

The Crucifixion - on Friday or Wednesday?

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Introduction

Last week, a statement was made from our pulpit by a guest speaker. I wish to question his statement this morning. Before I do, let me say that I greatly admire this man, and appreciate his ministry and scholarship. I do not intend to impugn him or his credibility in any way. He and I are simply on opposite sides of an issue of Bible interpretation. It is not a fundamental of the faith, and so it is not something we need to get all on our high horse about. It is simply an area where we need to study our Bibles and come to a conclusion. Some of you here will agree with him. Some will agree with me. In the end, I hope we all agree that the lesson to be learned is the importance of knowing our Bibles, and giving the time and effort to Bible study that will enable us to interpret it correctly. At the very least, we can determine that this is an area where we can "agree to disagree." Besides, since this is Easter Sunday, it is a timely topic.

Here is the statement. "I, for one, do not believe Christ was crucified on a Friday. I do not see how you can get 3 days and 3 nights between Friday and Sunday. I believe Christ was crucified on a Wednesday afternoon and rose again on Sunday morning." (At least that is a paraphrase of the statement as I remember it. I was not taking notes at the time.)

DISCUSSION - What do you think of this statement? When was Christ crucified?

Why some believe Jesus died on Wednesday

DISCUSSION - Have you ever heard the arguments for a Wednesday crucifixion? (Or perhaps you are one who believes it.) Either way, can you explain the rationale behind the thought that Christ might have been crucified on a Wednesday?

There are generally two primary pieces of evidence - *Matthew 12:40* and *John 19:31*. (Have someone read these two passages.)

Jesus' prophecy

Jesus plainly stated that He would be in the ground for "three days and three nights."

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. (Matthew 12:40, KJV)

If this verse is to be taken literally (i.e. according to our 21st century reckoning of time), then it must refer to a literal 72 hours of time. Jesus would have to be dead and placed in the "heart of the earth" BEFORE that 72 hour period commenced, and He could not arise until AFTER the last second of that 72 hour period was past.

We KNOW that Christ arose sometime before the women arrived at the tomb early on the first day of the week. (We'll describe the timeline shortly, and provide the verses to back it up.) For now, accept that fact, and work backwards, and you will see the logic behind the Wednesday crucifixion theory.

DISCUSSION - Can you see it? Can you see how you would need a Wednesday crucifixion if there were 72 hours of time required IN THE GROUND? Comments?

The High Sabbath

As we will see in a few minutes, the evidence that the crucifixion took place on the day before the sabbath is incontrovertible. It cannot be denied. Therefore, to argue for a Wednesday crucifixion, there must have been a sabbath on some day other than a Friday. John's description of the sabbath is used to strengthen this theory.

The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. (John 19:31, KJV)

This piece of evidence is vital to the theory, as we will see. The timing of the sabbath day is the single fact that disproves the entire Wednesday theory, so its proponents have to explain away the timing of the sabbath. This clearly could not have been a Saturday sabbath, or the theory of a Wednesday crucifixion is ridiculous.

Why I believe Jesus died on Friday

All four gospel writers agree about it.

Note: Have a class member read each of the following passages, followed by the question, "When does this passage teach that Jesus was crucified?"

READ - *Matthew 27:46-50, 57-64; 28:1-6*

READ - *Mark 15:34-37, 42-43; 16:1-6*

READ - *Luke 23:44-46, 50-56; 24:1-3*

READ - *John 19:30-31, 41-42; 20:1*

READ - *John 19:30-31, 41-42; 20:1*

QUESTION - Is there anything in any of these passages that could lead you to believe Christ was crucified some time other than Friday?

ANSWER - If we did not have the "3 days and 3 nights" quote from Jesus in *Matthew 12:40*, I do not believe anybody would question a Friday date. However, because of that quote, some have struggled. I

We need to deal with the problems that are cited by those who believe differently. As we mentioned earlier, they struggle with the 72 hour problem, and they handle it with the "the sabbath was not the normal sabbath" solution.

The "3 days and 3 nights" argument is not valid.

QUESTION - How can we explain the apparent discrepancy between Jesus' prophecy in *Matthew 12:40* and the lack of 72 hours between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning? Make the case for us.

The simple explanation is that in the Jewish way of communicating, any part of a day equated to a day, and "a night and a day" was simply an idiom, or figure of speech, for a day (or any part thereof).

Jesus, Himself, demonstrates this fact. In *Matthew 12:40* He indicates that he will be in the ground for 3 days and 3 nights, but in *Matthew 20:19* He says He will rise "on the third day."

QUESTION - Do these 2 phrases mean the same thing? Explain.

To our mind, they mean different things, but to the Jewish mind, they were two different ways of saying the same thing.

ILLUS - It would be as if I said to you, "The sun rises in the east and sets in the west." We know that that is not scientifically accurate, but it is a normal mode of communicating the fact that the earth rotates, bringing the sun into view in the east, and continues to rotate so that the sun appears to move across the sky until the earth's rotation finally hides the sun from view in the west. It is an idiom, or a figure of speech, which has a clear meaning to all of us. So with "a night and a day." It was simply a way of referring to a day, or any portion thereof.

Here are what others have said about this:

QUOTE - In the Bible, parts of time units were frequently counted as wholes. Thus a king might be said to have reigned for two years, even if he reigned for only fourteen months. In the same way, a day and a night does not mean a period of twenty-four hours. It can refer to any portion of a day coupled with any portion of a night. The expression "three days and three nights" could be used as simply a slightly hyperbolic way of referring to "three days."

Quote - Similarly, D. A. Carson, regarded as one of the deans of conservative Protestant Bible exegesis, explains: "In rabbinical thought a day and a night make an onah, and a part of an onah is as the whole.... Thus according to Jewish tradition, 'three days and three nights' need mean no more than 'three days' or the combination of any part of three separate days" (Expositor's Bible Commentary, 8:296).

QUOTE - If Jesus was crucified and died Friday afternoon, that would be the first day; at sundown on Friday the second day would begin; then at sundown on Saturday the third day would begin. So Jesus was indeed "raised on the third day" (Matt. 20:19).

The "some other sabbath besides the regular sabbath" argument is not valid.

This argument, stated simply, says that the sabbath referred to here is not the normal Saturday sabbath, but rather a high day, the passover. This is usually based on *John 19:31*, "... for that sabbath day was an high day.

While it is true that there were other days, such as Passover, or the Day of Atonement, which were referred to as sabbath days, it is not likely that such a sabbath is referred to by the 4 gospel writers.

QUESTION - Anybody want to explain why this is unlikely?

The gospel writers made constant use of the term "preparation" or the "day of preparation." This was a common expression, which simply meant FRIDAY! The Jewish people expressed the days of the week as days 1-5, followed by the preparation and the sabbath. It was an extremely common, even ubiquitous way of saying FRIDAY - the preparation.

ILLUS - We do similar things. If I were to say to you, "The Lord's Day" what day would I be referring to? How about "hump day?" "Turkey day?"

Within the culture of first century Judaism, the evidence is overwhelming that the day of preparation was day 6 in the weekly calendar (Friday), and the sabbath was day 7 (Saturday).

THEREFORE, it seems unlikely that a different sabbath is referred to here. All 4 gospel writers seemed to be taking pains to ensure we understood this happened on a Friday, a Saturday, and a Sunday.

Some other scholars thoughts on this:

QUOTE _ Some advocates of a Wednesday crucifixion concede that Jesus was crucified on the day before a Sabbath, but deny that this was the regular, weekly Sabbath. In later times, the phrase "day of preparation" came to be used to refer to the day before Passover and, this argument goes, Passover counted as a Sabbath in the sense that it was a day of rest, even though it usually did not fall on the weekly Sabbath. Thus Jesus was crucified on the day before Passover and had to be buried hurriedly on that account. But this explanation will not do. In the first century, "the day of preparation" referred to Friday, not the day before Passover. Further, we know from Scripture that the Sabbath following Jesus' crucifixion was the regular, weekly Sabbath, the seventh day of the week: "Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher" (Matt. 28:1).

QUOTE - By the time of Tertullian (c. A.D. 160-225) paraskeue had already become such a fixed name for Friday that he even argues that this had been the name for Friday since creation. These, and similar examples, clearly indicate that Christians adopted the Jewish practice of numbering the first five days of the week and of naming the sixth and the seventh as paraskeue and sabbaton - Preparation and Sabbath. ("The Time of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection," by Dr. Samuele Bacciocchi)

The early church believed in a Friday crucifixion

In any historical issue, earlier data is considered more accurate than later data. In other words, if we have the words of an eyewitness, or an apostle, versus the words of a 21st century preacher, then we would always give greater weight to the eyewitness, because they were actually there.

Similarly, if we have information from the early church, we need to give it due consideration. And the fact is, the early church believed in a Friday crucifixion.

QUOTE - A final and equally important consideration is the fact that Christian tradition has unanimously held to the Friday-Crucifixion/Sunday-Resurrection chronology. This is all the more surprising in view of the fact that some early Christian writers did place the Last Supper on Tuesday evening rather than Thursday evening. With regard to the Crucifixion, however, no early Christian writer ever disputed or doubted its occurrence on Friday. (Dr. Samuele Bacciocchi)

Conclusion

We can thus reconstruct the chronology of the crucifixion, death, and Resurrection of Christ as follows:

- Friday, the Day of Preparation: Jesus is crucified with two thieves. From noon to three in the afternoon, a darkness covers the land (*Matthew 27:45*). Then, "*The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.*" (*John 19:31*) . Then Joseph of Arimathea obtains Jesus' body and buries it: "*And now when the even was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathaea, an honourable counsellor, which also waited for the kingdom of God, came, and went in boldly unto Pilate, and craved the body of Jesus.*" (*Mark 15:42-43*)
- Saturday, the Sabbath: "*On the Sabbath they [the women] rested according to the commandment*" (*Luke 23:56b*). Also on this day, "*that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate,*" and asked for a guard to be placed on the tomb (*Matt. 27:62*).
- Sunday, the first day of the week: "*Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher*" and found that Jesus had risen from the dead (*Matt. 28:1*).

The evidence for a Friday crucifixion is overwhelming, and the problem verses which some use to teach a Wednesday crucifixion just do not teach that.