

ON WHICH DAY WAS JESUS CRUCIFIED — Wednesday, Thursday or Friday?

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An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and no sign shall be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah: 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 indeed, a greater than Jonah is here (Matthew 12:39-41).

Although skeptics have long mocked the story of Jonah as a “whale of a tale”, Jesus took it literally. (¹) But perhaps even more remarkable in Christian circles has been the persistent discussion as to whether Jesus meant his impending death, burial and resurrection were also to be understood as a literal three days and three nights (i.e. 72 hours) **in the heart of the earth**.

To some the phrase **three days and three nights** must be taken according to our modern reckoning of time. They insist there is therefore no way that Jesus was crucified on the traditionally accepted Friday. After all, how can we fit **three nights** into just Friday and Saturday, even if we count the daylight hours of Friday, Saturday and Sunday morning as the three days?

Hence, it is alleged, Jesus used the expression, **three days and three nights**, either because he was to be in the grave exactly seventy-two hours, (meaning he was crucified on Wednesday afternoon) and raised when the Jewish day began at sunset of the Saturday evening. Or, alternatively, he was crucified on Thursday afternoon (meaning he was three nights as well as three part-days in the grave).

Can we harmonise any of these interpretations with what the Scriptures teach? Over many years I have gone the full circle from Friday, to Wednesday, to Thursday and back to a Friday crucifixion. So I acknowledge the sincerity of all who come to a different view — but I am going to do my best to convince you that I finally have the right ‘take’!

NOT A SALVATION ISSUE!

I hasten to add this is not a salvation issue, but it is a matter of Scriptural harmony and ultimately of Jesus’ credibility.

¹ A large sea creature (κῆτος / *kētos*) either a whale, sea monster, or great fish.

TERMS OF EQUIVALENCE

On at least seventeen separate occasions Jesus, or His friends, spoke of the timetable involving His death and resurrection. Ten times it was specified that the resurrection would take place **on the third day** (Matt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Mk 9:31; 10:34; Lk 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46). Twice they used the term, "**after three days**" (Mk 8:31; 15:29) and one time only Jesus spoke of His death as **three days and three nights** (Matt. 12:40). On other occasions his accusers reported him saying, **in** or **within three days** (Matt 26:61; 27:40).

Without question all of these various expressions are used to describe the very same event. "**The third day**," "**in three days**," "**after three days**," and "**three days and three nights**" are **equivalent terms** used in the Bible in reference to the day on which Jesus was raised. This much is clear.

INCLUSIVE RECKONING OF TIME

Our confusion arises when these terms of equivalence are read in a wooden, literalistic way without regard to the method the Bible uses to define time. For example, to our Twenty-First Century ears, **after three days** would certainly have to be interpreted as longer than seventy-two hours. **Within three days** could mean anytime less than seventy-two hours, and **three days and three nights** could only mean exactly seventy-two hours to the minute — and **on the third day** presents even greater problems.

To state the obvious, the unreasonable insistence on employing Twentieth Century English idioms of speech to interpret first century Greek or Hebrew usage has led to the current confusion. As we shall see, the only way we can harmonize all of these apparently conflicting statements is to understand them in harmony with the common reckoning of time in that far-off ancient world. We must learn to read the Bible with Hebrew eyes!

However, before we turn to the Bible for confirmation of this principle of inclusive reckoning, let us read the authoritative statement of the **Jewish Encyclopedia** on the matter:

"A short time in the morning of the seventh day is counted as the seventh day; circumcision takes place on the eighth day, even though, of the first day only a few minutes after the birth of the child, these being counted as one day." Vol. 4, p. 475.

This defines the Jewish method of computing time: The briefest part of a day — even a minute or two! — was reckoned as the entire, or completed, twenty-four hour period — a full day **and** night. This Inclusive reckoning was taken for granted by all writers of the Scripture.

Scores of contradictions seem to appear in both Old and New Testaments if this principle is ignored. Repeat: This means that any part, even the smallest part, of a twenty-four day was counted as a whole day **and** night.

Failure to understand this principle that the tiniest part of a day should be considered as one full day, or a **completed** day, creates huge difficulties for us moderns. (²) For instance, **Genesis 17:12** specifies, **he who is eight days old shall be circumcised.** But **Luke 2:21** uses another expression: **When eight days were completed for the circumcision of the child.** To our modern way of thinking this last verse would communicate that the child was circumcised on his ninth day. (³)

THE THIRD DAY ... THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW!

Now we are ready to apply this clearly established method to the time Jesus was in the tomb. Since any part of a day had to be included in the period he was actually dead, we remember that the most frequent expression Jesus used in describing the resurrection was the **"third day"**. He defended his repetition of the term on the basis of the Scriptures; **And [Jesus] said unto them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day"** (Luke 24:46).

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus employed the same expression when they spoke of the terrible events surrounding the crucifixion. Unconscious of the fact that they were talking to Jesus, who had been raised earlier that same day, one of them said, **"Today is the third day since these things happened"** (Luke 24:21).

Clearly, those people understood how to count the days and to determine which was the third one. They knew because it was a common idiom of their language.

But Jesus did not leave any doubts in the matter. He used inclusive reckoning when he counted the days: One day they reported to Jesus that **Herod** was seeking him. Jesus was not cowed and stated, **"Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to day**

² In a recently posted blog titled **Jesus — The Only Sign** the author, 'Steve S' cites a "crazy" explanation which he happened upon. It tries to fit the three nights into the Bible account for a Friday crucifixion: **For those who are bothered by the "three nights" count, add a night for the darkness that descended on Friday afternoon. This is a miraculous night. Night fell, Jesus died, then the light returned briefly, then normal Friday night came. This then lets us count a third night.** As my blogger observes, we don't need to resort to such mental gymnastics to do our exegesis!

³ Other examples include **Genesis 42:17-19; 2 Chron. 10: 5,12**

and to morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must walk today, and tomorrow, and the day following” (Luke 13:32, 33).

How simple Jesus made it! **The third day is the day after "tomorrow!"**

Now we can understand the conversation Jesus had with the Jewish leaders and why they interpreted it as they did. He said, "**Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up**" (John 2:19-21). Later, after the crucifixion, the chief priest said to Pilate, "**Sir, we remember how that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, 'After three days I will rise again' ". Command therefore that the tomb be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night and steal him away**" (Matthew 27:63, 64).

With Christ's definition of time before us, the picture snaps into clear focus. Speaking prophetically of his own death and resurrection, he said, "**To day** (crucifixion) **and to morrow** (in tomb), **and the third day** (resurrection) **I shall be perfected**". Inclusive reckoning makes it three days and three nights in their sequence!

If Jesus died on Friday afternoon, the entire day would be counted as the first day (which included what we would call Thursday night because the Jewish day started the evening before the night and its day). The second day would span the Sabbath when He slept in the tomb. And when he was raised in the early hours on the third day, inclusive reckoning would make it one of the three days.

THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK IS OUR SUNDAY

Now the time has come to pinpoint the actual days of the week when these events took place. Again, we are amazed at the perfect harmony of the Scriptures on the subject. There can be no question but that Jesus arose on Sunday, the first day of the week. Mark emphatically states, **Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene** (Mark 16:9).

Sunday is the first day of the Jewish week, and that is when he was raised. Words could not be plainer. He did not rise from the grave on Saturday evening, as some argue. This rules out any contention that he died on the fourth day of the week — a Wednesday.

BUT WHEN WAS THE PREPARATION DAY?

We are told that, **It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathaea ... went in boldly unto Pilate, and asked for Jesus' body** (Mark 15:42, 43). According to the inspired record then, Christ was put to death on the "**preparation day,**" and the preparation day was never a

Wednesday, nor a Thursday. In all the pages of biblical history, the preparation day was Friday.

Anthony Buzzard's footnotes properly state of **John 19:31**;

Friday, preparation day, of Passover week (see NIB, NIRV, GWN) not the preparation for the Passover *meal*, which had taken place the evening before, when Jesus ate the meal at the same time as the nation, introducing the Lord's Supper (see Matthew, Mark and Luke for the clear evidence that Jesus ate the meal at the time the nation was keeping the Passover. John does not in any way contradict this).

All four gospels agree that Jesus died on Friday. *Paraskeue* and *prosabbaton* are words for Friday. Other days were in NT times called first day, second day, third day, etc. (⁴)

NOT ONE OF THE ANNUAL CEREMONIAL SABBATHS!

Some question whether this could be one of the ceremonial yearly sabbaths of the Jewish ordinance system. Notice these words, **The Jews therefore, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away (John 19:31).**

The day following the crucifixion was not only the weekly seventh-day Sabbath, but it was a high Sabbath. This means that *a yearly Sabbath in that particular year happened to fall on the weekly Sabbath*. In this case it was the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Luke clearly identified that preparation day as the one immediately preceding the weekly Sabbath.

And that day was the preparation, and the sabbath was about to begin. And the women also, who came with him from Galilee, followed after, and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid. And they returned, and prepared spices and perfumes; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared (Luke 23:54-24:1).

The time elements are clear. Jesus died on the preparation day, or the day before the weekly Sabbath. The next day is designated as **"the sabbath according to the commandment."** Since the commandment says, "The seventh day is the sabbath," we know that this had to be the day we call Saturday. Furthermore, after describing the events of the preparation day in **verse 55** and the Sabbath day in **verse 56**, the

⁴ *The One God, the Father, One Man Messiah Translation*, Restoration Fellowship, Footnotes 227, 228.

very next verse says it was **the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared.**

Observe that after preparing the spices on the afternoon of the crucifixion (Friday), and resting over the Sabbath (Saturday), they came to the tomb with the spices on the first day of the week (Sunday) to do the work of anointing. This was their first opportunity after the Sabbath to carry out the preparations made on Friday afternoon. This is when they discovered that Christ was raised.

NOT A WEDNESDAY CRUCIFIXION

If the crucifixion took place on Wednesday, how can we explain why the women waited until Sunday to come to the sepulchre? Why didn't they come Thursday or Friday to anoint His body? Did they not understand that after four days his body would be decomposing and their work of love would be in vain? The answers to these questions constitute the strongest case against a Wednesday crucifixion.

The Bible, in fact, offers incontestable proof that no one would have attempted such an anointing under those circumstances. Remember when **Lazarus** had been dead four days how Jesus ordered the stone removed from his tomb? **Martha**, the sister of Lazarus, protested in these words, **"Lord, by this time there is a bad odour for he has been dead four days"** (John 11:39).

These words of Martha reveal the fact that no woman of that day would have considered it possible to prepare a body for burial four days after death. To Martha it seemed an irrational act even to open the tomb of Lazarus. To the other women who prepared the spices it would have been equally unthinkable to enter Christ's sepulchre four days after he had been crucified.

In view of the amazing weight of biblical evidence to the contrary, is it not surprising that some still cling to the Wednesday crucifixion idea? The entire scheme is based upon the unsatisfactory interpretation of a single Bible text. The **"three days and three nights"** phrase is forced into artificial conformity with current English forms of speech, instead of the common usage of the people living two thousand years ago.

Those who believe that Jesus died on Wednesday and rose on Saturday evening base much of their evidence on this verse: **After the sabbath, as it began to dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb (Matthew 28:1).**

Figuring that the first day of the week "dawns" at sundown Saturday night as the Sabbath ends, these people assume that the women discovered the empty tomb in the twilight moments of the Sabbath, just before sundown. They count backwards

exactly seventy-two hours and arrive at Wednesday evening just before sundown for the crucifixion.

Is this a valid conclusion? Or is there evidence that the women could not have visited the empty tomb on Saturday evening? There is indeed positive biblical proof that they did not. We find that evidence in Mark's account of the visit to the sepulchre: **And when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus' body. And very early on the morning of the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. And they asked each other. "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" (Mark 16:1-3).**

There is no question about this being an early Sunday morning visit. It is at sunrise. The very same women are named as in Matthew's account. Can we correctly assume that these same women had been to the tomb the night before and found Jesus risen? Impossible. Why? Because of the question they asked as they approached the garden on Sunday morning, **"Who will roll us away the stone from the entrance of the tomb?"** If they had been there Saturday just before sundown and found the tomb empty, they would have known that the stone was already rolled away from the door. This is absolute proof that they had not been to an empty tomb the evening before.

It also proves that Matthew's "dawn" refers to the dawning represented by the sunrise and not sunset. There is no contradiction between the two accounts. So those who insist that Christ was in the grave a full seventy-two hours contend that the three days and three nights must be taken in the fullest literal sense. But this contention is absolutely contrary to the testimony of the Scriptures.

QUEEN ESTHER

Here's an O.T. example of the way the Bible computes times by the method of inclusive reckoning. It's particularly pertinent because it also mentions **three days and three nights**. Queen Esther says to her uncle Mordecai: **"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day: My maids and I will fast likewise ..."** (Esther 4:16).

They were to fast for three days and three nights. Yet we immediately read, **Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's palace (Esther 5:1).** Here is a perfect example of how three days and three nights terminate on the third day!

We have already learned how Jesus explained the third day. He said **"to day, and to morrow, and the third day"** (Luke 13:32). Consider how when Jesus walked with the

two disciples on the road to Emmaus on the first resurrection Sunday afternoon how Cleopas said, "To day is the third day since these things were done" (Luke 24:21).

If Jesus had been crucified on Wednesday afternoon, Cleopas would have had to say, "Today is the fifth day since these things were done." If Jesus had been crucified on Thursday, Cleopas would have had to say, "Today is the fourth day since these things were done." But no, Jesus made this statement: "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day." (Luke 24:46).

Now we see how those who claim a Wednesday or even a Thursday crucifixion are wrong. Christ died on Friday, the preparation for the Sabbath - that was the first day. He lay dead (euphemistically resting) in the tomb on the Sabbath according to the commandment - that was the second day. He was raised up on the first day of the week which was Sunday - that was the third day! How simple when we use the Bible's own inclusive reckoning of time!

Matthew said He would "be killed, and be raised again the third day." (Matthew 16:21). Mark wrote that He must "be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31). Luke reports that He must "be slain, and be raised the third day." (Luke 9:22).

The Scriptures emphasize *the death of Jesus as the starting point of the three days*.

Finally, we recall the **Jewish Encyclopedia's** definitive reckoning of time in the Bible: **"A short time ... only a few minutes ... are counted as one day."**

Thus, the smallest part of a twenty-four day was counted as the whole day and night.

We may therefore, after a careful consideration of the evidence, say with confidence that Jesus was crucified on the morning of Friday and that God raised him from the dead on the third day, at dawn on the Sunday.

Our confidence in Jesus' credibility and in the harmony of Scripture are established — not to mention our joyful confidence in His Father's faithfulness to do all these things according to the prophetic utterances of the holy prophets of old. Yahweh God Almighty, Who created time, never loses a single minute in all the vast ages of time!!

POSTSCRIPT

After this article went out I received a number of congenial and well-presented responses which requested more information before they might be convinced of my exegesis. I include their concerns and my answers below ...

Firstly, I was challenged to find "anywhere in Scripture where God made Friday a preparation day for the Sabbath". I answer with **Exodus 16:5**: **And it shall come to pass, that on the sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in; and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily.** This call to prepare for the Sabbath became deeply embedded in Israel's practice.

Although initially not a technical term for 'Friday', the day before Sabbath did eventually become known as "the preparation day" sometime during the Second Temple period (after the Hellenistic influences of the **Seleucids from 312-to 63BC**). By the time we get to the NT period the sixth day of the Hebrew week was indeed called "Preparation Day" --- even though it could apply to the day of preparation before any holy day. The NT Greek text uses *Paraskeuē* as the word for Friday ... and this practice has carried all the way through to today's modern Greek usage.

Secondly, the matter of the women buying spices: **Luke 23:56** states definitely that after the women saw where the body of Jesus was laid, that they **"returned and prepared spices and perfumes"** and that they then **rested on the Sabbath**. BUT **Mark 16:1** confirms they purchased spices **"when the Sabbath was over"**. Can these two statements be reasonably reconciled?

Well, I can confirm as a matter of history that from the time of **Nehemiah** onwards how immediately after the sunset which closed out the Sabbath that the markets opened for buying and selling. Opening time was usually around 8pm and the markets would remain open even up till midnight (weather permitting).

Nehemiah 13: 15ff records how **Nehemiah** was distressed at the trading on the Sabbath day. So he ordered the gates of the city be shut at sunset just as the Sabbath was beginning and then to be re-opened when Sabbath had ended (just after sunset the next evening (**Neh 13:19**) when normal trading began again. As far as we know, this practice continued right on through the Second Temple era.

That all said, it would be very helpful if we could locate in which year our Lord was crucified, as this would finally settle whether **"the high Sabbath"** mentioned in **John's Gospel** fell on the weekly Sabbath that year or otherwise. We will probably never know this side of the Glory!

The important thing again worth highlighting is that this is all nice to know and not necessary for salvation or fellowship. However, as far as my present understanding goes this is not fatal to the interpretation I give in my article. "Inclusive reckoning" is Biblically demonstrable, and most certainly very Jewish.

