

Crucifixion Day

by Henry A. Gieseemer

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It is almost the universal belief of the Christian church that Christ was crucified on Friday. In the spring of each year a whole week is given to commemorate our Saviours passing and resurrection. It is spoken of as Holy or Passion Week. All of the ritualistic churches, and not a few of the evangelistic churches observe the week with great solemnity. Friday of this week is called Good Friday and amid tears and sorrows and worship it is commemorated as Crucifixion Day.

Yet, strange to say, there is not a verse, or a line, or a word anywhere in the New Testament that so much as intimates that Christ was crucified on Friday; indeed, there is the strongest evidence to show that He was not crucified on Friday at all, but earlier in the week.

Whence then has come the almost universal belief that Christ was crucified on Friday? From the same source that many other errors has come, namely, the Church of Rome, which is never to be regarded as a sure authority in translating or interpreting the Bible.

Let us turn to the evidence.

Look at the words of Jesus: **For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whales belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth** (Matt. 12:40).

Note two things about this Scripture.

First: That every Greek text I have been able to consult (ten in number) gives every one of the above words.

Second: That every English translation I have examined (about ten in all) use the identical phraseology which we have here in Matthew in relation to the element of time.

This shows that the most critical and accurate translators of the passage are perfectly satisfied that these were the words of Jesus. If this be so and you give a literal meaning to our Saviour's words that He was in the heart of the earth three days and three nights, then He must have been in the grave seventy-two hours, one night and

one day, the second night and the second day, the third night and the third day, so that He must have been crucified on Wednesday and not on Friday.

This I shall now seek to prove.

I know that I have to contend against tradition, the teaching and practice of centuries and the prejudices of the churchmen, but tradition, human teaching and practice and ecclesiastical prejudices count for little when they are out of harmony with the words and teachings of Jesus.

The almost universal interpretation of these words of Jesus is that He lay in the grave a part of three days; that He died on Friday afternoon at 3 o'clock, that He was in the grave all Friday night, all day Saturday and rose early on Sunday morning; that He was in the grave about thirty-six hours, and that this is in perfect accord with Jewish reckoning which accounted a part of a year as a whole year and a part of a day as a whole day in the statement of time.

Every commentary that I have consulted, and I will mention some of them Meyer, Godet, Stier, Ellicott, Plumtree, Matthew Henry, Butler, Lange, Lyman Abbott and others all of these accept this as the interpretation of Christ's words and give the same reason for it in almost identical language, showing that they have copied one from the other from time immemorial and have been satisfied with it as the most plausible interpretation of Christ's words in keeping with the teaching and practice of the Church for ages.

Alford says: If it be necessary to make good the three days and three nights during which our Lord was in the heart of the earth. It must be done by having recourse to the Jewish method of computing time.

Now against this interpretation I place first of all our Saviour's words: **For as Jonah 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 believe that Christ meant what He said: that He was in the grave three days and three nights, and that His day and night was twenty-four hours in duration. This means that He was in the grave seventy-two hours.

Secondly: It is impossible to put seventy-two hours, or three days and three nights into thirty-six hours, or from Friday at 3 o'clock in the afternoon to early on Sunday morning when they saw He arose from the grave to crowd seventy-two hours. Accepting the current theory Christ was in the grave whole day and two whole nights, while two whole days and a third night are not accounted for at all.

Thirdly: That however inaccurate the Jews may have been in their statements relating to time, counting a part of a year as a whole year and a part of a day as a whole day, I am not willing to admit that Christ was given to making loose statements. I have always looked upon Him as the incomparable teacher, the man who spake as never man spake, our perfect exemplar. Neither am I willing to believe that the Holy Spirit would have allowed Matthew to misrepresent our Saviour's teaching when He inspired him to record these words of the Christ.

If Christ were crucified on Friday then there is a discrepancy between Mark's and Luke's gospels, which is inexplicable. Indeed Mark flatly and positively contradicts Luke. Let me read Mark 16:1.

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. Notice carefully the language here. **When the Sabbath was past they bought sweet spices, etc.** Now read Luke 23:56.

And they returned and prepared spices and ointments and rested on the Sabbath Day according to the Commandment.

Mark says the Sabbath was past when they bought the spices; Luke says they prepared the spices and ointments and rested on the Sabbath Day, referring of course to the Sixth Commandment: **Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.**

The one says the Sabbath was gone, the other says it was yet to come.

You can never harmonize these statements of Mark and Luke if you hold to the common belief that Christ was crucified on Friday.

If, however, you accept our Saviour's words as true, then there is an easy, natural and satisfying interpretation. The contradiction fades away and there is concord and harmony between the two evangelists.

The fact is that Mark refers to one Sabbath and Luke to another. There were two Sabbaths between the Crucifixion Day and the Resurrection, and a preparation day in between them, so that the spices were bought after the first Sabbath and prepared before the second on weekly Sabbath.

In the twenty-third chapter of Leviticus we find that the children of Israel were commended to observe seven Sabbaths in connection with their yearly feasts. These were not weekly Sabbaths, but additional ones.

There were to be days of rest and holy convocations in which the people were to do no servile work, but offer an offering unto the Lord.

The Passover had its Sabbath and that Sabbath had its preparation day just the same as the weekly Sabbath. On the preparation day everything was gotten ready, the lamb was slain, the unleavened bread was baked, the bitter herbs were made ready. This was the fourteenth day of the month.

Jesus was crucified on the fourteenth day of the month, the fifteenth was a Sabbath and the first day of the great feast. In proof of this listen to what John says in the nineteenth chapter of his gospel and the fourteenth verse: **And it was the preparation of the Passover and about the sixth hour.** There is no mistaking the meaning of these words. Christ was crucified on the preparation day for the Passover Sabbath, and not on the preparation day for the weekly Sabbath.

Matthew Henry says: It was the preparation of the Passover, that is, for the Passover Sabbath, and the solemnities of that and the rest of the days of the feast of unleavened bread. The day of preparation was peculiar to the Passover originally.

In further proof of this let me read to you from John 19:31: **The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation day, that the body should not remain upon the cross on the Sabbath Day (for that day was an high day) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.**

Notice that this Sabbath was to be a high day, differentiating it from the weekly Sabbath.

Yes, the Passover was a high day with the Jews. Every Sabbath is a holy day and a good day, but this was a high day a great day. That day which God had commanded them to keep forever in remembrance of that night when the avenging angel passed over them in Egypt .

Now let us hear how the foregoing harmonizes with the facts in Christ's life.

There is a perfect correspondence of time, dates, circumstances and facts between the Passover and the Crucifixion. In the Passover you have the outline of the picture. In the Crucifixion you have the picture completed and filled out by the Master hand. In the Passover you have the seed of which the Crucifixion is the full-blown flower. The Crucifixion is the consummation of the if the Passover, and for that reason we are not merely to look for similarity but perfect likeness between them. Let us look at the perfect and beautiful likeness.

In John's gospel, twelfth chapter, first to the fifteenth verses, we have an account of Christ's return to Bethany and His triumphal ride, sitting on an ass colt into the city of Jerusalem .

Let me read you the first line of the first verse: **Then Jesus, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany .** Note very carefully the expression **six days before the Passover.** Lyman Abbott says that the commonly accepted hypothesis makes Christ arrive at Bethany on Friday night, spending there the Sabbath Day and going on to Jerusalem on the following day, the first day of the week. But Mr. Abbott here falls into the popular error of trying to uphold Palm Sunday and is undoubtedly influenced by the teachings and interpretations of the writers who have preceded him.

I accept the first part of his statement that Christ did arrive at Bethany on Friday evening, but I am obliged to reject the latter part of the statement that he made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the first day of the week. Admitting that He reached Bethany on Friday evening, the twelfth chapter of John makes it as plain as the English language can make anything that He entered into Jerusalem on Saturday.

He reached Bethany in time for Martha to make Him a supper and Mary was afforded an opportunity to perform that beautiful and gracious service which has memorialized her name forever. Jesus spent the night at

Bethany, and then the twelfth verse says **on the next day** (Saturday or the Jewish Sabbath) **much people that were come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went forth to meet Him, and cried Hosanna Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord.** During the triumphal ride, Christ offered Himself to them as their King, but they rejected Him as a King and chose Him as the true paschal Lamb for death on that tenth day of Nisan.

God said unto Moses: **Speak ye unto all the congregation of Israel, saying, in the tenth day of this month they shall take unto them very man a lamb, according to the house of their fathers, a lamb for a house. And ye shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening** (Ex. 12:3-6).

This is a picture of which Christ is the true. Having been chosen as the paschal Lamb, they kept Him four days until the fourteenth day of the month, just like the paschal lamb of Egypt .

This, according to Biblical chronology, not Roman or English reckoning, would be Wednesday, the fourteenth day of the month, which was a preparation day for the Passover Sabbath. The Passover Sabbath would answer to our Thursday.

Christ was nailed to the cross at 9 A.M. , this being the third hour; at 12 Noon the darkness of night shrouded the earth, and at 3 o'clock He yielded up His spirit.

Between the hours of 3 and 6, Joseph and Nicodemus went to Pilate and secured permission to take the body from the cross and give it burial. They took the body and laid it in Joseph's tomb just about sunset, which was the dividing line between the Jewish days.

Christ was put into the grave just as Wednesday was closing and Thursday was beginning.

So that taking the words of Christ as literally true that He would be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights, I believe that He was in the grave seventy-two hours, three days of twenty-four hours each, or all day of Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and that He did arise as the Scriptures say on the first day of the week.

But I think I hear some one say: If your interpretation is correct, then Christ was in the grave not only three days and three nights, but also a fourth night, for He arose from the grave on the first day of the week.

It is the popular and almost universal belief that Christ rose from the grave some time after midnight on Saturday. Such a belief is not at all in accord with the Scriptures, and yet it very naturally arises from the way in which we divide our days. Our days end and begin with midnight , but the Jewish day ended and began with sunset. Christ did indeed rise on the first day of the week, but it was at the very beginning of it and not after the day was several hours old. Christ is our model for punctuality as well as everything else.

He arose immediately after the sun had set and not just before the sunrise of Sunday morning. Now in order to confirm this, I will read Matthew 28:1: **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 sepulcher.**

Note the words **at the end of the Sabbath**, just as the Sabbath was over they came to see the sepulcher. In the revised version it is translated in this way: but late in the Sabbath Day they came. So that the moment the sun had set and they could move without breaking the Sabbatic law, they were on the way to the sepulcher.

But some one is saying: Yes, but how about the remaining part of the verse which says as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week? Your Greek testament and dictionary will afford a very easy and satisfactory answer.

The word dawn is very misleading. We speak of the dawn as the opening of the day, the light that comes with the rising of the sun. We always associate the dawn with the sunlight.

But the Greek word here is Epi-phoske, which means the shining of the sun or the moon. You will observe that the Passover feast always occurred at the time of the full moon. Just as the sun was setting, the moon would be rising. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the sepulcher after the sun had set and the moon was beginning to shed its silvery sheen over the earth. The full-orbed splendor of the paschal moon had already introduced the first day of the week when they arrived and the grave to their astonishment was empty. But some one says: □What are you going to do with these words of Mark 16:2, And very early in the morning, the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulcher at the rising of the sun.

This verse gives no trouble. I do not hesitate to say that this was another coming. Otherwise Mark flatly contradicts Matthew and the story is discordant and inexplicable. Accept this interpretation and you have an easy, natural, intelligent and satisfactory explanation that unifies and harmonizes the whole story of the Resurrection.

Moreover, this interpretation furnishes us with a beautiful parable of the Gentile and Jewish churches. Mary of Magdala went to the sepulcher when the Jewish Sabbath was past and found the Christ had risen. With great joy she went and found her companions, and together with the Jewish Marys and others returned at the rising of the sun only to find an empty tomb.

Mary Magdalene beautifully represents the Gentile church in this age of gospel light, life and love. She discovered an empty grave and resurrection joy at the beginning of the first Lord's day of the Christian era, while the Jewish Marys representing the Jewish church, came to the sepulcher when the hour was late and learned the same joyous news. Filled with wonder and delight by what they had seen and heard the Jewish women hastened away to spread the glorious intelligence that Christ has arisen.

But Mary Magdalene, lingering about the sacred spot, as honored to be the first one to gaze upon her risen Lord. The Jews rejected the Christ and He turned to the Gentiles. The Gentiles accepted Christ early and have spread the principles of His kingdom very nearly in all parts of the world.

But prophecy declares and the story of the resurrection promises what history is beginning to confirm, that God's ancient people will come, even though it be late, to accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah. When that blessed day comes there will be no more Jew or Gentile, but we will all be one in Christ Jesus.

And now, finally, it may be that the views promulgated in this paper are not all in accord with your views or teachings. If so, all I ask is that you search the Scriptures to see if these things are so. And if after diligent and prayerful study, you find the Scriptures testifying of these things, stand by the Bible, even though you have to throw away the teaching of a lifetime and the traditions of the ages.

As for myself, this is the only interpretation that will bring all the Scriptures on this subject into one beautiful unity and harmony. Let me close by reading a few verses that are made luminous by the foregoing teaching.

John 2:19: Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.

Matt. 27:62-63: The Chief Priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said while He was yet alive, After three days I will rise again.

Mark 9:31 : For He taught His disciples and said unto them, the Son of Man is delivered up into the hands of men and they shall kill Him, and when He is killed after three days He shall rise again.

Mark 10:34 (R. V.): And they shall mock Him and shall spit upon Him, and shall scourge Him, and shall kill Him: and after three days He shall rise again.

All of these Scriptures, as well as others to be found in Matthew, Luke, John, Acts and the First Corinthians which allude to the time element in our Saviour's death and burial can only be fully understood and harmonized by accepting Christ's words as literally true when He says:

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.

(Religious Herald, April 13, 1922 , This paper was read to a group of Baptist ministers meeting in Baltimore . Griesemer was pastor of the Franklin Square Baptist Church in Baltimore).

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