

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

Prof. Budde for this original and suggestive commentary, which, even when it does not convince us, seldom fails to place the subject in a new light, and in textual criticism marks a turning-point.

T. K. CHEYNE.

*THE SIGN OF THE PROPHET JONAS.*

NOT one of us probably can remember a time when he was not conscious of an internal protest against the interpretation which is to be found in all commentaries of the words in which our Lord speaks of the sign of the prophet Jonas. It has been clearly impossible to accept it, because three days and three nights did not intervene between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection—and yet, if we must needs reject it, what other could we adopt? There seemed to be no alternative. For the violent course suggested by some, to assume the words about “the fish’s belly” and “the heart of the earth” to be a later interpolation, was manifestly inadmissible, and even if it were otherwise the difficulty would remain the same.

The object of the present paper is to consider the question, whether there is really no alternative; whether there is not another interpretation both possible and probable, which is simple and free from difficulty.

The difficulties which attend the interpretation of our Lord’s words with reference to the comparison between Himself and the prophet Jonah, difficulties which are by no means confined to the period of three days and three nights, are of course wholly distinct from any difficulties which beset the narrative in the book of Jonah itself; and into these last we do not now propose to enter at all.

There are two passages in the Gospel of St. Matthew, and one in that of St. Luke, in which our Lord is said to have referred to the prophet Jonah. If we would rightly understand what is meant by the sign of the prophet Jonas, we must consider all three. But the first of the three is wholly distinct from the other two, and may well be studied first. It is, moreover, the only one in which any allusion is made to the fish, or to the three days and three nights, and it stands quite apart by itself.

This first passage is in St. Matthew xii. 38-40: "Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from Thee. But He answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." It will be observed that it is not said here that Jonah himself, or anything which occurred in his life, was a sign to any one. But it is clearly implied that something was to occur with reference to the Son of man, which would be of the nature of a sign to the Scribes and Pharisees, and which would resemble in certain points the incident related in the book of Jonah. And the points of resemblance are, first and chiefly, the duration of time in each case, three days and three nights; and then the fact that this time was spent in the one case in the whale's belly, and in the other in whatever is indicated by the expression "the heart of the earth."

Two interpretations have been current of the words which our Lord uses with reference to Himself. One, which is by far the most popular, and which is in fact perhaps taken for granted by most people as the only one, is that which supposes Him to refer to His body resting in the grave, so that, according to this, "the heart of the earth"

means the sepulchre. The other, not nearly so well known, but with many authorities in its favour, interprets the words of our Lord's sojourn in Hades. This last is the view taken by Alford; and Meyer, who also adopts it, quotes in its support Tertullian, Irenæus, Theophylact, Bellarmine, Maldonatus, and among more recent writers Olshausen, König, and Kahnis.

But the advocates of both these interpretations are compelled to give them up the moment they have stated them. It being impossible to suppose that either the repose of the Lord's body in the grave, or His own "personal descent into the place of departed souls," could be a sign to the Scribes and Pharisees; they make the sign consist in neither the one nor the other, but in the resurrection out of both! Alford says plainly, "The sign of Jonas is the most remarkable foreshadowing in the Old Testament of *the Resurrection of our Lord.*" Meyer says, "Dieses Schicksal war allerdings eine Strafe und Wiederbegnadigung des Propheten, aber auch ein Zeichen, nämlich, für die Nachwelt *durch den Antitypus der Auferstehung Christi,*" and, with some naïveté, he adds in the same note that, just as Jesus had on other occasions "nur Dunkel seine Auferstehung vorhergesagt, nicht geradezu und ausdrücklich, so ist sie auch (v. 40) nicht geradezu ausgesprochen." And Bengel interprets the sign thus: "Jonas tum non est mortuus; sed tamen tam non creditus est redux fore a pisce, quam Jesus ex corde terræ. At rediit et ille et hic." Yet the Resurrection is not even dimly alluded to in the words of Jesus; and is it to be believed that if the Resurrection were the sign which He really meant, He would have left it wholly unmentioned, laying emphasis at the same time upon the three days and three nights of the sepulchre or of Hades, neither of which could in itself be any sign at all? And yet this difficulty is unavoidable if either of these interpretations be adopted, for the Resurrection must be

brought in to give any force whatever to the words used by our Lord. That is to say, these conventional interpretations compel us to add something of our own to the words of Jesus, in order to give any intelligible meaning to the language which He uses; and to lay the chief emphasis of the whole upon that which He Himself does not even mention at all.

But further, if we are to understand, according to the most current interpretation, that Jesus is speaking of three days and three nights in the sepulchre, is it possible to describe the "new tomb, hewn out in the rock," as "the heart of the earth." The grave would seem to have been not even beneath the surface of the ground. Alford, surely with good reason, points out that probably "it was not cut downwards after the manner of a grave with us, but horizontally, or nearly so, into the face of the rock." And in this manner it has been, as a rule, represented in pictures. But can the expression, "the heart of the earth" point to anything like this? Bengel, it is true, begs us not to be too scrupulous about this. "Medium sive cor terræ non debet præcise quæri; sed opponitur ipsi terræ, in quâ plus quam triginta annos versatus est Christus." But who can read this explanation without a smile?

Nor are we any better off if we adopt the other interpretation, and suppose that our Lord refers here to "the place of departed spirits." There is nothing in the expression, "heart of the earth," which even points to this. Such passages as Numbers xvi. 30, 33, and Job xi. 8, which are usually quoted in support of this view, clearly prove nothing. Nor can any passage of Scripture be quoted, in which such an expression is used in such a sense. It is true that Tertullian, discussing (*De Anima*, c. 54, 55) the question to what place the spirits of the departed go when they leave this present life, refers in passing to the words

of Christ "in the heart of the earth," and adds, "id est in recessu intimo et interno et in ipsâ terrâ aperto et intra ipsam cavato et inferioribus adhuc abyssis superstructo." But this is no proof that even Tertullian would have used such words as these, simply by themselves, and without anything in the context to indicate such a meaning, in the sense of the place of departed spirits. Nor can we suppose that Jesus, speaking of the sign of the Son of Man, which, to be a sign at all, must surely carry with it some clear significance, would use an expression so doubtful and obscure as this, and not rather language such as He actually used, when He said of the rich man that "*in Hades* he lifts up his eyes," and to the thief on the cross, "To-day shalt thou be with Me *in Paradise*."

But even if these difficulties were not already sufficient to make it impossible to adopt either of these interpretations, the period of time mentioned by our Lord, and upon which He lays such special emphasis, would still be a rock upon which both must be fatally wrecked. For the advocates of both of them have to explain in what sense the interval between Friday evening and Sunday morning at early dawn can be called "three days and three nights." Some of them indeed, implicitly admitting that explanation, in any serious sense, is impossible, decline to make any real attempt to give one, putting the question contemptuously aside as unworthy of consideration. Thus Alford says, "If it be necessary to deal with a matter so frivolous as the making good of the three days and nights during which the Lord was in the heart of the earth, it must be done by having recourse to the Jewish method of computing time. "And so Stier, "The refutation of the trifling and presumptuous after-reckoning of the three days and nights belongs only to a note." And Olshausen seems to consider that it would be almost a pity if there *were* too satisfactory an explanation, and bravely says, "The Holy Scriptures would

altogether miss their aim if, by mathematical precision and strictness, they would compel belief."

But all these writers fail to notice that though the duration of time in each case may seem to be a trifling detail, it is at all events the exact point of comparison upon which our Lord fixes attention. He does not say, "As Jonas was in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth," but "As Jonas was three days and three nights, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights." Therefore this question, so far from being "frivolous," is of the very first importance in attempting the interpretation of the words of our Lord.

The question is always dealt with, so far as it can be said to be dealt with at all, in the manner recommended by Alford. If an explanation has to be given, "it must be done by having recourse to the Jewish method of computing time." Of course it must, for that must have been the method used by our Lord. Now what was this method? In every passage which can be quoted from the Bible, the language used is similar to that which we use ourselves, and which any one, *εἰ μὴ θέσιν διαφυλάττων*, would suppose to be used here. They said, as we say, "Three days and three nights," if that were the period of time they wished to indicate, and they meant simply and exactly what they said. There is no instance whatever of any other kind. But S. Paul, saying in 2 Corinthians xi. 25, "A night and a day I have been in the deep," uses the compound word *νυχθήμερον*, which occurs nowhere else, but which carries its meaning upon its face. And in the Jerusalem Talmud mention is made of a Hebrew word *Onah*, which does not occur in the Bible, but which means some space of time. Lightfoot quotes from a Hebrew tract, "Schabbath," these words, "How much is the space of an Onah? R. Jochanan saith, Either a day or a night." And then he continues from the Jerusalem Talmud, "R. Akiba fixed a day for an

Onah, and a night for an Onah : but the tradition is that R. Eleazar Ben Azariah said, A day and a night make an Onah, and a part of an Onah is as the whole." And, "R. Ismael computed a part of the Onah for the whole." Lightfoot goes on, "It is not easy to translate the word Onah into good Latin, for to some it is the same with the half of a natural day; to some it is all one with *νυχθήμερον*, a whole natural day." This is the foundation, and the *whole* foundation, upon which the popular interpretation of the words of our Lord rests. On the strength of this single passage in the Jerusalem Talmud, which is itself only a statement of conflicting opinions, we are asked to put upon the words of Jesus in this verse a construction which we never think of putting upon any similar words in any other passage of Scripture whatever, a construction which every one feels to be strained and artificial in the extreme. We are asked to assume that He had in His mind, as He spoke, this peculiar expression of the Talmud, that He took sides with one set of doctors against another in its use, and that He spoke so completely as a partisan that He even adopted their theory of treating a very small fraction as if it were the whole, and, when the great point of the moment was exactness in the statement of time, used the words, "three days and three nights," when He meant two nights and a day.

It may in fact safely be said that there never would have been any doubt in any one's mind that the words of our Lord, when He said, "three days and three nights," mean exactly what to the ordinary reader they must seem to mean, if it had not been for the supposed necessity of making them square with the time which elapsed between His death upon the Cross and His resurrection on Easter morning. In other words, the difficulty of the three days and three nights is created solely by the interpretation put upon the expression, "the heart of the



earth." It is, therefore, upon this phrase that we should in the first place fix our whole attention. The more so as we have already seen that neither of the current interpretations assigns to it any satisfactory meaning.

The exact expression, "heart of the earth," we find only in this passage. But in "the prayer of Jonah" (c. ii. 3), there occur the words, "Thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the heart of the seas; and the floods compassed me about." And in 2 Samuel xviii. 14 it is said that Joab thrust three darts through the heart of Absalom, "while he was yet alive in the heart of the oak." And in Ezekiel xxvii. 4 it is said to Tyrus, "Thy borders are in the heart of the seas." The meaning is quite plain. That which is in the heart of anything is in its centre, surrounded by it, covered by it, hidden within it. The heart of the earth must be buried within it, in its very depths, out of sight, too deep for man to fathom. But in the Old Testament we most frequently find this thought expressed, in connexion with the earth, by the word *takhtiyyôth*, which literally means "depth," whatever is deep, far down, beneath everything else. And, "as the heaven is high above the earth," the depths of the earth came to mean the utmost limit of descent, whatever is lowest in creation, as heaven is the highest. This is clearly its meaning in Isaiah xlv. 23, "Sing, O ye heavens; for the Lord hath done it; shout, ye lower parts of the earth." The same word is used in Psalm cxxxix. 15, "My substance was not hid from Thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth." Here the dominant thought appears to be humbleness and low estate, the contrast between man in his littleness and the majesty of his Creator. Then there are three passages in Ezekiel xxvi. 20, xxxii. 18, 24, where the context, "all of them slain, fallen by the sword, which are gone down uncircumcised into the nether parts of the earth," and the addition,

in each case, "with them that go down to the pit," show plainly that the prophet is here thinking of Hades. And to these we may probably add Psalm lxxiii. 9, "Those that seek my soul to destroy it, shall go into the lower parts of the earth."

But, besides this word *takhtiyôth*, there are two others of somewhat similar meaning, which are so used that they cannot be explained of the deep places of the earth in the physical sense, nor can they be taken to mean the abode of departed spirits. They are used figuratively, and their meaning is beyond mistake. One is *t'hômim*. It is translated "depths," but suggests always the noise of waters, the trouble and tumult of rushing, roaring waves. It occurs in Psalm lxxi. 20, "Thou which hast showed me great and sore troubles shalt quicken me again, and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth." And it also appears, with similar meaning, in Psalm xlii. 7: "Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of Thy waterspouts: all Thy waves and Thy billows are gone over me." The other expression referred to is *m'zôlah*, which seems to mean a deep, or depth, and is so translated in our English Version. It occurs in its literal meaning in the prayer of Jonah, "Thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the heart of the seas." And figuratively, in company with other similar expressions also used in a metaphorical sense, in Psalm lxxxviii. 6, "Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit (*b'bôr takhtiyôth*, in the pit of the depths), in darkness, in the deeps (*m'zôlôth*)." .

We find then that, although the exact expression, *ἡ καρδία τῆς γῆς*, occurs only in this passage, where it is used by our Lord Himself, yet here and there, in the Old Testament, there occur other expressions so exceedingly similar to it, that we may safely take them as guides to its meaning. And they are so used that their own meaning is beyond a doubt. Always the idea expressed is that of

abasement and low place. They seem to be favourite expressions to indicate trouble, and misery, gloom, solitude of soul, depression, and extremest sadness.

We may safely infer that, when our Lord used the phrase, "the heart of the earth," He meant to express whatever is the very opposite of "heaven," and at the furthest remove from it. He must have had in His mind a period of humiliation, constraint, distress, which was to come upon Him. The words chime in with St. Paul's phrase, *εἰς τὰ κατώτερα μέρη τῆς γῆς* (Eph. iv. 9), which are used explicitly in contrast to *εἰς ὑψος* and *ὑπεράνω πάντων τῶν οὐρανῶν*. And they seem to indicate a descent from the very highest to the very lowest, and this not surely material, but spiritual, a descent distinctly below the level to which He had already stooped when He spoke the words, an emptying out of spiritual power and dignity in some conspicuous and evident manner, so as to be discernible even by those who had become destitute of spiritual insight, whose heart was waxed gross, and their ears dull of hearing, and their eyes closed. Our Lord manifestly speaks of some clearly marked space of time, "three days and three nights," during which the lowest point of the *κένωσις* would be reached; and this in so striking and obvious a manner, as to be recognisable and catch the attention of Scribes and Pharisees, and constitute for them a *σημεῖον*. For it is to Scribes and Pharisees that these words are primarily addressed. It is to them that He is directly speaking, though probably enough in the hearing also of His disciples and of the crowd. Of course the Incarnation was from first to last a *κένωσις*. What we have to consider is whether there was any period when it was most conspicuously so, when for three days and three nights the words of the Psalm were being fulfilled, "I sink in the mire of depth, where there is no standing: I am come into depths of waters, and the floods overflow me,"

a period of innermost affliction and distress, showing itself outwardly in extremest visible humiliation and abasement.

The lowest point of our Lord's humiliation was surely the Cross. And we may with confidence assume that if we measure backwards three days and three nights from the morning of the Resurrection, we shall have the period during which the Son of Man was to be "in the heart of the earth." This brings us to the Thursday, the day before the Crucifixion. No reader of the Gospels has ever failed to be struck by the sudden eclipse which overshadowed Jesus at that time. What was going on in His own Spirit we dare not say, but the darkness must have begun which He put into words when "He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray Me," and in that other mysterious saying, "The prince of this world cometh."

Scribes and Pharisees felt the difference. Consciously or unconsciously they were already aware of a change, of the removal of something which hitherto had baffled and thwarted their evil designs. Previously they had been afraid of Him. They had hated Him, and "sought how they might destroy Him," but they had not been able to touch Him. Some mysterious influence surrounded Him, making all their efforts vain. "They sought to take Him: but no man laid hands on Him, because His hour was not yet come." The officers whom they sent to bring Him disappointed and perplexed them with their report, not of any visible impediment, but of the awe which His words inspired. "Never man spake like this man." Once in their rage they had taken up stones to stone Him, but "He went out of the temple, going through the midst of them," and they dared not touch Him. Within this week they had been saying to one another in perplexity and despair, "Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing?" But when the Thursday came, all this was changed to the very

opposite. Instead of showing Himself in the temple with His words of cutting rebuke, and speaking to them face to face the parables which they knew to point at themselves, He appeared to be Himself afraid, and to "hide Himself from them." He was already saying in His manner and bearing what on that same day He said with His lips, "This is your hour and the power of darkness."

Those words must mean a deep reality. Let us ponder them well. They must point to the innermost meaning of what He had said before, "The Son of Man shall be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," and they show that the time had already begun. Through that day Judas is forming his plan, and seeking opportunity to betray Him. Success seemed certain. His sun had gone down. He is shorn of His strength. Scribes and Pharisees are confident of accomplishing His destruction. Their one only care is, "lest there be an uproar among the people." From Himself they fear nothing. Throughout the day the gloom was deepening, "deep calling unto deep." We need only call to mind the "exceeding sorrow" of the Supper, and the Agony of Gethsemane: This was known to His own disciples. To Scribes and Pharisees the triumph must have seemed complete, and their confidence justified, when the apprehension took place, and He Himself declared that resistance was not to be thought of. "And then all the disciples forsook Him and fled."

We need not go further, and dwell upon the narrative of the next day, and the day that followed it. Enough has been said to show that the words which Jesus had used before to the Scribes and Pharisees may be taken, as they surely were meant to be taken, in the strictest and most literal sense. The sign which He had said should be given to them was actually given to them. For the very space of time which He so accurately and carefully defined, for "three days and three nights," the Son of Man was "in

the heart of the earth," "in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps."

Such power and dignity as Scribes and Pharisees could feel and recognise manifestly departed from Him; and though they were wholly unable to measure the depth of His humiliation, or even to conceive its nature, yet the sign of it was clearly visible to them, and they rejoiced in the sight. Bengel, though he interprets the expression, "heart of the earth," as meaning the sepulchre alone, yet in principle admits this larger view, for, after mentioning Gethsemane and the events connected with it, he adds, "*Hæc omnia commoratio in terrâ latius sumpta complectitur. Etenim Filius Hominis non modo in sepulturâ sed vel maxime in passione signum fuit generationi illi. Hoc modo ternarius dierum noctiumque præcise completur, a luce feriæ quintæ ad lucem feriæ primæ.*" But it is important to bring clearly into view that this interpretation, which commends itself to the mind at once, is the natural meaning of our Lord's own words, and that we need feel no temptation to wrest His language, either by supposing that, when He said "the heart of the earth," He meant a cave hewn out of a rock upon its surface, or that when He said "three days and three nights" He meant the interval between Friday evening and Sunday morning.

F. F. WALROND.