

The Sign of Jonah

Easter is a day when Christians rejoice and commemorate the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The scriptures plainly testify that he was resurrected early Sunday morning, the first day of the week. In contrast with the day of his resurrection, the New Testament is silent concerning the day Jesus completed his earthly ministry. On the surface the scriptures appear to favor Friday. However, a closer examination endorses Thursday. In order to determine the exact day a thorough review of all the circumstantial scriptural evidence is required.

Traditionally "Good Friday", the Friday before Easter, has been acknowledged as the day our Lord died on the cross. The basis for this tradition is somewhat justified in that it is couched in scripture. Several scriptures record that the crucifixion took place "the day before the sabbath." (Mk. 15:42, Lk. 23:54 & John 19:31.) The Jewish sabbath falls on the seventh day of the week or Saturday. (Ex. 20:8-11.) Since Friday is the day before the Jewish sabbath, it is only logical to assume the crucifixion occurred on that day.

In connection with Good Friday, the commonly accepted span of time between the death of Jesus and his subsequent resurrection is approximately forty hours or slightly less than two days. Two days conflicts with numerous references in the scriptures which require three days. (Matt. 27:62-66 & Mosiah 3:8-10.) This apparent contradiction has been explained by observing that these scriptures do not necessarily require three consecutive twenty-four hour periods. They only require three different days or portions thereof. By recognizing Friday, Saturday and Sunday as separate days; it is plausible the crucifixion could have occurred on a Friday. This assumption satisfies the three day requirement.

The fallacy in this argument is that it prohibits fulfillment of the plainest prophecy Jesus ever made concerning his own death and resurrection. Good Friday denies "the sign of Jonas the prophet." (Lk. 11:29.) The explanation for this prophecy is found 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." (Compare Matt. 12:39-41 and Lk. 11:29-30 with Jonah 1:15-17 and 2:10.) A Friday crucifixion makes allowances for two full nights, but does not permit a portion of a third. The sign of Jonah rejects the theory of Good Friday.

While Thursday can satisfy the three days and three nights requirement, it raises new and additional questions which need to be resolved. The first question focuses on continuity in the sign of Jonah. In order for the sign of Jonah to maintain credibility, Jesus must have been resurrected prior to daylight Sunday morning. The second question considers the problem of Thursday being "the day before the sabbath". (Mk. 15:42.) The

third problem focuses on genuine scriptural discrepancies over "the first day in the feast of unleavened bread" which tends to undermine support for a Thursday crucifixion.

The first question is, "Was the Savior resurrected before or after sunrise the first day of the week?" Consider the following circumstances which make this minor detail very important. Three of the gospel writers identify the hour of our Lord's death as "about the ninth hour" or three o'clock in the afternoon. (Matt. 27:45-50, Mk. 15:33-37 and Lk. 23:44-46.) Mark, Luke and John also report that the burial of Jesus was completed prior to the sabbath. (Mk. 15:42-47, Lk. 23:52-56 and John 19:39-42.)

According to the Jewish reckoning of time each day, including the sabbath, commenced in the evening. (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23 & 31.) For example, the first day in the Jewish week merges our Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon into one day. From our perspective of time, their weekly sabbath consisted of Friday evening and the daylight hours of Saturday. This means that the Last Supper and the crucifixion both took place on the day Jesus observed the passover. (John 13:1-3.) It also means that the disciples laid the body of Jesus in the sepulchre prior to darkness on Thursday.

As a technical matter, the sign of Jonah does not permit separate portions of the daylight hours of Thursday and Sunday to occur. If Jesus was resurrected following dawn Sunday morning, it would be impossible to fulfill the sign of Jonah the Prophet. The result would be four days and three nights. Thursday would then fall into the same fallible position as the theory of Good Friday.

All four of the gospel writers unanimously agree that Jesus was resurrected on the first day of the week. They also agree that Mary Magdalene was among the first to arrive at the tomb. Matthew recorded Mary's arrival "as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week". (Matt. 28:1.) Mark stated the arrival was "very early in the morning . . . at the rising of the sun." (Mk. 16:2.) Luke provides the least information saying only that it was "very early in the morning". (Lk. 24:1.) John however, had firsthand knowledge and participated in this event. He was with Peter when Mary initially reported the tomb was empty. He records, "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. Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him." (John 20:1-2.) Peter and John then ran to the sepulchre to see for themselves. (John 20:3-10.) John provides the most reliable testimony and maintains the integrity of "the sign of Jonas the prophet." (Lk. 11:29.) Jesus arose triumphant from the

tomb early Sunday morning before sunrise.

Saturday is the seventh day of the week and the regularly observed sabbath day. (Compare Ex. 20:8-11 with Lk. 13:10-17.) It is also clear that the day following the crucifixion was a sabbath. (Mk. 15:37 & 42, Lk. 23:46 & 54 and John 19:42.) The only explanation which maintains the three days and nights criteria and still allows the day following the crucifixion to be a sabbath is that there were two consecutive days of sabbath. Friday must have been a separate and distinct sabbath observance from Saturday. "But how can Friday be a Jewish sabbath?" The feast of unleavened bread provides the necessary explanation.

Through Moses the Lord commanded the children of Israel to observe various feasts ". . .for a memorial;. . .throughout your generations;. . . by an ordinance forever." (Ex. 12:14.) One of these was the feast of unleavened bread. The Lord prescribed this feast to begin in the evening of the day following the Lord's passover. (Lev. 23:5-6 & Num. 28:16-17.) The feast continued for seven days. (Ex. 12:15, Lev. 23:6 and Num. 28:17.) The first and seventh days of this feast were days of "holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein." (Lev. 23:4, 7-8 & Num. 28:18, 25 compare with Ex. 20:8-11.) It is also certain that the Lord intended these additional days of "holy convocation" or sabbaths to be observed, "Beside the sabbath of the Lord". (Lev. 23:37-38.) Therefore, the first day in the feast of unleavened bread was a sabbath regardless of which day in the week it fell upon.

John supports the probability of an extra sabbath observance in chapter 19 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,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away." By drawing attention to "that sabbath" as "an high day" John infers it had greater significance than a regular sabbath. This is true because "that sabbath" was the first day in the feast of unleavened bread. It was also the day following the passover observed by the Lord and the Twelve. Thursday evening began a day of "holy convocation", "an high day" and an extra sabbath.

The third and final problem needing resolution is, "Which day was the first day in the feast of unleavened bread?" The foregoing analysis is heavily dependant upon it being Friday. In reality there are several scriptural discrepancies which obscures a clear answer to this question. The Old and New Testaments present conflicting views on whether the first day in the feast was the day before, the day after or the same day as the Lord's passover.

Instructions to the children of Israel regarding the feast of unleavened bread are recorded in three of the five books of

Moses: Exodus 12, Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28. All three accounts prescribe the observance to continue seven days. (Ex. 12:15, Lev. 23:6 & Num. 28:17.) They also agree that the first and seventh days of this feast are sabbaths. (Ex. 12:16, Lev. 23:7-8 and Num. 28:18 & 25.) They disagree as to which is the first day in this feast. Exodus 12:18 says the first day commences, "In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at even". This is the same day as the Lord's passover. (Compare Ex. 12:6, Lev. 23:5 and Num. 28:16.) Leviticus and Numbers agree that the passover began in the evening on the fourteenth day of the first month but, "on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread". (Lev. 23:6. & Num. 28:17.) This was the day after the passover.

The first passover meal may have been held simultaneously with the feast of unleavened bread due to the haste in which the children of Israel left Egypt. (Ex. 12:11.) In later years the date was changed by the Lord to the day following the passover. This change did not diminish the requirements of the passover meal. It remained a dinner to be eaten with unleavened bread. (Ex. 12:8, Num. 9:11 & Deut. 16:1-3.) Mark and Luke concur that the passover was a meal of unleavened bread, but do not necessarily associate it with the feast days. (Mk. 14:12 & Lk. 22:7.) It is possible that there were actually eight days of unleavened bread, but only the last seven consisted of feast days. This is reinforced by the fact that the Old Testament records the first day in the feast as the day following the passover not once but twice.

Matthew strongly suggests that the day before the passover meal was the first day in the feast of unleavened bread. Matthew 26:17 & 19-20 says, "Now the first day of the feast of unleavened bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying unto him, Where wilt thou that we prepare for thee to eat the passover? . . . And the disciples did as Jesus had appointed them; and they made ready the passover. Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve." As stated before, each new day began in the evening. Therefore, it is implicitly written that a new day began "when the even was come". (V. 20) State more clearly, the disciples made ready the passover on the first day of unleavened bread which was the day before the passover.

The first day in this feast may have been changed to one day prior to the passover, but this is highly unlikely. It is unlikely because the first day in this feast was a sabbath and none of the gospel writers refer to a sabbath immediately preceding the passover. Additionally, while the Scribes and Pharisees frequently embellished the Mosaic Law; they rarely if ever revised it. It is also improbable Matthew intended the first day of the feast to be held simultaneously with the passover meal. If this was his intent, the crucifixion would have occurred on the sabbath not the day before. (Compare Matt.

27:58-62, Mk. 15:42, Lk. 23:54 and John 19:31 & 42.) Likewise, the Jews would not have had cause to beseech Pilate to expedite the death of the condemned by having their legs broken. The Jews wanted their bodies taken down from the cross so that the sabbath would not be defiled. (John 19:31-33.) The chronology of "the first day in the feast of unleavened bread" recorded in Matthew is in error on this point. (Article of Faith #8.)

This explanation while clear, creates two additional supplementary questions. "Why was the afternoon before the passover a day of unleavened bread?" (Matt. 26:17, Mk. 14:12, Lk. 22:7.) This would raise the total number of unleavened bread days to nine. The answer to this question is found in the requirements of the preparation day.

The preparation day was a day when all leaven was removed from the house. The removal of all leaven was so important that the Lord stated that if it was not removed prior to the passover then, "that soul shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel". (Ex. 12:19.) Thus the day of preparation was an unofficial day of unleavened bread to assure compliance with this requirement. It was not associated with the seven feast days of unleavened bread. The preparation day was however the day "when the passover must be killed." (Compare Mk. 14:12 and Lk. 22:7.) Those who observed the second day of passover and the first day in the feast of unleavened bread simultaneously replaced the true passover day with the day of preparation. The benefit in observing these two feasts simultaneously was to eliminate one day in the official eight days of unleavened bread and the additional preparation required for two separate feasts. By Mosaic law it was forbidden to have any of the paschal lamb left in the morning. (Ex. 12:10.)

The other question is, "Why did Jesus observe the passover feast on a day different than the scribes and pharisees?" This question is resolved in the fact that the passover feast could be observed on either one of two consecutive days. This variance to Mosaic law was permitted in order to accommodate the large volume of people that came to the temple to sacrifice. ("Jesus the Christ" footnote #1 of chapter 33.) Two days of passover is supported by the fact that Jesus regarded the last supper as the passover meal and yet John states that the last supper was held one day prior to what appears to be the more widely practiced "feast of the passover". (Compare Matt. 26:17-19, Mk. 14:14-16 and Lk. 22:11-13 with John 13:1-2.) The second passover day referred to by John was merged with the first day in the feast of unleavened bread as it was during the initial passover in Egypt. (Mk. 14:1 & Lk. 22:1.)

Additional support is inferred in that "the disciples came to Jesus, saying unto him, Where wilt thou that we prepare for thee to eat the passover?" (Compare Matt. 26:17 & Mk. 14:12 with

Lk. 22:8-9.) The disciples went willingly and made no resistance. The implication being that the disciples did not find anything unusual in observing the passover on a different day than the first day in the feast of unleavened bread.

Furthermore, all sacrifices were performed at the temple by the Levitical priests. When Jesus asked his disciples to prepare for the passover meal no unusual preparations, such as instructions to not make a sacrifice at the temple, were in order. The temple and the officiating priests were not totally rejected by the Lord until after his death as evidenced when "the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom". (Matt. 27:50-51, Mk. 15:37-38 & Lk. 23:45-46.) This implies that the priests of the temple were normally engaged in performing paschal sacrifices one day in advance of the feast of unleavened bread and more commonly practiced passover feast. Jesus observed the passover on the true passover day; while the scribes and pharisees found his life worth sacrificing and condemned him to death. (John 11:49-53 & 18:28-32.)

The highest probability in the chronological sequence of these events is as follows:

1. Wednesday afternoon (the end of the Jewish Wednesday) the paschal lamb was killed and preparations were completed for observing the passover meal which Jesus and the Twelve attended.
2. Wednesday evening (the beginning of the Jewish Thursday) the events associated with the last supper transpired.
3. Thursday morning about midnight the Lamb of God partook of that bitter cup for which he could not pass over. (Compare Matt. 26:38-39, Lk. 22:42-44 & D&C 19:18-19 with Ex. 11:4-5 and 12:21-23, 29-30.)
4. Later that morning Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified.
5. Thursday afternoon, at the very hour when most of Israel was sacrificing a lamb for the passover meal, the Lamb of God performed the ultimate sacrifice and voluntarily laid down his life.
6. The burial of Jesus was completed with haste immediately prior to dusk.
7. From late Thursday afternoon until Sunday morning the body of Jesus laid in the tomb.
8. Sunday morning before daylight Jesus came forth out of the tomb as a living resurrected being.

While it is true Holy Writ contains some genuine internal inconsistencies, none of them discredit the resurrection of Jesus. The greatest evidence that the crucifixion took place on Thursday is found in the resurrection itself. If Jesus truly held power over death and was perfect, then surely he must have held sufficient power to fulfill the sign of Jonas the prophet. Jesus did not make an error when he prophesied, "so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matt. 12:40.) Jesus did fulfill all of the prophecies made concerning his death including the sign of Jonas. There is no question as to which day Jesus arose from the dead. It was Sunday, the first day of the week. Therefore, Jesus Christ voluntarily (John 10:14-18.) laid down his life Thursday afternoon.

Each of the gospel writers have blessed our lives by recording events in the life of Jesus. Through their personal knowledge and because they recorded the testimonies of eye witnesses, we gain greater assurance that Jesus is our Savior. John adequately summarized the purpose of each gospel writer in chapter 20 verse 31, "But these things are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." All mankind has access to forgiveness of sins through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. (Compare Moses 5:8, Enos 5-8 and A. of F. #4.) Because Jesus was resurrected with a tangible body of flesh and bone, all mankind will enjoy this same privilege. (Compare Lk. 24:36-40 & 1 Cor. 14:21-22.) Truly it is less important to know when Jesus died than it is to know that he was resurrected. Perhaps this is why each of the four gospels are less specific about the day of his death and focus more on the day of his resurrection.

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