

Jesus in the heart of the earth; Deciphering the Jonah Saying (Matthew 12:39-41)

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The unique comparison between Jonah and the Son of Man in the First Gospel has been notoriously difficult for several reasons. First, “three days and three nights” cannot be fitted into the interval of Jesus’ burial in the tomb from Friday evening to Sunday morning; second, the resurrection of Jesus, which is understood by some as “the sign of Jonah,” was not witnessed by “an evil and adulterous generation,” but only by believers in Christ; third, an above sea-level tomb like the one that contained Jesus hardly qualifies as “the heart of the earth” in the sense of subterranean depth; and fourth, interpreting “the heart of the earth” literally as *Sheol* still does not resolve the chronological problem. However, the enigma of the Jonah saying unravels with a shift in perspective. This article will recognize that shift and propose a new understanding of this passage.

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Keywords : heart of the earth, Jerusalem, Jesus, Jonah, Mount Zion, *Sheol* , three days and three nights, *Zohar* .

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 Jonah the prophet’ (For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth). ‘The men of Nineveh will rise in the judgment with this generation and condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here’ (Matt 12:39-41).¹¹Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of ancient texts in this article are mine.

Introduction

Ulrich Luz (2001) said “The little pericope of the *sign of Jonah* , vv. 38-40, is extremely difficult and controversial” (p. 215). It would only take a brief overview of published scholarship to prove his comment.

Luz himself maintained that the idea of the resurrection is present in 12:40 even though Matthew does not mention it. He felt that there is no tension between the “three days and three nights” and the “third day” which is Matthew’s usual expression for the time of the resurrection (pp.215-18). However, these are large assumptions that have yet to be proven.

A.K.M. Adam (1990) launches from Stanley Fish’s reader-response theory. He wittily calls this theory “a Fish-eye view.” This approach attempts to expose the hermeneutical assumptions behind a proposed interpretation. It calls attention to the context of both the producers and receivers of an interpretation. Adam says:

At the heart of a Fish-eye view of interpretation, then, is the proposal that there is no objectivity in either the method or the object of interpretation, so that we necessarily judge interpretations on the basis of our own interests and commitments (pp. 177-78).

We, therefore, cannot claim that our interpretation is “scientific” or “objective” in comparison to some other interpretation. Such a claim would be no more than “a mask for personal and community interests, a whitewash for one particular group’s ideology” (p. 178).

Adam disagrees with Fish’s argument that “there is no text,” assuming that by “text” Fish means “a constant stable entity to which differing interpretations both appeal.” Adam thinks that it is better to concede to the existence of the “text,” but deny that it has any “functional efficacy.” We must therefore give up the idea of a single, correct interpretation of a text (pp. 179-81).

Adam focuses primarily on Matt 12:38-40 (while acknowledging Matt 16:1-4 and Luke 11:29-30). This passage was the focus of the earliest attempts to explain “the sign of Jonah” probably because it pointed to the resurrection of Jesus. Adam offers an instructive overview of patristic, medieval, Reformation, and twentieth century exegesis of the text, but only to demonstrate that this variety of treatment has produced no consensus on the meaning of the sign (pp. 182, 185).

In the course of his survey, Adam observes a “serious problem” in the Matthean version, “inasmuch as Jesus did *not* spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (p. 182). Earliest interpreters tried to resolve the difficulty by omitting the time interval, substituting “on the third day” for the problematic clause, counting the darkness at noon as a night and the afternoon as a day, identifying the time interval as a synecdoche in which parts of a day were counted as whole days and nights, and turning the expression into a non-specific colloquialism. After acknowledging that Luke’s version of the Jonah saying offers little or no help, Adam remarks “so to this day, curiosity about the sign of Jonah is unabated” (pp. 183,185).

Adam concludes on the basis of divergent, conflicting interpretations that there is no correct interpretation of the sign of Jonah (p. 187). Of course, Adam seems to think that he is “correct” that there is no correct interpretation. Even though his argument by virtue of itself must also be “non-scientific” and “non-objective,” he certainly does not present it that way. Adam calls attention to the illusionary character of both literary and historical-critical objectivity, but that does not stop him from forcefully arguing his own literary-critical case. Some might say that Adam objectifies “non-objectivity” and absolutizes the “non-absolute.” He draws us into a paradox that invites us to believe and disbelieve him at the same time. If he is correct, we can do neither; but if he *is* correct he has contradicted himself. I, for one, would rather believe that some interpretations are more accurate than others; and even though none of us may ever arrive at the complete truth, our critical dialogue and mutual exchange will bring us closer to the truth than we would otherwise be.

Reed Lessing (2007) wishes to call attention to the “judgment aspect” of “the sign of Jonah,” particularly as it relates to Lutheran “baptismal theology” and the motif of death preceding life. The reference to *Sheol* in

Jonah 2:3 MT indicates that the judgment of God was upon the prophet. Lessing compares Jonah's "three days and three nights" to a similar interval in the Sumerian myth of the goddess Inanna. Here she descends into the underworld where she dies at the hands of another goddess. "After three days and three nights" Inanna returns to life with the help of other divine beings. This time interval only covered Inanna's travel to the underworld, not her time there. Similarly, "three days and three nights" in Jonah 2:1 MT is not the time it took for Jonah to descend into the depths; it was the time it took for "the great fish" to return the prophet from *Sheol* to dry land. Lessing says, "Whether this refers to a span of seventy-two hours or only to parts of 'three days and three nights' is an issue of greater concern for modern commentators than it was for the ancient narrator" (pp. 13-15).

Lessing argues that "the sign of Jonah" in Matt 12:39 is not only the resurrection of Jesus, but the experience of judgment as well. For Lessing, the interval "three days and three nights" signifies judgment for Jesus as it did for Jonah (pp. 15-16). It is this meaning that concerns Lessing rather than any chronological difficulty. Lessing struggles to make the sign of Jonah *both* the resurrection and the suffering of Jesus. He says, "both Jonah and Jesus go down to *Sheol* before they are brought up and saved by God" (p. 17). Notably, Lessing places greater emphasis on the sign of Jonah as the suffering of Jesus which was witnessed by both opponents and followers of Jesus. The "heart of the earth" like "the heart of the sea" (Jonah 2:4 LXX) refers to *Sheol*. When Jonah says, "I went down to the earth" (Jonah 2:7 LXX) he is again referring to *Sheol* (pp. 19-20).

There are a few problems with Lessing's argument. It is not clear from Lessing whether Jesus's descent into *Sheol* begins at his burial, his expiration on the cross, or at the point where he says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46) (p. 21). Another problem is that there is nothing in the text of Jonah nor Matthew that indicates travel time to or from *Sheol*. Given the aims of his study, Lessing may be justified in not diverting attention to the chronological problem posed by "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," nevertheless, the problem remains.

Dominic Rudman (2004) sums up the situation well in regard to previous scholarship on Matt 12:39-41:

Superficially, this passage comparing the experiences of Jonah and Jesus appears straightforward. Yet it has nevertheless been the subject of much speculation by biblical scholars on account of the 'three days and three nights' chronology on which the comparison partly rests. While Jonah did indeed spend this period of time inside his fishy host (Jonah 1:17 [Eng. 2:1]). Jesus spent only one full day and two nights in his tomb. Rudman continues with a helpful summary of attempts to resolve the matter: Modern scholars typically deal with the problem in one of two ways. The first is to argue that 'three days and three nights' may stand for any portion of three calendar days. The second is to see in the whole chronological discussion a classic case of modernist nit-picking, which not only disallows Matthew any poetic license, but also ignores the broader theological issues raised by Jesus' use of the comparison (p. 325).

Rudman seems to think that these arguments are a "partial resolution to the chronological issues." He furthermore commends recent scholarship for not being "distracted by minor interpretative issues" and allowing the biblical text to speak on its own terms. Rudman nevertheless warns that recent scholarship may be neglecting important exegetical issues. The particular issue he takes up is that of affirming the parallel drawn between Jonah and Jesus. The problem is that Jonah did not die in the belly of the great fish, but Jesus did literally die. Rudman must therefore clarify the exact nature of the comparison, and then show

the validity of the experiential parallel drawn between Jesus and Jonah. Rudman proceeds to show that Jonah's time in the watery deep was a type of death. On this basis he argues for a stronger parallel than previously realized between the death and resurrection of Jesus and the submersion and emergence of Jonah (pp. 325-28).

However, there are issues that remain. Is the chronological problem that Rudman cites really only a "minor interpretative issue"? Is our concern with it really "modernist nit-picking"? Have we really come to a "partial resolution" of the chronological problem? It is true that "three days" may stand for any portion of three calendar days, but to include "three nights" in this synecdoche is a deal-breaker even from a Matthean perspective. Moreover, to simply dismiss concern with the passage as "modernist nit-picking" is not only evasive, but it ignores other problems as well. It is not clear whether Rudman thinks this concern is "modernist nit-picking," but he nevertheless does not confront the charge.

A host of problems

Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew has indeed inherited a legacy of difficulty from the comparison drawn between Jonah and the Son of Man in Matt 12: 39-41. Most of the difficulty is precipitated by the statement, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three

days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Gospel tradition is clear that Jesus was buried in a tomb in the evening of the day that some parts of Western tradition call Friday, and that he was raised from the dead on the morning of the day that the same parts of that tradition call Sunday. The plain and simple literary sequence "day of preparation," "sabbath," and "after the sabbath" (or "day of preparation," "next day," and "first day of the week") which appears with slight variation in all the gospels (Matt 27:62; 28:1; Mark 15:42; 16:1,2; Luke 23:54,56; 24:1; John 19:31, 42; 20:1) can only be rephrased in sequential terms equivalent to Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Moreover, gospel tradition identifies the day of Jesus' death and burial as the "day of preparation for the sabbath" or Friday (Matt 27:57, 62; Mark 15:25,42; Luke 23:44, 54; John 19:31). Try as we may (and many have tried) there is no altogether credible way to get three days and three nights between Friday evening and Sunday morning.¹¹ Theodore of Heraclea (?-319 C.E.) was among the first who tried: "Christ says he will spend 'three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.' He is referring to the end of Friday, all of Saturday and the beginning of Sunday [of the passion week], in keeping with the way people understood the beginning and ending of days" (Simonetti, 2001, p. 256). A more recent attempt was made by France (1985): "Three days and three nights was a Jewish idiom appropriate to a period covering only two nights (see my *JOT*, p.81, n.2). The heart of the earth probably refers to Sheol, the place of the dead (cf. Jon 2:2, 'the belly of Sheol')-Jonah was rescued from the prospect of death, Jesus from death itself" (p. 213).

There are other problems as well. Making "three days and three nights" equivalent to a shorter interval strains credulity; the resurrection of Jesus, which is understood by some as "the sign of Jonah," was not witnessed by "an evil and adulterous generation," but only by believers in Christ; an above sea-level tomb like the one that contained the body of Jesus hardly qualifies as "the heart of the earth" in the sense of subterranean depth, and interpreting "the heart of the earth" literally as the underworld, the place of the dead, or *Sheol* still does not resolve the chronological difficulty of "three days and three nights."

Moreover, the author Matthew knows that Jesus was not buried in the tomb for three days and three nights, and, despite exegetical remarks to the contrary, he never tries to use this interval as a metaphor for a shorter time of burial. He knows that Jesus was only buried in the tomb for roughly one day and two nights. This knowledge is disclosed in Matt 16:21; 17:23; and 20:19 where Jesus prophesizes that he will be raised from the dead "on the third day" (τῇ τριτῇ ἡμέρᾳ). For Matthew, the phrase "on the third day" does not mean "in three days and three nights." It does not even mean "in three days time." In the context of Matthew, the phrase "on the third day" means an interval that includes the last part of Friday, all of Saturday, and the first part of Sunday. Interpreters have nevertheless tried to show that "three days and three nights" is somehow a substitute for "on the third day" in Matthean thought. This has happened so often that it is

almost an unquestioned assumption that this substitution is a feature of Matthew's narrative. Yet to this day, no one has been able to show how a period of roughly one day and two nights could be equivalent to a period of three days and three nights. Nor has anyone been able to show that this equivalency actually appears in Matthew.

In Matt 27:63-64, the chief priests and Pharisees tell Pilate that Jesus said, "After three days I will rise again" (Μετὰ τρεῖς ἡμέρας ἐγείρομαι). They also tell Pilate that he must secure the tomb "until the third day" (ἕως τῆς τρίτης ἡμέρας) to prevent theft of the body and the fabrication that Jesus was raised from the dead. Some seem to think that this establishes some type of equivalency between "after three days" and "until the third day," and that, for some reason, this equivalency should be extended to include "three days and three nights." This is common, but incoherent thinking. It stretches the meaning of "until the third day" pass the breaking point.

Moreover, in Matthew, Jesus never said "After three days I will rise again." That Jesus said this is only what the chief priests and Pharisees reportedly tell Pilate. It is a misquote. In Matthew, Jesus is frequently misunderstood and misquoted by accusers, detractors, and even bystanders (Matt 26:61; 27:11, 40, 47, 63). Nevertheless, even though they express worry about what might happen "after three days" they request that the tomb be guarded "until the third day." The suggestion here is that they only need to disprove the prophecy, and securing the body "until the third day" (i.e., for a night, a day, and a night) will do just that. In any case, "the third day" is the terminus for their watch, and ironically for the burial of Jesus in the gospel. Even in this case, "the third day" is not used as an alternative for "three days and three nights." The interval "three days and three nights" must therefore be the time frame for some other experience. As long as interpreters do not see that "three days and three nights" *must* refer to something other than just Jesus' burial in the tomb they will be oblivious to the weight of this alternative argument.

The heart of the matter

Ironically, we make greater progress toward resolving the difficulties when we shift our focus from chronology to topology. Therefore, rather than ask about the meaning of "three days and three nights" we will instead ask about "the heart of the earth."

We begin with a relatively simple question, Are there precedents in biblical literature for the Matthean term "heart of the earth" (καρδία τῆς γῆς)? Even though the phrase does not occur elsewhere in biblical literature, we may still have the occurrence of analogous, and perhaps even synonymous terms. The first of these we shall consider is the phrase "middle of the earth."

In the Prophets and the Psalms

In First Isaiah, rejoicing shall arise "in the middle of the earth in the center of the nations" (MT: bqr b hrts btk h'mym; LXX: ἐν τῇ γῇ ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἐθνῶν). The exuberance is over the destruction of the "city of havoc" (qrytthv) (24:10) an enemy suzerainty; most likely, Babylon. The rejoicing will be such as one would find at a harvest festival:

For so it shall be *in the middle of the earth in the center of the nations*, as when an olive tree is shaken, as when the harvest of grapes is completed. They lift up their voices and sing of the majesty of the Lord, they shout from the direction of the sea (Isa 24:13-14).

In this Isaianic context, the *middle of the earth in the center of the nations* can only be Jerusalem or Mount Zion (see Isa 24:23). Remarkably, the description of Jerusalem or Mount Zion as "the middle of the earth" or "center of the nations" is a recurring theme in biblical tradition.

In Ezekiel, the prophet is instructed to cut his hair and perform various actions with the strands to symbolize God's judgment upon Jerusalem. At a climactic moment the prophet declares, "Thus says the Lord God, This is Jerusalem, I have set her in the *center of the nations*, with countries all around her" (Ezek 5:5).

Later in the book, there is a shift in the prophet's pronouncements of judgment from Zion to Gog, the enemy of Zion. The prophet warns Gog of the thoughts that this enemy has "To take spoil and steal a prize; to

attack the waste places where people dwell, especially the people who were gathered out of the nations, who have acquired livestock and goods, who dwell at the *navel of the earth* ” (Ezek 38:12).¹¹Cf. Terrien, 1970, p. 333. “After the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., it was above all the belief in the Zion-space myth which enabled the surrounding Judahites to maintain their sociological identity and thus create Judaism. It was precisely at that moment that the prophet Ezekiel explicitly referred to Jerusalem as the navel of the earth.” I took this quote directly from Terrien, but I wish to acknowledge Charlesworth 1985, 720 note i, for his mention of this source. The prophet is here referring to Jerusalem as the *navel of the earth* . Significantly, the prophet makes synonymous use of the terms “in the center of the nations” (MT:btvk hgvyv ; LXX: ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἐθνῶν) and “in the navel of the earth” (MT: ’ltbvr hrts; LXX: ἐπὶ τὸν ὀμφαλὸν τῆς γῆς) when referring to Jerusalem.

In Psalm 74:2 (73:2 LXX) the petitioner prays “Remember your congregation, which you possess from ancient times, which you have redeemed as the people of your inheritance, Mount Zion, where you dwell.” Here the petitioner establishes the context for the rest of the psalm which laments the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Babylonians. In verse 12, however, the petitioner returns the typical counterpoint, “Yet God my King is from ancient times, working salvation *in the middle of the earth*. ” The phrase “in the middle of the earth” (MT: bqrb hrts ; LXX: ἐν μέσῳ τῆς γῆς) can only be a reference to Jerusalem.

In post-biblical Judaism

In *1 Enoch* , the seer is transported on two journeys of the created order.¹¹I am deeply grateful to Professor James C. VanderKam of Notre Dame University for providing English transliterations of the Ethiopic (Ge ‘ez) phrases cited from 1 Enoch 26:1 and Jubilees 8:12,19. He describes a transition that occurs during his second journey.

And from there I went *into the center of the earth* (Eth: *mā ‘kala medr*;

Gk: εἰς τὸ μέσον τῆς γῆς) and saw a blessed place, shaded with branches

which live and bloom from a tree that was cut. And there I saw a holy mountain; underneath the mountain, in the direction of the east, there was a stream which was flowing in the direction of the north” (*1 En* 26:1-3)(Isaac, trans., 1983, p. 26.). ²²The parenthetical inserts and italics in this section are mine.

The key feature at the *center of the earth* is “a holy mountain,” which would be recognized by an ancient Hebraic audience as a reference to Mount Zion, the location of Jerusalem (Ps 3:4; etc.). Undoubtedly, the “blessed place” (Eth: *makāna buruka* ; Gk: τόπον ἡὺλογημένον) at the *center of the earth* would have been recognized as Jerusalem.³³Cf. Nickelsburg, 2001, p. 318. “Jerusalem is described as the center of the earth already in Ezek 5:5 and 38:12 (there tbvr, lit. ‘navel’), and the idea is explicit in Jub 8:12, 19. The phrase expresses in geographical terms Israel’s self-understanding as God’s special, chosen people.” Cf. also Jeremias, 1969, pp. 51-52.

In *Jubilees* , a second century B.C.E. retelling of Genesis and Exodus accounts, we finally come to the apportioning of the earth among the sons of Noah: Ham, Shem, and Japheth. Of interest is the portion recorded in a document and given to Shem the biblical ancestor of the Jews.

And the lot of Shem was assigned in the document as the

center of the earth (Eth: *mā ‘kala medr*) which he would take

for his possession and for his sons for eternal generations from

the midst of the Rafa mountains (*Jub* 8:12).

As the account continues, Noah rejoices over the portion of the earth given to Shem because it contains the garden of Eden, Mount Sinai, and Mount Zion.

And he knew that the garden of Eden was the holy of holies and the dwelling of the Lord. And Mount Sinai (was) in the midst of the desert and Mount Zion (was) in the midst of *the navel of the earth* (Eth:

mā 'kala henbertā la-medr) (*Jub* 8:19, Wintermute, trans., 1985, pp. 72-73). 44For the Ethiopic script see VanderKam, 1989, pp. 52-54.

The terms “center of the earth” and “navel of the earth” are synonymous and they refer to the future site of Jerusalem on top of Mount Zion. Already, in widely known literature prior to Matthew we see a strong tradition of Jerusalem or Mount Zion as the *axis mundi*.⁵⁵ See Charlesworth 1985, 720, note i. Here Charlesworth comments on verse 8 “You who sit upon the mountain of holy *Sinaios*” (my adapted spelling). He says, “This statement is significant because Jews usually depicted Jerusalem, not Sinai, as the *axis mundi*. . . *Jub* 8:19 refers to three holy places: the Garden of Eden, Mount Sinai, and Mount Zion (see *Jub* 1:2, 28). *Ezek* 38:12 calls Jerusalem ‘the navel of the earth.’ 1En 26:1 portrays Jerusalem as both the middle of the earth and the ‘holy mountain’ (see also LetAriss 83). . . .”

In rabbinic literature

Jerusalem or Mount Zion continues to be acknowledged as the *center or navel of the earth* in literature subsequent to Matthew. The Matthean phrase “heart of the earth” (12:40) may therefore be a singular occurrence of the theme in a tradition stretching from antiquity to medieval times.

In the Talmud, the theme of Jerusalem as the *navel of the earth* appears in midrashic explanation of courtroom seating arrangements:

From where do we derive this law that the members of the Sanhedrin must sit in a semicircle? Rabbi Aa bar Hanina Said: It is derived from the verse that says (*Song of Songs* 7:3) “Your navel is like a round goblet, that never lacks blended wine; your belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lillies.” The words, “your navel” (shrrk) refer to the Sanhedrin. Why is the Sanhedrin called “your navel”? Because it is seated in the Temple of Jerusalem, which is at the center of the world” (btybvrv shl 'vln) (*b. Sanh* 37A). 11The parenthetical inserts are mine. Adapted from Steinsaltz, trans., 1998, p. 65. The rabbinic texts in this section were identified by Talmon, 1977, pp. 249-50. Again, I acknowledge Charlesworth, 1985, p. 720 note i., for his mention of Talmon.

The theme reappears in the Adolph Jellinek (1853-77, Vol.5, p. 63) midrashic collection:

‘In wisdom God founded the earth. . .’ The Holy One blessed be he created the world like the infant of a woman. In the beginning the infant develops from the navel and extends from there. What is the earth’s navel? This is Jerusalem and its central point is the altar. And why was it called the foundation stone? Because from it the entire world was established” (*BHMidr* 5.63).

In the Solomon Buber recension of the *Midrash Tanuma* (adapted from Townsend, 1997, pp. 309-10) even the land of Israel itself sits at the navel or center of the world:

Just as a navel is set in the middle of a person, so the land of Israel is the navel of the world. Thus it is stated (in *Ezek* 38:12): who dwell on the navel of the Earth. The land of Israel sits at the center of the world, Jerusalem is in the center of the land of Israel; the sanctuary is in the center of Jerusalem; the Temple building is in the center of the sanctuary; the ark is in the center of the Temple building; and the foundation stone, out of which the world was founded, is before the Temple building (*Tanh.. Lev* 19:23).

In Josephus, Philo, and Aristeas

In other places where the axial significance of Jerusalem is acknowledged, the scope of that significance is not so global; but yet we still have a variation on the theme. In his account of the war between the Jews and the Romans, Josephus includes a description of Judea which eventually focuses on the capitol city.

. . . and the city of Jerusalem sat in the *middle* of her, (μεσαιτάτη δ' αὐτῆς πόλις τὰ Ἱεροσόλυμα κεῖται); which is why some have wisely called that city the

navel of the country (τινες οὐκ ἀσκόπως ὀμφαλὸν τὸ

ἄστυ τῆς χώρας ἐκάλεσαν) (*B.J.* 3.52).

He continues saying that Judea was divided into eleven parts, “over which the majestic city of Jerusalem reigns, ruling over each district as the head rules the body” (*B.J.* 3.54).

Even in the allegorizing interpretation of Philo, where Jerusalem is a metaphor for the soul, the city is still envisioned “in the middle of all things” (ἐν τοῖς οὖσι πάνθ’). As Philo expounds:

But the city of God is called Jerusalem by the Hebrews... who do not seek that city in the regions of the earth, for it is not built of wood and stone, but is found perfected in the soul of the one living a godly and peaceable life, for what more reverent and holy dwelling can one find *in the middle of all things* than the mind that loves the contemplation of God (*Somn.* 2. 250-51).

In the *Letter of Aristeas*, the axial significance of Jerusalem becomes a faint echo, but is nevertheless discernible.

When we arrived at the place, we saw the city built in the *center of the whole land of the Jews*, upon a mountain which

was of great height” (Ὡς γὰρ παρεγενήθημεν ἐπὶ τοὺς τόπους,

ἐθεωροῦμεν τὴν πόλιν μέσσην κειμένην τῆς ὅλης Ἰουδαίων ἐπ’

ὄρους ὑψηλὴν ἔχοντος τὴν ἀνάτασιν) (*Let. Aris.* 83).11Cf. Shutt 1985, p. 18 and Thackeray 1968, p. 566.

Jerusalem as the heart of the earth

We therefore gain some insight from various literary expressions, but especially from a cluster of texts that use phrases that may be interchangeable with the Matthean “heart of the earth.” Those phrases are “middle of the earth,” “center of the earth,” “center of the nations,” “navel of the earth,” “navel of the country,” and even other phrases where the axial theme is more recessive. It is especially instructive to observe that the referent for these phrases is either the city of Jerusalem *and its environs* or Mount Zion where the city is located.

Given these occurrences and the evidence of a strong 1200 year tradition we are led to ask, Why should we interpret the unique Matthean phrase “heart of the earth” as a reference to the tomb of Jesus or literally to *Sheol* rather than as a reference to Jerusalem and immediate surroundings? It would appear that if we yield to the weight of tradition and make other logical connections, we should read “the heart of the earth” in this pericope only as a reference to Jerusalem and vicinity. The probability that this is the more correct reading is indicated by the solution it offers to the aforementioned problems, particularly the chronological one. In light of the solution my proposal offers, the burden of proof shifts to those who still believe that “three days and three nights” is a stressed synecdoche, a cryptic chronology, or a mismatched metaphor.

One may object that the “heart” is inside the body and the “navel” is outside the body, therefore the phrases “heart of the earth” and “navel of the earth” cannot be equivalent. This objection misses the whole point. These phrases are metaphors. It is possible for several metaphors to refer to the same reality, without corresponding exactly to each other. In English, the monikers Big Apple, Empire City, Gotham, Melting Pot, and Five Boroughs do not exactly correspond to each other, but they all still refer to New York City. The phrases “heart of the earth” and “navel of the earth” may draw upon different parts of the body, but they both can refer to Jerusalem and its environs.

Inspiration for the heart

Literary use of the metaphor “heart” (Gk: καρδιά; Aram: lbb; Heb: lb) in what could be an axial description of Jerusalem occurs in antiquity as far as we know only in Matthew. A native Galilean or Judean would have most likely used the Aramaic phrase lbb rq or lbb r’ for “heart of the earth.” In a more formal or liturgical context the Hebrew phrase hlb hrts probably would have been used. We at least have a linguistic-stylistic precedent for the metaphorical usage in the Hebrew phrase “in the heart of the seas” (Heb: blbymym; LXX: ἐν καρδίαις θαλασσῶν), which appears a number of times in the Scriptures (Ex.15:8; Ps 46:2; Ezek 27:4, 25, 26, 27; 28:2,8; Jonah 2:3). The phrase with the singular “sea” (ym, θαλάσσης) occurs in Prov 23:34; 30:19;

cf. *de corde maris* in 4 Esdras 13:3,25, 51). The greatest likelihood is that the inspiration for Matthew's rare use of the metaphor "heart" rather than "middle," "center" or "navel" comes from the prayer of Jonah while in the belly of the great fish:

You cast me into the deep, *into the heart of the seas* (blbb ymym), and the waters surrounded me; all your waves and breakers passed over me (Jonah 2:4 MT).

As Jonah spent three days and three nights in the *heart of the seas*, Jesus will spend three days and three nights in the *heart of the earth*. The "heart" metaphor clearly connotes "depth" in the prayer of Jonah, but the evidence is compelling for the connotation of "centrality" in Matthew's use of the metaphor. The connotation of the whole phrase "heart of the earth" in light of tradition indicating the axial significance of Jerusalem is what matters in the case of Matthew's language.

In Jonah 2:7 MT, the prophet speaks further of his ordeal, saying:

lqtsby hrym yrddy hrts brkhyh btsdy ltsvln vt'l mshkht khyy yvhv lhy

(I descended to the bases of the mountains; the earth with her bars was around me forever, but you brought my soul up from the pit, O YHWH, my God).

The "bases of the mountains" (qtsby hrym), "the earth with her bars" (hrts brkhyh), and "the pit" (shkht) may very well be echoed in the Matthean phrase, "heart of the earth." Also, this place to which Jonah descends is clearly deep under water. These echoes would strongly suggest that "the heart of the earth" is *Sheol* in some metaphorical sense of the word, but still this would not require that the *primary* referent for the phrase is actually the subterranean deep.

In biblical tradition, generally speaking, the "heart" metaphor does not necessarily connote "depth." In Ezek 27:25-27, the city of Tyre is told that:

The ships of Tarshish exported your goods and you were loaded full and packed with wealth *in the heart of the seas*. Your rowers have brought you into great waters; the east wind has shattered you *in the heart of the seas*. Your wealth, your merchandise, your goods, your seamen and sailors maintaining your seams, the traders of your goods

and your men of war who are aboard, and who are assembled

in the midst of you shall fall *into the heart of the seas* on the day of your ruin.

These verses have implications for a broad understanding of the phrase "in the heart of the seas." Ships in the sixth century BCE sailed on the surface of the seas, not beneath the waves. Even if a shipwreck resulted in loss beneath the waves, the event itself still happened on the surface of the waters. In biblical tradition, the phrase "in the heart of the seas" does not necessarily connote being submerged in the sea.

In Ezek 27:2; 28:2 the city of Tyre itself is built and stands "in the heart of the seas." That certainly does not mean that Tyre is submerged beneath the surface of the waters. The metaphor "heart" alone does not *necessarily* require a location beneath the surface of anything. The "heart of the earth" is no more necessarily beneath the surface of the earth than the "heart of the seas" is necessarily beneath the surface of the water. The metaphor "heart" can very well connote "centrality" rather than "depth."

Moreover, an important parallel to the phrase "in the heart of the seas" occurs in

Ezek 26:5 where the destruction of Tyre is prophesied: "It shall be a spreading place for nets *in the center of the sea* (hym btk)." The parallel occurs again in Ezek 27:32:

And in their mourning they shall lift up a lament for you, and a

lament over you, "Who was ever devastated like Tyre *in the*

center of the sea (hym btk)?"

The phrase *hym btk* also occurs in the wider biblical context (Ex 14:16, 27, 29; 15:19; Neh 9:11=2 Esdras 19:11 LXX).¹¹With slight variation, the LXX renders the phrase ἐν μέσῳ τῆς θαλάσσης. The renderings *in the middle of the sea* or *in the midst of the sea* are also acceptable for the Hebrew phrase in these verses, but a more precise translation would be consistent with the way we would render *hym btk* (*in the center of the earth*). The more significant observation is that “center” (*tvk*) is a clear parallel to “heart” (*lb*) in these places. From this point, it does not matter whether the phrases we compare contain the singular “sea” or plural “seas.”²²Cf. the singular *mare*, *maris* in 4 Esdras 13:3,5,25, 51,52; and *ym* in Prov 23:34; 30:19. Therefore, the phrases “in the center of the seas” and “in the heart of the seas” are *sometimes* equivalent in biblical tradition. It stands to reason, that the phrases “in the center of the earth” and “in the heart of the earth” can also be equivalent in biblical tradition. This is a pivotal point in this study and it deserves emphasis. *The sometime equivalency between “center of the seas” and “heart of the seas” in biblical tradition at least establishes the possibility that “center of the earth” and “heart of the earth” are equivalent terms.* The term “center of the earth” would be further delimited by Matthew’s Jewish context to mean Jerusalem and its immediate environs.

Searching for the heart

In the Moore and Jackson (1931) translation of Tacitus (*Annals* 73.1), Junius Blaesus, proconsul of Africa in the time of Tiberias, received honors for defeating the rebel Tacfarinas who had “recruited his forces in the heart of Africa” (*reparatis per intima Africae auxilium huc*) (p.637).

Also, while recalling the Roman fleet’s voyage to Britain under command of Agricola, Tacitus (*Agricola* 10.6), in the Hutton and Peterson (1914) translation, describes incoming tides of the sea that reach so deeply inland that they “even steal into the heart of hills and mountains” (*etiam ac montibus inseri*) (pp. 45-47).

These English translations of the Latin phrases use “heart” in the same metaphorical sense that I propose for Matt 12:40. However, the Latin terms *intimus* and *insertus*, unlike *cor*, are not specifically equivalent to “heart.”¹¹Plautus (c.205-184 B.C.E.) was a Roman playwright. In his *Epidicus* 384, Periphanes, a retired Athenian soldier, wishes that people had mirrors that would allow them to see into the “heart of wisdom” (*cor sapientiae*) so that they could examine their character. The meaning of “heart” in this case is ambiguous. It could connote “centrality” or “depth,” or most likely, both at the same time. In any case, it indicates that the metaphorical use of “heart” was not absent from pre-Vulgate Latin literature. These English translations are therefore interpretive judgments.

The same could be said of the Trapp (2018) translation of Aelius Aristides (Oration 1.80) where he speaks of the heroism of Athenian soldiers in “the heart of Boeotia” (ἐν μέσῳ τῇ Βοιωτίᾳ) (p. 86). Trapp’s translation is certainly acceptable, however, the Greek term μέσος, unlike καρδιά, is not specifically equivalent to “heart.”

While these English examples are noteworthy, they do little to advance my argument. I mention them to show similarity between ancient and modern language uses, and also to show what more is needed. We would need uses of καρδιά or equivalent terms, other than the ones I have already mentioned, to provide further support for my interpretation of “heart” in Matt 12:40. Intriguingly, we find such usage in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Deut 4:11, Moses recounts a theophanic experience of the children of Israel at Mount Horeb, saying:

And you came near and stood at the base of the mountain,
and the mountain burned with fire *to the heart of the heavens*
(’dlb hshmy ; LXX: ἕως τοῦ οὐρανοῦ), shrouded in darkness,
clouds of smoke, and thick billows of ash.

In this passage we see the same metaphorical use of “heart” (*lb*) that I propose for Matt 12:40. The verse supports my earlier observation about the sometime equivalency between “heart” and “center” in biblical tradition.

In 2 Kgdms 18:14 LXX=2 Sam 18:14 MT we have an account of the death of Absalom: “Joab took three darts in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was yet alive *in the heart of the tree*” (ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ τῆς δρυὸς MT: blb hlh). In both the Greek and Hebrew versions of this text we see the same metaphorical use of “heart” that I see in Matt 12:40.

Intriguingly still, we find further support for my argument in the writings of the neo-platonic philosopher Proclus of Athens (412-485 C.E.), specifically in his *Hymn to the Sun* . Here (*Hymni*1.6) Proclus observes:

μεσσατίν γὰρ ἐὼν ὑπὲρ αἰθέρος ἔδην καὶ κόσμον κραδιᾶν ἔχων ἐριφεγγέα κύκλον παντα τεῆς ἐπλησας ἐγερ-
σινόοιο προνοίης (For your abode is on high in the midst of the sky, And you keep *the heart of the cosmos*
encircled with your brilliance; You awaken all things, when you presciently fill them with your power).

When Proclus refers to “the heart of the *cosmos*” or “the heart of the world” (κόσμον κραδιᾶν), we see the same metaphorical use of “heart” that I propose for Matt 12:40.22 Proclus here uses the adjective masculine accusative form of κραδίᾱς, which is the adjective form of καρδιά, which is the Doric form of καρδίη, which is the Ionic or Epic form of καρδιά. Although using a different Greek dialect in a remote, fifth-century, non-biblical setting, Proclus is still antiquarian support for the sometime equivalency between “heart” and “center” that I see in the First Gospel. If Matthew’s “heart of the earth” is equivalent to “center of the earth” as I contend, then Deut 4:11 and 2 Kgdms 18:14 LXX=2 Sam 18:14 MT show that usage has precedence in biblical tradition. Furthermore, these same passages along with Proclus show that this usage is neither eccentric nor idiosyncratic.

When we add these examples (Deut 4:11, 2 Kgdms 18:14=2 Sam 18:14 MT, and Proclus) to those where “the heart of the seas” clearly denotes “the center of the seas” (Ezek 27:2, 25; 28:2), we have strong indication of how we should interpret Matthew’s “heart of the earth.” The real challenge is letting go of long- standing assumptions that equate “the heart of the earth” with the tomb of Jesus or the literal underworld.

What further makes the equivalency between “center of the earth” and “heart of the earth” not only possible, but probable, and perhaps, more probable than previous understandings? A simple and plain observation: Jesus did not spend three days and three nights in the tomb, not even in Matthean perspective. This time interval *must* refer to some other circumstance. We begin to see this circumstance when we note what may be the closest parallels we have in biblical and extrabiblical tradition to the phrase “heart of the earth.” In biblical and extrabiblical tradition, “the center of the earth” and equivalent phrases can only mean one place, Jerusalem and its environs. Understanding the phrase “heart of the earth” as one of these equivalent phrases adequately solves all the difficulties we have mentioned, especially the chronological one.

Suffering and the Sign of Jonah

If “the heart of the earth” refers to Jerusalem and its environs there is no problem then with Jesus spending three days and three nights there. In Matthean and Markan tradition, Jesus actually first arrived in Jerusalem at least five days before he was crucified (Matt 21:10; Mark 11:11; Cf. Luke 19:45). He eventually left the city to stay in Bethany (Matt 21:17; Mark 11:11). He then returned to Jerusalem a second time in that week (Matt 21:18; Mark 11:12,15, 27), and then left again to stay in Bethany (Matt 26:6; Mark 14:3). Jesus then returned to Jerusalem *a third* time in that week (Matt 26:20; Mark 14:17), but this time he did not return to Bethany. He travelled to the Mount of Olives and the field of Gethsemane (Matt 26:30, 36; Mark 14:32), but this was still considered within the boundaries of Jerusalem especially for the Passover (Jeremias, 1969, pp. 60-62). This third coming of Jesus to Jerusalem in the same week will therefore culminate in his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial (Matt 26:50, 57; 27:2, 28-29, 35, 59-60 par.). The third arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem in the same week therefore marks the beginning of a *discrete* and *unique* period of time in that he does not leave the city before being crucified. Thursday was the day that Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the third and last time that week (Matt 26:2, 17, 20; Mark 14:1,12).

The interval “three days and three nights in the heart of earth” therefore refers only to a discrete and unique period of time in which Jesus’s body was located in Jerusalem prior to his resurrection. That period of time was from Thursday evening to Sunday morning. It included burial in the tomb, but only for part of that

time.

Why is this final discrete and unique period compared to Jonah's time in the belly of the great fish? Obviously because it was a time of suffering. Jesus' suffering began in Jerusalem with the last supper on Thursday evening. The last supper may be characterized only as an occasion for emotional suffering, but it was suffering nevertheless. How easy could it have been to announce, "one of you will betray me" (Matt 26:21; Mark 14:18; cf. Luke 22:21)? His suffering intensifies through the time in Gethsemane (Matt 26:38; Mark 14:34; cf. Luke 22:42), and then, of course, through his arrest, scourging, and crucifixion (Matt 27:27-31; Mark 15:17-20; Luke 23:33; John 19:1-16). Even though it would make sense that Jesus' death and burial marked the end of his suffering, his death and burial could still be considered part of the suffering. After all, he was waiting to be resurrected. On the other hand, there is Christian tradition that nevertheless depicts the period of Jesus' death and burial as also a time of suffering (Luke 24:26; Acts 2:24; Phil 3:10; Heb 2:9).

Moreover, it was the *suffering* of Jesus that was witnessed by an "evil and adulterous generation." Therefore, it was *not* the resurrection of Jesus, but his suffering that constituted the *sign of Jonah*. It is true that the last supper and his agony in Gethsemane occurred before Jesus was "betrayed into the hands of sinners" (Matt 26:46), that is to say before the stage where his suffering becomes a public spectacle. However, it was never required that unbelievers witness every moment of Jesus suffering for it to be a "sign."

Further still, it is precisely because the suffering of Jesus was witnessed *by* an "evil and adulterous" generation that it also becomes a witness *to* that generation. In other words, the suffering of Jesus performed the role of Jonah's preaching to the people of Nineveh. It should have moved "this evil and adulterous generation" to repentance; but it did not. Matthew is joined by Luke in expressing this irony (Luke 11:32; cf. Matt 12:41).

In Jonah 2:3 MT, the prophet cries out "from the belly of *Sheol*" (mbtn shvl; LXX: ἐκ κοιλίας ᾗδου "the belly of Hades"). This phrase is parallel to Jonah's "heart of the seas." It is likely that this parallel is echoed in the Matthean phrase, "heart of the earth." Matthew draws a parallel between "the belly of the great fish" and "the heart of the earth" in 12:40. From a Matthean perspective, "*Sheol*," or "the belly of *Sheol*" would still be a metaphorical reference to Jerusalem, not to the tomb of Jesus alone, nor primarily to the underworld. Even in Jonah, "*Sheol*" refers not primarily to the underworld, but to the great fish, the place of Jonah's suffering. In Matthew, *Jerusalem* would be "*Sheol*" for Jesus because it was the place of his suffering, especially from Thursday to Sunday. One may object to an implied parallel between Jerusalem and Jonah's great fish in Matthew's thought because Jerusalem was stationary and the great fish was mobile. Again, such an objection would miss the point of metaphor.

A Convergent Study

I first presented this argument in 2013, most notably in the International SBL in St. Andrews, but in the meantime, Michael W. Andrews (2018) has independently written and published a study of Matt 12:40 that strikingly converges with mine.

Andrews examines Jesus' reference to "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" against the background of a "close reading" of Jonah 2. The time Jonah spent in the belly of the great fish is analogous to the period Jesus spent in the heart of the earth. Andrews describes the "sign of Jonah" as *suffering* rather than rescue. The three days and three nights interval in the heart of the earth "preceded and included" Jesus' death and burial. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus sunk to the depths of sorrow and despair with the same degree of agony expressed in the prayer of Jonah while in the belly of the sea monster. Jesus' descent into death actually began in Gethsemane. In Gethsemane is where "the three days and three nights" commenced (pp.105, 108, 116, 118).

Andrews and I are in agreement that the "sign of Jonah" was not the resurrection, but the *suffering* of Jesus. We are furthermore in agreement that this suffering includes the death and burial of Jesus, but commenced *before* the crucifixion. For Andrews, the entering of Jesus into "the heart of the earth" is his descent into death or *Sheol*, but he departs from other scholars by making Jesus' ordeal in Gethsemane the time when his

descent into *Sheol* begins.

While I interpret “the heart of the earth” *topologically*, Andrews interprets the phrase *psychologically*. While “three days and three nights” commences for me with Jesus at the last supper in the Upper Room, for Andrews it commences with Jesus in Gethsemane. In either case, the interval begins on Thursday within the boundaries of Jerusalem. There are a number of other differences between Andrews and me in regard to our interpretations, but they seem rather insignificant in light of our essential agreement that Matt 12:40 refers to a time period that *precedes* yet includes Jesus’ burial in the tomb.

A classic study

Venerable support for my thesis can be found in a 1916 monograph by A.J. Wensinck (1978). In his wide-ranging study of “the navel of the earth” in Jewish and Arabic literature, Wensinck (p. 46) reflected on Deut. 4:11 and acknowledged an equivalency between “heart” and “navel.”

Perhaps the navel of heaven was already known to the author of Deut IV,11, where mount Sinai is represented as burning “unto the heart of heaven” ... for heart is sometimes used as a synonym for navel. Jerusalem is called the heart of the earth (in the *Zohar* as quoted by Feuchtwang p. 728). Mekka is also called the heart of the world... by al-Batanūni, p. 27, 4 infra; the author’s note to this expression does not leave any doubt as to its meaning. But the idea of the navel of heaven is certainly known in Jewish Literature.

Surprisingly, Wensinck made no mention of Matt 12:40 in his study, and I imply nothing in regard to whether he would have agreed with my argument. Nevertheless, I agree with the equivalency he acknowledged between “the heart of the earth” and “the navel of the earth” in reference to Jerusalem.

The Feuchtwang quote cited by Wensinck is not available to me. However, Feuchtwang was undoubtedly referring to either *Zohar* 1:84b, 2:193b, or 3:161b where Jerusalem in each case is described as the “heart of the whole world” (lb dkl ’lm).¹¹ The *Sefer ha-Zohar* is a multi-volume commentary on the Torah. Its origins are disputed, but associated with the 2nd century rabbi Shimon bar Yohai of Israel and the 13th century rabbi Moses de León of Spain. Its Aramaic mystical content became the literary fountainhead of the Kabbalah movement. This more current wording comes from the critical Aramaic text and English translation of the *Zohar* produced by Daniel C. Matt.²² Matt, 2004-16, pp. 2:39; 6:95; 9:50. The first number is the volume, the second is the page. His translation of the passage from *Zohar* 1:84b well illustrates the status of Jerusalem:

Just as a rock is supreme and mighty above all, so is

Jerusalem. In the covert of the cliff—the Holy Temple,

site called Holy of Holies, heart of the whole world.³³ Matt, 2004-16, p. 2:39.

Here occurs a phrase that is practically the same as “the heart of the earth” in Matt 12:40, and that furthermore uses the term “heart” in the very sense that I propose for this verse. In the *Zohar*, Jerusalem is also described as the “center of the world” (mts’yt d’lm, 1:266a), “center of the whole inhabited world” (or “middle of all habitation,” mts’yt dkl yshvb, 2:184b; 3:161b), “center of the land and of the whole world” (vkl ’lm mts’yt dr’, 2:157a), and the “center of the whole earth” (mts’yt dkl r’, 3:66a).⁴⁴ Matt 2004-16, pp. 3:360; 5:419; 6:36-37; 7:433; 9:49. In the *Zohar*, these Jerusalem descriptions are interchangeable with “heart of the whole world.”

Matt himself, in a critical note, shows thematic equivalency between *Zohar* 1:84b and *Tanuma*, *Qedoshim* 10: “The land of Israel sits in the center of the world, Jerusalem in the center of the land of Israel...”⁵⁵ Matt 2004-16, p. 2:39, n. 302. See also p. 2:8. In *Zohar* 1:78a, the land of Israel is referred to as “the central point of habitation” (dmts’yt dyshvb) upon Abraham’s arrival there. Again, I imply nothing in regard to whether Matt would agree with my thesis; nevertheless, I agree with him when he acknowledges Zoharic equivalency between “center of the world” and “heart of the whole world” in reference to Jerusalem.

The origins of the *Zohar* are disputed, but at the very least we have a medieval Sephardic Jewish text that supports my interpretation of Matt 12:40. Moreover, it is not likely that the author of the *Zohar* would have

invoked a description of Jerusalem that did not descend from antiquity. Zoharic descriptions of Jerusalem have obvious semantic continuity with “the navel of the earth” in Ezek 38:12. Likewise, “the heart of the whole world” in the *Zohar* has semantic continuity with “the heart of the earth” in Matt 12:40.

In synoptic perspective

Rehearsing the synoptic history of the Jonah saying is more obligatory than necessary, and necessary only because it is obligatory. On the two-source hypothesis, some form of the Jonah saying occurs in Q. A variation without mention of Jonah occurs in Mark 8:11-12. Matthew (12: 39-41) and Luke (11:29-32) independently choose to adapt the Q version for their purposes. Curiously, Matthew (16:4) makes double use of the tradition, and in doing so preserves a briefer form of the saying (Cf. Dunn, 2003, pp.658-60).

On the Griesbach-Farmer hypothesis, Matthew 12:39-41 and 16:4 are the first occurrences of the saying. Luke then adapts his version of the saying from Matthew; and Mark offers a compromise version based upon both Matthew and Luke (Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, 1976, pp. 200-201). However, given the tenuous nature of all documentary hypotheses I decline to depend upon any in this tradition-critical investigation (Cf. Farmer, “Matthew and the Bible,” 1976, pp. 57-66).

James Dunn (2003) makes a compelling case to shift the focus from anachronistic literary theories to the phenomenon of oral tradition and narrative performance. He argues that the Jonah saying can be traced back to the impact of Jesus on the earliest witnesses to the saying. Differences in the parallel versions can be attributed to performance variations (pp.658-60).

Dunn would further characterize the comparison between Jonah and Jesus in Matt 12:40 as a Matthean elaboration in regard to the Son of Man’s burial (pp.659-60).¹¹Dunn says. “And though one of Matthew’s versions elaborates the sign of Jonah in terms of the Son of Man’s burial for three days (Matt.12:40), that is assuredly to be regarded as elaboration in hindsight.” . I would agree that the passage is Matthean, although I would rather describe it as a parenthetical remark. I also would not characterize the passage as a reference to burial time. In this case, the gospel writer did not intend for the comparison in 12:40 to be understood as a saying of Jesus. The occurrence of the duplet in Matt 16:4 where the comparison is not reproduced, the idiomatic Jewish character of the phrase “heart of the earth,” and the absence of the comparison in Luke 11:29-32 indicates the Matthean origin and parenthetical character of the saying.

A heartfelt conclusion

At issue is whether Matthew’s comparison drawn between Jonah and the Son of Man is a basically incoherent statement requiring extraordinary deference and excuse, or a straightforward, sensible remark however culturally distant it may be from modern readers. I argue for the latter.

Matthew’s reference to “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” as an ordeal for the Son of Man is therefore not a stressed synecdoche, nor a cryptic chronology, nor a mismatched metaphor. It is a summation of events involving Jesus in Jerusalem from Thursday evening to Sunday morning. Although draped in biblical prose it recalls a historical memory about the suffering of Jesus. As Jonah spent three days and three nights of suffering inside the great fish, so Jesus spent a final three days and three nights of suffering in Jerusalem, that place known in biblical and extrabiblical tradition as the “middle,” “center,” “navel,” or “heart” of the earth.

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