

When Did Christ Die and Rise Again?

Written by K B Napier
Thursday, 05 March 2015 14:50

Some say that Christ died before the coming of the Sabbath. They base this on the saying of Christ recorded in 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.”*

The problem with taking this as a full three days and nights is that other parts of scripture do not support this conclusion. As Matthew Henry says, this kind of saying was common and did not necessarily infer full days or nights. And if we take it as literal, we start to have problems... such as Jesus was not in the *“heart of the earth”*, but in a cave, a tomb. Also, if He was literally three full days and three full nights in the tomb, He would have risen on the *fourth* day, not the third!

It is assumed the ‘days’ referred to were full days, between sunrise and sunset. But, in the East, a ‘day’ can be a full day, or part of a day. Therefore, ‘three days and three nights’ need not refer to three full days and three full nights, but one full day (the second) plus parts of two other days (first and third). There are several other possible meanings for ‘day’ but they do not apply in this case.

It is this latter definition that appears to apply to the case of Christ dying and rising. Let us see why:

In Matthew 16:21, we find that Jesus would *“be killed, and be raised again the third day”*. Later, in 17:23, we find the same note, that Jesus would be raised on *“the third day”*.

In 20:19 we are told *“and the third day he shall rise again.”*

This is repeated many times in the Gospels. In Luke 24:7 He would be *“crucified, and the third day rise again.”*

Again, in Acts 10:40, Paul says *“Him God raised up the third day”*, repeated in 1 Corinthians.

The word ‘third’, in the texts referring to the ‘third day’ is *hēmera*. It is an adjective and as such means ‘the third day’ or ‘the next day but one’, which exactly fits the usual interpretation of the

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death and resurrection of Christ. The phrase *“three days and three nights”* is an idiom rather than an actual meaning of three full days and three full nights. It is in this idiomatic way that we read 1 Samuel 30:12.

Add this to the possible meanings of ‘day’, as in ‘third day’ and we have much clearer understanding of ‘the third day’. The idea of three full days and three full nights presents many problems of interpretation, particularly as the New Testament statements that all say ‘the third day’ refer to actual days, whilst the saying by Christ is idiomatic, if not used as a parable, because the Pharisees did not believe.

We must also look at the actual series of events. For example, we are told that Christ arose *“on the third day”*

. We know that the three women went to the tomb on the day we call Sunday, and found the tomb empty. Jesus did not rise again on the Sabbath, so He arose on the same day as the women went to the tomb. The women went just after dawn, so that means Jesus arose at dawn, which was the ‘third day’ following the night.

As He arose on a Sunday morning, it means He was in the tomb for the whole of the day before, the Sabbath or Saturday, and part of the day before that, Friday. We know this because He died at three o’clock in the afternoon – the details are quite specific, and was taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb before the coming of the Sabbath preparations, which began on Fridays after six o’clock in the evening, or at least after the sun went down that same day.

Thus:

First day – died in afternoon and was buried, to stay in tomb full night.

Second day – laying in tomb for full day and night; the Sabbath

Third day – the ‘first day of the week’ . Rose at dawn.

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We KNOW when Jesus arose, because, in Matthew 28:1 we are told that the three women went to the tomb *“In the end of the Sabbath”*, as it began to dawn towards the first day of the week...” The “end of the Sabbath” linked to “first day” both tell us, with accuracy, that it was “the third day”.

We KNOW Jesus died on the day BEFORE the Sabbath: *“Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation”* (Matthew 27:62) refers to the Sabbath day, Saturday, for the preparation was made the evening beforehand.

So, Jesus died on Friday afternoon and was buried, remained in the tomb all day and night on the Sabbath (Saturday), and was raised again the next dawn, on the “third day”, Sunday. If we try to go outside these timings we begin to lose rationality, for the texts either mean what they say, or not. We have shown, as have Jewish scholars, that Jesus’ reference to the three days and three nights was idiomatic and typical of the day and geographical area, and was not meant to be taken as three full days and three full nights. If we try to say otherwise, then we begin to stop accepting the factual data given to us in the Gospels.

Also see [Was it ‘three days and three nights’ or, ‘the third day’?](#)

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