Three days and three nights

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When the Lord Jesus cited the case of Jonah, who spent three days and three nights in the stomach of a sea monster, what He said has misled many people, including scholars. The context is the king of interpretation, and that context includes not only the text in which the word or phrase is found, but also the social situation within which the text occurs, as well as the larger culture.

When Jesus was dealing with the Pharisees and company, He often did not give them a direct answer, especially when they asked for a 'sign', because He knew that they were duplicitous. But that was probably not the primary reason. In John 5:19 the Lord said that He could only do what He saw the Father doing. Since the religious leaders belonged to Satan, what they asked for could not have come from the Father; therefore, Jesus could not grant their request. Rather than simply saying He could not, He would deflect the issue. Let us look at a few examples.

First, John 2:18-20.

> 18 So the Jews reacted and said to Him, "What sign do you show us, since you do these things?" 19 Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it". 20 So the Jews said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it in three days?!"

The Lord had just finished cleaning out the temple, Herod's temple, and was standing within that temple. So when He said, "Destroy this temple", the Pharisees quite naturally took Him to be referring to that temple, the literal meaning. But He was actually referring to his physical body, which we now know, but which they would have had no way of guessing. So He deliberately did not give them what they had asked for.

Second, John 8:56-59.

> 56 "Your father Abraham was overjoyed to see my day; yes, he saw it and rejoiced." 57 So the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?!" 58 Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM!" 59 Then they picked up stones to throw at Him.

The 'Jews' here were Pharisees, as is clear from verse 13 above. Again, the Lord said something that they could not understand, since they were looking at and listening to a physical man. They took the literal meaning, which was impossible. In verse 58 Jesus was openly, unmistakably claiming to be Jehovah. They were obliged to get the point, but not wanting to acknowledge Him they picked up stones.

Third, John 6:52-55.

> **52** At that the Jews started quarrelling among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?!” 53 So Jesus said to them: “Most assuredly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of the Man and drink His blood, you do not have Life within yourselves. 54 Whoever chews my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. 55 Really, my flesh is genuine food and my blood is genuine drink.”

The Lord was in the synagogue in Capernaum, so the ‘Jews’ doubtless included some Pharisees, but also included a wider audience. In verse 30 they had asked for a sign, in spite of having witnessed the multiplication of the five loaves and two small fish. They were being strictly literal, which could not be right—if they had started cutting Him up right there, they would have killed Him, and only those physically present could have eaten and drunk. (And of course, to eat human flesh was not allowed.) Even today, the interpretation of what Jesus said here is not straightforward. Again, the Lord did not give them what they asked for.

Now we come to the reason for this article, to be found in Matthew 12:38-40.

> [38]Then some of the scribes and Pharisees reacted saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.” [39]But in answer He said to them: “A malignant and adulterous generation seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. [40]For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the stomach of the sea monster, so will the Son of the Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

The Pharisees had just finished blaspheming the Holy Spirit, and Jesus called them “a malignant and adulterous generation”. Furthermore, it had been only a few weeks since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and the Pharisees were well aware of that fact (John 11:46). What ‘sign’ could be greater than raising someone from the dead? Their request, therefore, was perverse; they were certainly under demonic influence. It was yet another attempt by Satan to cause Jesus to err. As with the cases already discussed, this one should not be interpreted literally, as I will discuss in more detail below. The phrase ‘three days and three nights’ was simply a repetition of the description of what happened to Jonah. Also, it is a single phrase and should be handled as a unit.

The principal difficulty derives from Jesus’ own use of several different expressions to describe the time in the tomb. Referring to the time period between His death and resurrection He Himself said—“the third day”, “after three days” and “three days and three nights”. A careful look at all the relevant

passages makes clear that the three phrases are not equal candidates to give us the correct interpretation.

For 'the third day', there are eleven direct instances, plus two related ones. **Proper hermeneutic procedure requires that we interpret the few in terms of the many**, and not the reverse. In Matthew 16:21, 17:23, 20:19; Mark 9:31, 10:34;[1] Luke 9:22, 18:33, Jesus was telling the disciples what was going to happen to Him. Since the 'betrayed', 'mocked', 'scourged', 'crucified' and 'resurrected' were all fulfilled literally, 'the third day' was certainly fulfilled literally as well. Dealing with His disciples was very different from dealing with Pharisees and Sadducees. But consider 'raised on the third day': the verb dominates the verb phrase, the prepositional phrase is grammatically subordinated to it. So the important piece of information, what is being emphasized, is the resurrection, not the time in the tomb.

Besides those seven, in Luke 24:7 the angel quoted Jesus to the women at the empty tomb. In Luke 24:46 the resurrected Jesus was speaking with the disciples. In Acts 10:40 Peter was preaching to Cornelius. In 1 Corinthians 15:4 Paul made a statement. Those are the eleven direct instances. In Luke 24:21 Cleopas said to Jesus, "today is the third day since these things happened"—the 'these things' refers to the crucifixion, and the 'today' includes the resurrection, since he cites the women. In John 2:19 Jesus says, "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it". Those are the two related instances, for a total of thirteen (the case in Luke 13:32 is more difficult).

There are just two instances of 'after three days', to be found in Mark 8:31 and Matthew 27:63. In Mark Jesus is cited in an indirect quote, as Jesus tells the disciples what is going to happen to Him. In Matthew 27:63 Jesus is quoted by the Jewish leaders as they ask Pilate to guard the tomb; but notice that in verse 64 they go on to say, "until the third day", so the two phrases would appear to be synonymous.

I suppose that all human cultures have the tendency to think that their way of seeing things is right, and all others wrong. But what to do when conflicts arise? When attempting to understand a given event, it is the culture within which it happened that must be respected. Jews and Brazilians handle time differently than do 'Westerners' in general. Here in Brazil, after church, we often say, "I'll see you in eight days", which means the next Sunday. The day in which you are is included in the number. We have biblical basis; consider John 20:26. "Well, after eight days His disciples were inside again, and Thomas with them." 'Eight days' from when? "Then at evening on that first day of the week, the doors being

[1] In Mark 10:34 the eclectic text currently in vogue reads 'after three days', following a mere 0.7% of the extant Greek manuscripts, which manuscripts are of objectively inferior quality, demonstrably so.

locked where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the middle" (John 20:19). The 'first day of the week' is Sunday; the use of "that" indicates that it was Resurrection Sunday. With few exceptions, the Church Universal has always understood that Jesus arose on a Sunday, as the Text plainly indicates.

In John 20:26 "after eight days" means the next Sunday. To the 'western' mind, the use of 'after' is misleading; 'after eight days' would place one in the ninth day. But we are in the presence of a Hebrew idiom, wherein 'after eight days' = 'the eighth day'. This is plainly indicated in Matthew 27:63-64, where 'after three days' = 'until the third day'. But as already noted, the beginning day is included in the number; so 'after eight days' = 'the eighth day' = seven consecutive solar days of elapsed time (although the first and last solar day may not be a full 24 hours).

The single instance of 'three days and three nights' is in Matthew 12:40. What was the 'sign' in Jonah's case? It was the resurrection; he only spent three days and nights in the stomach of the sea monster; he didn't die there. Many people have been swallowed by a fish, and they died, so being swallowed by a fish is not the sign (to get out alive would be!). The 'three days and nights' was not the sign and therefore should not be taken as referring to the time in the tomb. The main point in all of the Lord's statements is the resurrection.

Now consider Luke 23:53-24:1.

> "Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock, where no one had ever been laid. **54** It was a Preparation Day; the Sabbath was drawing near. **55** The women who had come with Him from Galilee followed along, and they saw the tomb and how His body was placed there. **56** Then they returned and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment. **1** Then on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb carrying the spices that they had prepared, along with some others."

After the women observed the burial, they rested for one day—Sabbath is singular. They took their spices to the tomb on Sunday. It follows that Jesus was buried on Friday. Jesus was in the tomb for part of Friday, all of Saturday, and part of Sunday—He arose 'the third day'. As I understand it, the Lord Jesus dismissed His spirit about 3:30 p.m. on Friday, April 5, 30 and arose before dawn on Sunday, April 7, 30.

All said and done, argument about dates should not be allowed to detract from the importance of the facts in the case, nor to distract us from remembering and affirming that importance. The human part of the God-Man did indeed shed His blood and die on the cross to pay for our sins, and the resurrection from

among the dead is the proof that the Father accepted the price that the Son had paid. We are justified because of the resurrection, Romans 4:25. Since death is the result of sin, by ‘conquering’ death through the resurrection, Sovereign Jesus proved that the ‘wages’ had been paid. Thank you very much, Sovereign Jesus! “If Christ has not been raised, then our peaching is empty, and so is your faith!” (1 Corinthians 15:14).