

# What Day Did Jesus Die?

Revised and expanded, April, 2014

Further revised, May, 2016

## Introduction

The question of what day of the week Jesus died is one that continues to inspire debate, if not controversy. I was taught, and believed for many years, that the traditional view of Jesus dying on Friday could not be reconciled with other Scriptures, particularly the prophecy that he would be in the grave three days and three nights. In recent years I have been involved in rethinking many of the old doctrines which I once held as true. For years, I believed that a Wednesday crucifixion solved all the apparent contradictions, and I thought I had it all figured out. But my problem was two-fold. First, I did not understand Hebrew idiomatic language; and second, I hadn't read the records in context.

First of all, let me recap the reasoning that is used to conclude that Jesus was crucified on Wednesday, and not the traditional Friday. (A number of groups and individuals hold to this theory, as seen by an internet search.) To begin with, it is maintained that the Bible does not mention by name what day of the week the crucifixion occurred on, although the day of the resurrection appearances is identified as "the first day of the week" which we know as Sunday. Second, the often quoted verse, Matthew 12:40, refers to "three days and three nights."

Matthew 12:40 – 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.

I, and others who held this view, took delight in pointing out that anyone who can count could see that you can't get three days and three nights from Good Friday afternoon to Easter Sunday morning. Even if you count part of a day as a whole day (which many who hold to the Wednesday theory consider to be illogical and unbiblical), the most you can get is three (partial) days and two nights. All four Gospel records say that Jesus died on "the preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath," which traditionally has been understood as Friday. But I was taught that the first day of the Passover was a "special Sabbath," and that the Gospel records referred to this, and not the weekly Sabbath.

John 19:31 – 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.

Since the special high "Sabbath" that started Passover could be on any day of the week, and it is thought that no other Scripture demands that it be on Friday, it is concluded that the first day of Passover was on Thursday, and that he died on Wednesday afternoon. From that afternoon to Thursday afternoon was one day and one night, to Friday afternoon was two days and two nights, and to Saturday afternoon was three days and three nights. Jesus then arose on the third day (Saturday afternoon) and when the women came to the sepulcher on Sunday morning "while it was yet dark" they found that he was "already risen" (it hadn't said when he arose). Thus he was buried on Wednesday shortly before sunset, and arose on Saturday before sunset, exactly 72 hours later, and first seen some time before sunrise the next morning. It all fit and made perfect sense, I thought. However, there are a number of difficulties with this theory.

## “The Third Day” vs. “Three Days and Three Nights”

The main reason for considering that Jesus did not die on Friday as tradition has long held, has been the problem of the “three days and three nights.” It is worth noting, however, that only one verse (Matthew 12:40) mentions this, while thirteen others<sup>1</sup> simply refer to him being raised on “the third day.” The exact meaning of the phrase “the third day” in its Biblical usage is defined in Luke 13:32. “And he said unto them, Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures **today and tomorrow, and the third day** I shall be perfected.” Counting of days began with today as the first day, and tomorrow as the second day. The day after tomorrow was the third day, even though we would say only two days have elapsed, because we don't count today as day one.

We can see this way of reckoning time in the Old Testament as well. In Exodus 19:10-11, we read, “And the LORD said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them **to day and to morrow**, and let them wash their clothes, And be ready against **the third day**: for **the third day** the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai.” And in I Samuel 20:12, we read, “And Jonathan said unto David, O LORD God of Israel, when I have sounded my father about **to morrow** any time, or **the third day**, and, behold, if there be good toward David, and I then send not unto thee, and shew it thee.” What we would call “the day after tomorrow,” they referred to as “the third day.”

This fits with Jesus dying on Friday and rising on “the third day” or Sunday. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday are the first, second, and third days respectively, according to the way they reckoned days in that culture. If he died on Wednesday, according to this reckoning the third day would be Friday, which would contradict the theory that he rose on Saturday. (Similarly, a Thursday crucifixion would not work either, as the third day would then be Saturday.) But the Scriptures are clear that on the first day of the week (Sunday), the apostles said that it was, “the third day since these things were done” (Luke 24:21). This identifies the day of his death as Friday, according to Biblical usage.

The phrase “after three days” (used twice regarding Christ's resurrection, in Matthew 27:63 and Mark 8:31) has a similar meaning. The preposition “after” in these verses is *meta* in Greek, which is translated with, among, or after. So depending on its context it could mean after the days have passed as in “after two days is the Passover” (Matthew 26:2; Mark 14:1), or it could mean what would happen “with” the days mentioned, as in “after three days I will rise” (Matthew 27:63). If in this context it meant after three entire days had completely passed, then it would actually refer to something that happened on the fourth day. This can't be the case, since Matthew 27:64 says that the chief priests requested a seal on the tomb “until the third day.”

One other variation is the phrase “in three days.” It occurs five times in the New Testament (Matthew 26:61, 27:40; Mark 15:29; John 2:19,20) and all refer to Jesus' statement that although the temple of his body would be destroyed, he would raise it up “in three days.” The word for “in” is simply the Greek word *en* and has the same basic meaning as in English, “in three days.” In addition, in Mark 14:58, the word *dia* is used, and translated “within” in the KJV, but “in” in the NASB. When used of time, it has the meaning of throughout or during. In both cases, the period of three days is referred to, which fits with “today, tomorrow, and the third day.”

As for the phrase “three days and three nights,” we have had a problem reconciling this with the rest of the clear Biblical records, because in our Western thinking “three days and three nights” means a literal period of 72 hours. But it was not so in Hebrew thinking of Biblical times. There is abundant evidence that the expression, “three days and three nights” was simply an idiomatic phrase to refer to a period of

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:64; Mark 9:31; 10:34; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7,21,46; Acts 10:40; I Corinthians 15:4

three days which included partial days at the beginning and end. When a Hebrew in Biblical times referred to “three days and three nights,” he was using a type of Jewish “shorthand.” The literal meaning would be too long and awkward to say—“a part of a day, a night, a whole day, another night, and part of a third day.” Thus the idiomatic shorthand phrase was used.

*The Jewish Encyclopedia*, under the article “Day,” says the following:

In Jewish communal life, part of a day is at times reckoned as one day; for example, the day of the funeral, even when the latter takes place late in the afternoon, is counted as the first of the seven days of mourning; 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 remain after the birth of the child.<sup>2</sup>

There are examples of this idiom in the Old Testament. In Genesis 7, the length of the flood is described as “forty days and forty nights” in verse 12, and as “forty days” in verse 17. The two phrases are equivalent. The rain started **during** the first day, and ended **during** the last day. The two partial days are included in the entire period described as both “forty days” and “forty days and forty nights.”

In Genesis 42:16-17, Joseph “...put them all together into ward **three days**. And Joseph said unto them **the third day**, This do, and live; for I fear God.” They are put in ward on the first day, and released on the third day. The two partial days are included in the three days.

In I Kings 12:5, we read “And he said unto them, depart yet for **three days**.” Then in verse 12, it says, “so Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam **the third day**, as the king had appointed, saying, Come to me again the third day.” Here we note that the “three days” included the first, second and third days. The same example also appears in II Chronicles 10:5 and 12.

I Kings 20:29 reads, “For **seven days** they camped opposite each other, and on **the seventh day** the battle was joined.” The partial days at the beginning and ending are included, so that “on the seventh day” marked the end of “for seven days.”

There is also the example from the New Testament which we saw earlier, in Matthew 27:63-64. “Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, **After three days** I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure **until the third day**, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.” Note that “after three days” was equivalent to “until the third day” (not “until the fourth day”).

Another example from the New Testament involves Cornelius. In Acts 10 he has a vision at the ninth hour (v. 3). He sends messengers for Peter, and then “on the next day” (v. 9), Peter has a vision, meets Cornelius’ messengers, and gives them lodging. “On the next day” (v. 23) Peter goes with the messengers, and “on the following day” (v. 24), they enter Caesarea. Then in verse 30, Cornelius says, “Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour.” From the first day at the ninth hour to this day at the ninth hour would be considered three days and three nights, or 72 hours, by our Western reckoning. Yet Cornelius says it was “four days ago,” because they considered the day on which they started as day one, whereas we call the first day **after** the starting point day one.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Isidore Singer, ed. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1901), Vol. 4, p. 475, s.v. “Day”.

The argument has been made that the above verses speak of numbers of days, rather than “days and nights” (except for the reference to Noah's Flood). But we saw from the Flood record in Genesis that the phrase “forty days” is equivalent to the phrase “forty days and forty nights.” Nevertheless, there are also at least two other places where “days and nights” are referred to. Esther 4:16: “Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink **three days, night or day**: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.” And then in 5:1: “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 house...” In this case, “on the third day” is the end of the period of time described as “for three days, night or day.”

The other example is in I Samuel 30:12-13: “And they gave him a piece of a cake of figs, and two clusters of raisins: and when he had eaten, his spirit came again to him: for he had eaten no bread, nor drunk any water, **three days and three nights**. And David said unto him, To whom belongest thou? and whence art thou? And he said, I am a young man of Egypt, servant to an Amalekite; and my master left me, because **three days ago** [ago] I fell sick.” In this case “for three days and three nights” was equivalent to the period of time that started “three days ago” in Hebrew terminology, or the day before yesterday.

E. W. Bullinger, in Appendix 144 of *The Companion Bible*, made the argument that Hebrew idiomatic language does allow for a part of a day to be reckoned as a whole day when describing periods of time, but “when the number of ‘nights’ is stated as well as the number of ‘days’, then the expression ceases to be an idiom, and becomes a literal statement of fact.” (The entire Appendix 144 can be read on the Levend Water website<sup>3</sup> or on The Rain website<sup>4</sup>.)

But does the addition of the number of nights necessarily make the phrase literal instead of figurative? The following is from *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* by John Lightfoot (first published in 1658).

Weigh well that which is disputed in the tract Schabbath, concerning the uncleanness of a woman for three days; where many things are discussed by the Gemarists [expert on the Gemara, the second book of the Talmud] concerning the computation of this space of three days. Among other things these words occur; “R. Ismael saith, ‘Sometimes it contains four Onoth sometimes five, sometimes six’. But how much is the space of an Onah? R. Jochanan saith either a day or a night.” And so also the Jerusalem Talmud; “R. Akiba fixed a day for an Onah, and a night for an Onah: but the tradition is, that R. Eliezar Ben Azariah said, “A day and a night make an Onah, and a part of an Onah is as the whole.” And a little after, R. Ismael computeth a part of the Onah for the whole.

It is not easy to translate the word Onah into good Latin: for to some it is the same with the half of a natural day; to some it is all one with a whole natural day.

Thus there is no hard and fast rule that the addition of “and nights” makes the expression literal. An onah (a period of time) can be either a night, or a day, or a “whole natural day” consisting of a night and a day. The context and parallel verses must determine which meaning is intended. While this idiomatic terminology can be confusing to our Western minds, it is clarified for us by using different wording in parallel verses, all referring to the same three days.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.levendwater.org/companion/append144.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.therain.org/appendixes/app144.html>



tomorrow and the third day” defines the counting of days, and the phrases “in three days” and “after three days” (which is literally “with three days” in the Greek) both speak of the same three days.

The fact that the different wording in different verses all refer to the same thing is the key to clarifying the “difficult” wording of Matthew 12:40. Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7,46 all say he would be killed and would rise “the third day,” and Mark 8:31 says that he would rise “after [*meta*] three days,” while Luke 24:21 explicitly states that the day they were speaking was “the third day” since those things happened. In Matthew 26:61, 27:40; Mark 15:29; John 2:19 and 20, reference is made to Jesus’ statement that the temple of his body would be raised “in three days” while Mark 14:58 says “within three days” in the KJV and “in three days” in the NASB. Acts 10:40 and I Corinthians 15:4, speaking in the past tense, say he arose “the third day.” Mark 9:31 and 10:34 say “three days later” in the NASB, and “the third day” in the KJV. And in fact **two different** phrases are used in Matthew 27.

Matthew 27:

62 Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate,

63 Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, **After** [*meta*] **three days** I will rise again.

64 Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure **until the third day**, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.

65 Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can.

66 So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.

So you see the majority of references say “the third day,” and the few that use different wording are shown to be equivalent because they are referring to the same period of time. And the meaning of “third day” is clearly defined in Luke 13:32 (as well as Exodus 19:10-11 and I Samuel 20:12) as “the day after tomorrow” (i.e., “today, tomorrow and the third day”). These meanings are beyond dispute. And if the idiomatic phrase “three days and three nights” is speaking of the same period of time - from the death and burial to the resurrection - then it must also be equivalent.

## Digging In

We have seen how understanding the Biblical meanings of phrases clarifies the subject. In addition, a Wednesday crucifixion and Saturday resurrection do not fit with the records of the events in all four of the Gospels. Let us read them carefully, in context. Matthew describes events that happened on the day Jesus died.

Matthew 27:57 – 28:1

57 **When the even was come**, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus’ disciple:

58 He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered.

59 And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,

60 And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.

61 And there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre.

62 **Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation,** the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate,  
63 Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again.  
64 Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.  
65 Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can.  
66 So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.  
1 **In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week,** came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.

When Joseph put the body in the tomb, the two Marys were sitting there. Notice that verse 62 says “Now the next day, that followed the day of preparation...” and on that day the chief priests requested the guard at the tomb. Then 28:1 says “In the end of the Sabbath as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week.” Remember that even in the Wednesday crucifixion theory, it is recognized that a Jewish day started at sunset. Therefore the end of the Sabbath was Saturday evening, as we would call it. The women went to the tomb sometime after sunset and before sunrise on what we would call Sunday morning.

A question is sometimes asked, “if it was the Sabbath day, why doesn’t verse 62 just say so, instead of calling it the day after the preparation?” However, the same question could still be asked if it was the yearly Sabbath on the first day of Passover. The point of calling it the day after the preparation is simply to emphasize the Day of Preparation on which these significant events took place, rather than the Sabbath.

In any case, if the “day of preparation” referred to in verse 62 is the day before the weekly Sabbath, then it is clear that the events of verses 62 through 66 took place on the Sabbath, and that the day before, or the preparation day, was the day Jesus died. Then the next verse (28:1) follows in a natural flow (there were no chapter breaks in the original). The events on the Sabbath are immediately followed by the phrase, “In the end of the Sabbath...” But, if the preparation day is the day before the first day of Passover, and took place on Wednesday, then what happened to Thursday and Friday? There are missing days in this record, and a break in the natural flow, if we assume the preparation was Wednesday. Keeping that in mind, let’s examine the record in Mark.

Mark 15:42 – 16:2

42 **And now when the even was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath,**

43 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.

44 And Pilate marvelled if he were already dead: and calling unto him the centurion, he asked him whether he had been any while dead.

45 And when he knew it of the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph.

46 And he bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen, and laid him in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock, and rolled a stone unto the door of the sepulchre.

47 And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid.

1 **And when the sabbath was past,** Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him.

- 2 **And very early in the morning the first day of the week**, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.
- 3 And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?
- 4 And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great.

Notice that verse 42 very specifically identifies the day as “the preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath.” Again, it describes the day Jesus died, and says, “When the even was come” which means it was just before sundown when it would then be the Sabbath. Joseph wraps the body, and the two Marys observe, just as we saw in Matthew. And again, the next verse begins “When the Sabbath was past.” Since they were to do no work on that day, they waited till the Sabbath was past to go to the tomb to anoint the body. The record makes sense if it is the weekly Sabbath, but if this Sabbath was the first day of Passover, and Jesus died on Wednesday, why is there no mention of Thursday or Friday? Now let’s look at Luke.

Luke 23:46 – 24:2

- 46 And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.
- 47 Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man.
- 48 And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned.
- 49 And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things.
- 50 And, behold, there was a man named Joseph, a counsellor; and he was a good man, and a just:
- 51 (The same had not consented to the counsel and deed of them;) he was of Arimathaea, a city of the Jews: who also himself waited for the kingdom of God.
- 52 This man went unto Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus.
- 53 And he took it down, and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulchre that was hewn in stone, wherein never man before was laid.
- 54 **And that day was the preparation, and the sabbath drew on.**
- 55 And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid.
- 56 **And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment.**
- 1 **Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning**, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them.
- 2 And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre.

I started with verse 46 here to establish that it is talking about the day Jesus died. Once again, we have Joseph burying the body of Jesus, and “that day was the preparation, and the Sabbath drew on” (verse 54). The women returned and prepared the spices **that day**, but **then rested on the Sabbath** (verse 56). **Then on the first day of the week**, they went to the tomb to anoint the body with the spices which they had prepared. If Jesus had died on Wednesday (assuming that the Sabbath referred to was Thursday, the first day of Passover), they still could have anointed the body on Friday and then rested on Saturday, the weekly Sabbath. But they didn’t go to the tomb until Sunday morning (“The first day of the week,” 24:1). Why would they have waited all that time?



Theories have been advanced, speculating that it took that long to prepare the spices, or that they ran out and had to buy more on Friday. Another theory suggests that they waited until after the guard that was posted for three days was gone, and then rested on the weekly Sabbath, finally going to the tomb on Sunday. However, the guard was posted “until the third day” which we saw above would have been concluded on Friday, not Saturday, according to their reckoning of days. The women still could have gone to the tomb on Friday if that were the case, unless the guard left close to sunset on Friday, when the Sabbath began.

These theories might be plausible, but there is no indication in any of the Gospels that they delayed for any other reason than resting on the Sabbath. And there is no indication in Scripture of any intervening days, and no direct reference to the supposed two Sabbaths, in any of the Gospel records. It would be very strange, not to mention misleading, for Luke to write his record the way he did, and omit any reference to the intervening days or a second Sabbath, if they had occurred. Finally, let’s look at John’s record.

John 19:21 – 20:1

31 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.

32 Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with him.

33 But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs:

34 But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.

35 And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.

36 For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken.

37 And again another scripture saith, They shall look on him whom they pierced.

38 ¶ And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus.

39 And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.

40 Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid.

42 There laid they Jesus therefore **because of the Jews’ preparation day**; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.

1 **The first day of the week** cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.

Once again, the day is clearly identified as the preparation, the day before the Sabbath. Joseph buries the body, and verse 42 again confirms that it was the preparation day. Then immediately in verse 1 of chapter 20 it describes what happened on the first day of the week. There is no mention of any intervening days.

**All four Gospels concur that it was on the preparation day, the day before the Sabbath, that Jesus died.** The question then is, does this Sabbath refer to the weekly Sabbath, or the special “high Sabbath” at the beginning of the Passover? **All four Gospels also concur that it was the first day of the week that the women came to the sepulcher and found that Jesus was risen.** As we have seen, the disciples said that it was “the third day since these things were done” which points to Friday being the day of the crucifixion, and thus the preparation for the weekly Sabbath, not the first day of Passover. Plus, if the day of his death was on Wednesday, there is a gap of two days missing from the records.

### **When were the spices bought?**

There is an apparent contradiction concerning when the women bought the spices they used to anoint Jesus’ body. Luke says the women prepared spices the day **before** the Sabbath, and Mark says they bought spices the day **after** the Sabbath. Generally, versions of the Wednesday crucifixion theory suggest that the only way to reconcile the two records is to understand that there were two Sabbaths.<sup>5</sup> One was the “special” or yearly Sabbath, that is, the first day of Passover, and the other was the weekly Sabbath. According to this theory, Mark describes the women buying the spices the day after the annual Sabbath (the word “had” in Mark 16:1 is said to be added without any textual basis, and the verse should be read as they “bought spices” not “had bought”). Luke, on the other hand, describes the women preparing the spices (on Friday, according to this theory) and then resting on the weekly Sabbath. This supposedly explains the space of time, as Jesus would have died on Wednesday, then Thursday was the annual Sabbath, after which the women would have bought (according to Mark) and prepared (according to Luke) the spices (on Friday, when the annual Sabbath was past, Mark 16:1). Then they rested on Saturday, the weekly Sabbath, as Luke describes, and came to the sepulcher on Sunday, the first day of the week.

There is a problem with this, however. Read the record in Luke again. It is clearly describing the events of **the day Jesus died**. On that same day, Joseph buried the body, which the women observed, and then, on **that same day**, “...they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and [after sunset] rested the sabbath day according to the commandment.” Whether you interpret this as the weekly Sabbath, or the annual one, it still clearly states that the women prepared the spices **the same day** that Jesus died. If it was on Wednesday, you have to explain why they waited till Sunday to go to the tomb, when they had all day on Friday. As noted above, some explanations have been offered, but they involve conjecture, with no direct statement in Scripture, and they result in an unnatural flow of the narrative, especially in Luke. And there is still the matter of the disciples saying on Sunday that it was the third day since the crucifixion.

How then should we handle the apparent contradiction about the spices? The verb in Mark 16:1 is translated “had bought” in the King James version, but “bought” in most others. This can be understood in one of two ways. It may be that the King James is correct in rendering it “had bought,” referring to having bought the spices the day before the Sabbath, and now they were going to the tomb on the day after the Sabbath. (They may even have bought them prior to the day before the Sabbath, since Luke says they “prepared” them that day, not that they “bought” them.) The aorist tense in Greek would allow for that. “The aorist tense is characterized by its emphasis on punctiliar action; that is, the concept of the verb is considered without regard for past, present, or future time. There is no direct or clear

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<sup>5</sup> Proponents of this theory point out that the Greek word for Sabbath is plural in Matt. 28:1. This does not prove that there were two Sabbaths involved, however. There are three other places where the plural, *sabbaton*, is used to refer to a single weekly Sabbath: Luke 4:16; Acts 13:14; 16:13.

English equivalent for this tense, though it is generally rendered as a simple past tense in most translations.”<sup>6</sup>

The other possibility is that they went and bought **more** spices for whatever reason, after sunset “when the Sabbath was ended” (Mark 16:1) and then, “very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb” (Mark 16:2). In this case, the verb is correctly translated as “bought.” Even if this were the case, the day the women prepared the **first** spices was the same day Jesus died, according to Luke. All four Gospel records clearly indicate that Jesus died on the day before the Sabbath, and the women came to the tomb on the day after the Sabbath.

## Sabbaths and Preparations

Another apparent contradiction involves the setting of the day Jesus died in the Gospel of John. All of the Synoptic Gospels clearly state that Jesus died on the Day of Preparation. Mark even specifically defines it as, “The day before the Sabbath” (Mark 15:42), which in Greek is a single word, *prosabbaton*, literally “before-sabbath.” Furthermore, the Synoptic Gospels all relate that Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover together, and the crucifixion took place **after** that.

However, when we come to the Gospel of John, we read, “And it was the preparation of the Passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King!” (John 19:14). This refers to Pilate presenting Jesus to the people after being scourged, and before the crucifixion. As written, this implies that the crucifixion took place on the preparation day, that is, **before** the Passover. This problem has been addressed in a number of different ways by theologians for hundreds of years.

The word *paraskeue* only occurs six times<sup>7</sup> in the New Testament, and always in the context of “preparation for the Sabbath.” But the question is then raised, does this mean the weekly Sabbath, or the special Sabbath on the first day of Passover? A common explanation, which fits with the Wednesday-crucifixion theory, is that it can refer to either one. In Bible dictionaries and commentaries, depending on the interpretation of the writer, you may read either that the word *paraskeue* (preparation) refers to the day before the weekly Sabbath, or that it can refer either to the day before the weekly Sabbath or the day before a feast day.

Since none of the verses in which *paraskeue* occurs specifically identifies it with the first day of Passover rather than the weekly Sabbath (with the possible exception of John 19:14, see below), a strong case cannot be made that the Sabbath referred to in connection with the day Jesus died is anything other than the weekly Sabbath. It is also worth noting that there is nothing in Scripture that demands an equating of the first day of Passover with the word Sabbath, although the first day of other feasts are called Sabbaths. See a further examination of this in the follow-up article, “Jesus and the Passover.”

The word *paraskeue* continued to mean preparation for the weekly Sabbath after New Testament times, as evidenced in the *Didache* (dated between AD 70 and 120) which speaks of fasting two days a week, on “the fourth day and preparation.” Josephus wrote that the Jews “...be not obliged to go before any judge on the Sabbath day, nor on the day of preparation to it, after the ninth hour.” (*Antiquities*, Book XVI.6.2). By the time of Tertullian (c. AD 160 - 225) *paraskeue* (preparation) had become commonly

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<sup>6</sup> Online Bible Greek Lexicon (software, Online Bible Foundation, 1995-2005)

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:14,31,42

used as the name for the day before the weekly Sabbath, to the extent that he even argued that it had been the name for that day since creation.

The only place where “the preparation” is mentioned in connection with Passover is John 19:14, “And it was the preparation of the Passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King!” But as pointed out, this would place the crucifixion **before** the Passover, which would contradict the Synoptic Gospels. The most likely understanding, therefore, is that this verse refers to the weekly preparation day (Friday, the day before the weekly Sabbath) that took place **during** the Passover week. The word Passover can mean the entire eight-day feast, as well as the first day on which the lamb is sacrificed. It is significant that it refers to “the preparation **of** the Passover” and not “the preparation **for** the Passover.”

The fact that it refers to the preparation day of the Passover week is implied by verse 31: “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)...” Whether he meant the weekly Sabbath or the first day of Passover, it would have been obvious to his readers that the Sabbath was a high day. Why did John make a point of saying that? In this case, “that Sabbath” was the weekly Sabbath that fell during Passover, making it even more significant than a regular weekly Sabbath, and thus, “a high day.” That there is special significance to the weekly Sabbath that occurs during the Passover week is seen in Leviticus 23. This is also dealt with in the follow-up article, “Jesus and the Passover.”

It is also possible that in the year Jesus died, the first day of Passover may have fallen on the weekly Sabbath, which would make that Sabbath a “high day” indeed. In that case, the day before it was both the weekly “Preparation day” and the preparation for the Passover, making it exceptionally special and significant to the Jews. But barring that, there is no basis for assuming that the Preparation day on which Jesus died was anything other than the day before the weekly Sabbath, which we would call Friday. This fits best with a simple reading of the Gospel records, as it is extremely unlikely for the Gospel writers to have employed the unnatural flow that a Wednesday crucifixion would necessitate.

The simple reading of Scripture points to a Friday crucifixion which fits with the many references to Jesus rising on the third day. The disciples confirmed that Sunday, the day of the resurrection, was in fact the third day since the crucifixion. Everything in the Scriptures agrees with this view, with the single exception of the reference to “three days and three nights.” It is not a good idea to try to change the overall meaning of many clear Scriptures in order to make them fit with one difficult verse. And even this one reference fits with no contradiction when properly understood in light of its Hebrew idiomatic language.

## **So What?**

Some may say, “What difference does it make what day he died? The important thing is that he was raised.” This is true. However, this study is significant for two reasons. One, it has been humbling for me. After many years of smugly thinking I knew it all, and condescendingly implying that those who held to the traditional Good Friday view “couldn’t count to three,” I am in the sobering position of discovering how little I really knew. The other reason is that it illustrates some of the more common mistakes that are made in the field of Biblical interpretation. If you begin with an idea that is not explicitly stated in the Scriptures, and read it into a particular passage, the Bible can seem to say something that in fact it does not. Then when you attempt to interpret other passages in light of that preconceived idea, the result is a compounding of error. This is especially true when you have to twist

and force Scriptures to make them fit with an idea that is not explicit in the Bible to begin with. This practice has been at the heart of many wrong interpretations and doctrines. It has been a humbling and exhilarating experience over the past several years to discover how much I had done that in the past, and yet how simply the Bible interprets itself when you avoid doing it and just read things in context. My aim in writing this article is to inspire readers to pursue further study and rethinking of the Bible in this way.