

The Crucifixion Conundrum

Things Theologians Have Overlooked

Much time and effort has been expended in making the case for a Friday Crucifixion. Most denominations are heavily invested in their Traditional teachings on the matter. But, like it or not, there are consequences in getting it wrong!

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Ask any churchgoer about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and you will usually get a predictable answer. Ask any person on the street, whether religious or not, and you'll likely get a similar response. The prevailing opinion is that He was crucified on a Friday and rose from the dead very early on a Sunday morning. What's so difficult to understand about that?

Generations of sincere believers have embraced the pat answers taught them by their favored denomination, without really thinking or questioning.

While the counter argument is easy to find, few have invested the brainwork to resolve the matter in a way that would pass a scholarly test.

Two Possible Answers

Much of the 'issue' has revolved around, and has been settled to most peoples' satisfaction by, considering the question of the New Testament expression, **"three-days-and-three-nights"**. What more do we need? The problem is, a somewhat convincing case can be made in support of either of two positions. Either the crucifixion occurred on a Friday or on a Wednesday. Both determinations being made from the undisputed fact that Christ rose some time prior to a Sunday morning.

But, there's more to consider than just what's meant by "three-days-and-three-nights". If that alone was all there is to consider, then the argument could go on and on, unresolved in the minds of the average worshipper.

Lots More to Consider

By my saying 'more to consider', I'm posing that there are ramifications with the belief system that insists the crucifixion and death of our Paschal

Lamb – that takes away the sins of the world – occurred on a Friday. All the ramifications that position are not usually considered by those arguing on the basis of the "three-days-and-three-nights" matter alone.

The widely accepted Palm Sunday, Friday crucifixion and Easter Sunrise belief system does represent indelible traditions. So much so, it seems the average worshippers never cognitively consider the many hidden anomalies that should be obvious even to those who study only casually. But when we review the four Gospels narratives more comprehensively, it brings out some startling facts.

Considering the Friday Position

When holding to the Friday crucifixion scenario, a number of somewhat hidden 'other' things are incumbent on the believer. In other words, when you believe that the crucifixion was on a particular day, the other days and other factors relative to the whole scene are inescapable. Let me pose several.

- 1) It would necessitate them travelling from Ephraim and Jericho all day on a weekly Sabbath.

If the crucifixion was on a Friday, then it would require that Jesus and His disciples travelled all day on a weekly Sabbath, walking some 27 miles! They came into Bethany "six days before Pass-over" according to John 12:1. Six days before a Friday is a weekly Sabbath! How likely is it that they would violate the Sabbath in this way when there was no need at all to do so? That is further established by the common presumption that the next day was a Sunday: what's known as "Palm Sunday"! If picking a handful of grain on a Sabbath was deemed 'unlawful' (Luke 6:2), then why would that not be similarly criticized?

- 2) Would necessitate that the entourage travel into Jerusalem the very next morning.

In order for the traditional “Palm Sunday” event to take place as posed, Jesus would have to have gone into Jerusalem the very next morning after arriving in Bethany.

- 3) That would leave no time for the Jerusalem area followers to visit with Him in Bethany.

John 12:9 explains that word had gotten to peoples in Jerusalem who heard of Him being in Bethany. They went up to Bethany to see Him there. That would have to have been during daylight hours of the next day, as they wouldn’t have travelled the 2 or more miles to Bethany in the dark of night. Word likely would’ve been conveyed by the other travelers continuing on into Jerusalem who’d seen the entourage on the road. These spent the day visiting Him there. It was the ‘next day’ after that when the “Triumphal Entry” took place. This, of course, seriously complicates a Palm Sunday idea.

- 4) Requesting a watch would require the Chief Priests to go into the Judgment Hall on the Sabbath before (their late 14th) Passover.

Another area not factored-in is the situation as it regarded the religious leadership. We know of their absolute reluctance to enter the Praetorium before their Passover from John 18:28. In order to request the watch with a Friday crucifixion, we’re locked-into either of two dilemmas. They would have to have done so on the same High Day Sabbath mentioned in John 18, or do so before His death. That obviously wasn’t the case!

If they waited until after His death and burial (which their knowledge of His having been buried attests to) then they would also have to do the work of sealing the tomb (the Romans didn’t do that – Pilate assigned that task to them) – on the Sabbath day also. How likely was that?

But there’s more of a problem with this. If they’d waited until after the High Day Sabbath (Saturday) was over to see Pilate, the sealing would have taken place on the next morning at the earliest, which of course would have been that Sunday morning, AFTER His resurrection had already taken place!! See the problem?

- 5) The posed scenario would require that the Chief Priests perform or direct the work of the sealing of the Tomb on the Sabbath.

Few have noticed that when requesting setting the watch, Pilate assigned the task of sealing the Tomb to them.¹ The Romans provided the watch detail only. So to seal the Tomb, when would they have done so? (The Chief Priests did seal it!) Would it have been before He was in it? Would it have been after He had risen? This is where things stand, IF they didn’t enter the Praetorium to get the watch and seal the Tomb on the High Day Sabbath as that Sabbath is represented to us as being the day in question. In the 36 hour entombment position, there would be only one interval between Friday evening and Sunday morning that would provide a daylight period in which to perform the labor of doing the sealing, and that would have to have been that High Day itself IF the crucifixion was in fact on a Friday!

- 6) The above considerations would require that the watch be set on a double Sabbath or after it (a Sunday?) Sunday would be too late! He’d already risen!

The problem here should now be quite obvious. The watch couldn’t have been set after early in the morning on Sunday. The women coming there before sunrise found the guards already gone!² Matthew’s account shows that they had been there and had witnessed His resurrection.

- 7) The Friday crucifixion idea would require that the Sabbath in question be a double Sabbath, the first Day of Unleavened Bread occurring on a weekly Sabbath..

This is a well-realized presumption.

- 8) This would cause the Triumphal Entry to NOT be on the important 10th of Nisan.

If the Palm Sunday story is correct, this event would’ve been 5-days before Passover (the 14th day of the month). That would make the date the 9th, not the 10th which was the day on which the people were to select their Paschal Lambs according to Exodus 12:3. Is this important?

- 9) The situation would require the women to buy spices after the Sabbath, in daylight, after He was already resurrected

We have two scriptures that seem to conflict, that need to be ‘explained away’ by those who hold to

¹ Matthew 27:65

² John 20:1; Luke 24:1-3; Mark 16:1-5; Matthew 28:1-4

the Friday crucifixion teaching. One shows the women purchasing needed spices after the Sabbath and the other shows them preparing those spices before the Sabbath, then resting on the Sabbath.³ With the 15th of the month supposedly being a double Sabbath, (an High Day as John calls it) this poses a serious difficulty. As to purchasing before the Sabbath, if it were Saturday, a weekly Sabbath, it would suggest they'd bought them before His death in anticipation. Keep in mind, they had no idea ahead of time that He was to be killed. This all happened short notice. Furthermore, a crucifixion often took days for the victim to expire. To have died this soon amazed even Pilate! (Mark 15:44)

- 10) Yet, these same women were first at the Tomb at dawn being first to realize He had already risen!

This precludes a post-Sabbath purchase, if it was in fact a double Sabbath, because the women were first at the Tomb, before sunrise, before any vendor would have been open for business! The only logical conclusion would steer us toward the idea of there being a day between two Sabbaths. And, they'd come with their prepared spices then. (Luke 24:1) So the purchase had to have been before Sunday morning.

- 11) And, of course, it requires rejection of a 72 hour entombment.

Holding to a double Sabbath idea cancels out the idea of two Sabbaths in the same week, though we know there was an annual Sabbath (a High Day) and a regular weekly Sabbath also at this season of the year. There had to have been the two Sabbaths, separate in most years or coinciding occasionally.

- 12) A 36-hour entombment denies Him of an officially declared death (3- full days by Roman law, not a day and a half).

A legal death in the Roman world at the time required that three days pass before such was to be declared.⁴ Opting for a 36-hour entombment would deny Jesus a legal death declaration. Yet,

³ Luke 23:56 "And they returned, and prepared *spices* and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment." and 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."

⁴ This was the reason why Jesus waited until the 4th day before raising Lazarus, to address this consideration.

no such claim, such as Him being only comatose and not really dead, was ever credibly posed at the time that we know of. The option to pose a body theft attests to the fact that three full days had in fact passed, knowing that a 'not really dead' idea wouldn't fly!

- 13) The Religious leadership didn't know where the Tomb was until after the Sabbath.

Reflecting back to #4 & #5, the religious leaders wouldn't have been aware of where the Tomb was, or even IF there was a Tomb. Usually with such death sentences, victims were disposed of by being thrown in the Valley of Hinnom. Being given a proper burial suggests His great uncle was a man of influence, in that he was able to have an audience with Pilate on short notice and be given the body.

- 14) Joseph of Arimathea (a member of the Sanhedrin) kept the burial location secret.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus cooperated in performing the burial. Neither wanted it known that they were disciples. They both kept the location, as well as their preference, from the religious authorities. (John 19:38-42; Mark 15:42-46; and Luke 23:50-53.)

- 15) Jews were not aware of Him being such a short time on the cross (it usually took days longer to expire).

This all came as a surprise to all concerned. No one anticipated or was prepared for such a sudden burial event. Nor was it known at first by any but the disciples where Joseph had taken the body.

- 16) Even Pilate was surprised at His death having occurred so soon. (Mark 15:44.)

- 17) Joseph of Arimathea (a great uncle) used his influence and intervened to acquire the body (bodies of 'criminals' would usually be thrown into the Valley of Hinnom).

The expectation would have been that the body would be disposed of in the usual manner as was done for condemned criminals. And, typically only a relative could make such a request.

- 18) If the request for a watch was in daylight on the preparation day then the request would have been before His death (if the crucifixion was a Friday). Yet the religious leaders would not have even been aware that there would be a Tomb that early.

This is a key question not usually given its full due. When exactly was the watch request made, permission granted and the sealing carried out? We know that the guards were posted and had been on site for some time, as they were there when the (second) earthquake ⁵ happened and the angels appeared: (Matthew 28:3-4) The guards were struck unconscious for a time by what they'd seen. So, we know the watch was in place before Saturday night. Under the double Sabbath (Friday crucifixion) belief system, the watch would've been requested and completed on that High Day! This is something that we must accept if we want to align our thinking with that persuasion.

The extreme reluctance to enter into the judgment hall (the Praetorium) ⁶ early in the day, in advance of the Passover, lest they be defiled and unable to keep it, poses a real conundrum when anyone suggests that they in fact did enter just a few hours later in order to request the watch. (The reference to Passover in John 18:28 is the traditional Jewish observance which came nearly a full day later than the Passover that Jesus and His disciples observed.) The question we must answer is, Was this the same day or a later day, after the Passover in question had already been observed?

But for that to be the case, there had to be a week where there were two Sabbaths, separated by a day, each preceded by a preparation day. That would preclude the crucifixion having been on a Friday!

19) The double Sabbath idea was used as basis to set the numerical year.

Realizing that Jesus was 33 years old, and knowing that their belief system required a year in which the High Day fell on a weekly Sabbath (the double-Sabbath) 'scholars' found such a year and numbered it 33AD. But Jesus was 33½ in the spring of 33. That means His birthdate was in the fall of 32. He turned 33 in 32! That means He was 32 in 31, etc. etc. Then He would have been 2 in year 1 and 1 on year zero. But there is no year zero, so He would have been 1 in the year 1BC. That would place His birth in 2BC!

⁵ There was another prior earthquake at the time of His death also. (see Matt. 27:51-54 and the comments at right.)

⁶ John 18:28 "Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas unto the hall of judgment: and it was early; and they themselves went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover."

Those who assigned the year number apparently weren't mathematically too astute!

The Saints Which Slept Arose!

Just as an interesting side point, we need to ask, at what time of day did the second earthquake occur? It had to have occurred before dawn of Sunday morning. Would the angels that the guards saw be visible to them in darkness? It was at this second earthquake that the 'saints arose and went into the city'. Was that during the night or at dusk just as the weekly Sabbath was ending?

"And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; ++ and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many." (Mt. 27:51-53) This account doesn't distinguish between the two earthquakes, though it refers to both. The first, at the time of Jesus' death, caused the damage to the veil at the Temple, preempting the Traditional Jews' Passover. The second was the occasion when the dead Saints arose and went into the city. This suggests that the second occurred at dusk about the time of Jesus' resurrection, as the weekly Sabbath was ending, exactly as His 72-hour entombment was ending. It appears that both Jesus' death and His resurrection were punctuated by an earthquake!

A comparison between Mt. 28:2 and Mk. 15:38-39 clarifies the distinction between these two earthquakes. The mention of the centurion being on site ties Mark's mention to Jesus' death, as there was no soldier of centurion rank attending at the watch, only at the crucifixion. Matthew 27's reference, as worded, gives the impression that they were one and the same.

A Broader Periphery

What all of these 19 points show is that arguing and settling the case on the basis of the meaning of three-days-and-three-nights alone leaves so much other supporting information aside. We should be able to do better in getting the picture!

A companion article to this is the "*Last Six Days*" study which explains the detailed countdown in the Gospels to the Passover, and the crucifixion. 