveh, those who are willing to listen to the word of God with no prior understanding of God's word reflect a greater faith than those who are uninterested in the word of God with the blessing of an abundance of revelation.

Many in our generation have the gift of ample access to God's word. Yet many are from circumstances where their exposure to God's truth has been non-existent. We ought to be faithful with the word of God to all we encounter, but we must not favor those who are culturally Christian but without a longing for the Scripture over those with no church background but with an interest in spiritual truth. Some of those we are more comfortable associating with may not be those whom God most desires to use us for His service.

Our ministry priority must be for those who are interested in God's revelation. This focus will be seen in the following chapter when Jesus begins to speak in parables, *"for the sake of those who have been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom"* (Matthew 13:11). We cannot overlook those who are potentially the true disciples in our ministry for Christ.