Yes, It Really Was A Good Friday (Part 1)

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Like 3

Friday, April 14, 2017

Yes, It Really Was A Good Friday.

Every year about this time (usually during Holy Week), a number of my friends get in a bit of a twist, and demand that Jesus did not die on a Friday, but on a Wednesday (or for a few, on a Thursday). Some occasionally then mock any mention of a "Good Friday." Good Friday is the traditional language used to celebrate the day of the Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the marvelous first part of the Gospel message. The sharpness of language that some use to denounce “Good Friday” is astounding. One individual assured me a few days ago that, “Yes, Christianity absolutely rises and falls on the fact that every prophecy is true, including this one...” and proceeded to quote Matt. 12:40 and explain in several other comments that if Jesus didn’t stay in the grave 72 hours (that is, if he actually did die on Friday and rise on Sunday) then Christianity as a whole is not true!

But is there really room for this kind of sharpness or condescension? More importantly, arrogant attitudes aside, is there any reason at all to think Jesus didn't die on a Friday?

Is there any good reason to think he did?

In fact, that Jesus died on Friday could not be more clear from the biblical accounts themselves, from the traditions of church history, and from the consensus of NT scholarship. There is debate and controversy about the exact date (that is, the day of the month) of the crucifixion. Was it on Nissan the 14th or 15th? And there is great debate and controversy about the year of the crucifixion. Was it AD 30, or AD 33? These are the two most commonly held options. A strong majority hold to the AD 30 date, but

Köstenberger and some others have promoted an AD 33 date. [1]

But the actual day of the week of the crucifixion is not held in any kind of serious dispute. It is as close to a consensus position in NT scholarship as is possible. The dating of the Crucifixion as occurring on a Friday, together with Paul's preaching before Gallio in AD 51-52 while he was in Corinth, are in fact the two bedrock dates from which all the rest of NT chronology are built. But let us briefly peruse the voices that can speak responsibly to the question of what day of the week Jesus died.

The Voice of Scholarship

While containing a detailed examination of the controversies surrounding the date and year of the crucifixion, the IVP Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, a standard in the field of Gospels issues, notes, "The Gospels agree that Jesus was crucified on a Friday, the day before the Sabbath," [2] and then proceeds upon a detailed examination of controversies concerning the date of the crucifixion without so much as a mention of any controversy about the day of the week. An introduction to the NT, like that by Carson and Moo, likewise wrestles with the controversy about the day of the month and the year of the crucifixion, but plainly declares that the starting point for settling such controversies is that, "We know that Jesus was crucified on a Friday (the 'Preparation Day' [Mark 15:42 par.]) in the Jewish month of Nisan." [3] In this standard NT Introduction, mention is not even made of contentions for another day of the week (and the same is true of most all NT Introductions, with a handful of exceptions). A standard conservative introduction to the Gospels in particular, like Craig Blomberg's "Jesus And The Gospels" has more space to devote to such questions, and thus, Blomberg notes more carefully, "We know that Christ died during the reigns of the prefect Pilate (AD 26-36), the high priest Caiaphas (AD 18-36), and the tetrarch Antipas (4 BC-AD 37). It would seem that he was crucified on a Friday (the day before the Sabbath, as in Mark 15:42 par.) and the day after the evening on which the initial Passover meal was celebrated (Mark 14:12, 14, 16 pars.)." [4] His text is a standard work, and was even the textbook for the *Life of Christ* course at HBBC when I was in undergrad (though I didn't take the course). He makes no mention of another possibility in the text. He does however insert a footnote after the above quotation, which notes, "Some have argued for a Wednesday crucifixion on the grounds that in Matt. 12:40, Jesus predicts that he will be in the 'heart of the earth' for 'three days and three nights,' thus requiring three full days before Resurrection Sunday. But this interpretation fails to recognize the standard Jewish idiom of using 'a day and a night' to refer to any portion of a twenty-four-hour period of time." For Blomberg, a possibility other than Friday is worthy of mention only as a brief footnote. This is a good indication of the general approach of scholarship to the issue. [5] Thousands of pages worth of ink have been spilt in the last two millennia debating the controversial issues surrounding the date of the crucifixion and Easter, but the remote possibility that Jesus didn't die on a Friday is worth little more than an occasional footnote in this voluminous discussion. Scholars make their living by carefully and thoroughly debating every possible option of every technical issue, but this simply isn't a controversial issue about which there is any doubt to seriously discuss.

Two other scholarly treatments are worthy of mention. Raymond Brown's massive two-volume, "The Death Of The Messiah" is probably the most comprehensive treatment of the Passion Narratives of the Gospels available in English. However one might feel about his conclusions (and I for one disagree at numerous points), his awareness of virtually every voice that has spoken on controversial subjects relating to the death of Christ cannot be gainsaid. He devotes an almost 50-page appendix to the controversial issues surrounding the dating of the crucifixion (pg. 1350-1378). But he deals with the claim that Jesus died on a day other than Friday in basically a single paragraph. In a footnote he takes up the argument that the Sabbath mentioned by each Gospel as the day following the crucifixion was not the weekly Sabbath but a separate "annual Sabbath." (As we'll see below, this suggestion is essential to any claim that Jesus didn't die on Friday). Brown concludes of this suggestion though that the author making it, "Offers little proof of this." [6]

Last is the work by Harold Hoehner, "Chronological Aspects Of The Life Of Christ." [7] Devoting an entire chapter to the question of "The Day Of Christ's Crucifixion (most of which is devoted to the day of the month, but a few pages of which are devoted to the day of the week), Hoehner presents the three different suggestions as to what day of the week Jesus died. He considers the possibility of a Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday crucifixion, and presents the best case possible for each day (at more length than we will do here). After working through the details, he concludes, "Having examined the three different views, it was concluded that the Friday date for the crucifixion is the most acceptable. Both the Wednesday and Thursday views are basically built on one verse, namely, Matthew 12:40. These views are unacceptable, because, first, the preponderance of Scripture would indicate Jesus' crucifixion as having occurred on Friday, and second, when one realizes that the Jews reckoned part of a day as a whole day, these options no longer stand." [8]

Hoehner notes that the most well-known advocate for a day other than Friday has been B. F. Westcott. Westcott is of notable caliber as a NT scholar (especially for his text-critical work on the Greek NT of 1881 and his meticulous commentaries on the biblical text), and it is worth hearing his voice in slightly more detail. One might accidentally get the impression from Hoehner's mention that Westcott was adamant about a Thursday crucifixion, or provided a detailed and compelling argument for it, but this is not at all the case. In his marvelous, roughly 500 page, "An Introduction To The Study Of The Gospels," he writes a chapter on the differences between the Synoptic Gospels. At the end of the chapter he has a note (like a modern excursus), titled, "On the Day of the Crucifixion." The bulk of this note is about the day of the month of the crucifixion (Nisan 14th or 15th). He then spends one paragraph taking up the question of the day of the week of the crucifixion. He doesn't make a dogmatic case, but only humbly suggests that there might be "grounds for doubting the correctness of the common opinion." He suggests that, "the evidence on both sides is slight." He finally suggests that (since he has made a case for Nisan the 14th as the day of the month) "the day of preparation" in the Synoptics might possibly refer not to a Friday (which he acknowledges is the normal usage of the word) but to any day of preparation for any kind of Sabbath, thus leaving open, in his mind, the possibility that the crucifixion was on a Thursday. He ultimately thinks this is more likely due to Matthew 12:40. But again, note that he is only asking for the humble consideration of a dissenting possibility, not making a strong, compelling, or dogmatic case. And he was writing before the common idiom we will explain below was widely recognized.

I mention the voices of scholarship here primarily to enjoin humility upon my reader. There are many complex and controversial issues in biblical scholarship, where many good scholars stand on opposite sides of an issue and hold widely diverse opinions.

This is not one of those issues.

It needs to be recognized that this is not a controversial issue. It is presented as controversial only by those who are ignorant of the literature. It is a consensus opinion among biblical scholars, which has had only the occasional dissenting voice. I'm all for the courage of challenging the *status quo*. But if you wish to offer such a challenge, know the details of what you are talking about, and be humble and respectful of the fact that you are accusing essentially every biblical scholar alive of being wrong (and they do, after all, study this kind of thing for a living). Such claims should be made with a humble spirit rather than the dogmatic and angry attitude so dismissive of the traditional opinion that I often see.

The Voice of Church Tradition

It goes without saying that the early Church Fathers and traditional position of the Church has been that Jesus died on a Friday and was raised on a Sunday. I don't recall a single dissenting voice anywhere in early church history. That Jesus died on a Friday and rose on Sunday is after all the origin of the language of "Good Friday" and essentially the reason that we worship on Sunday instead of Saturday. There was and continues to be throughout the church sharp division about the method of observance of Easter and the year of the crucifixion. The issue still divides the Eastern from the Western branches of the established church. But the *day of the week* on which Jesus died has always been a consensus point. A few voices in particular are worth noting. Most I have seen who claim a Thursday or Wednesday crucifixion are Fundamental Baptist, some of whom claim (quite illegitimately) that there is an unbroken historical succession of Fundamental Baptist that goes back to Jesus. Two fathers who are occasionally co-opted as early "Baptists" in such schemes are Tertullian and John Chrysostom. Should historical voices matter to such a crowd, I suspect these voices would matter most. Yet both of them in wrestling with various controversies about the date of Easter seem to presume behind their construction a Friday crucifixion. [9]

The Voice of the Evangelists

We come finally to consider the voices that matter most. Namely, those of the biblical writers themselves, the penmen of the inspired text of Holy Scripture. The most important of these are of course the four Evangelists, the authors of the four canonical Gospels. We shall consider them each in turn. But first, we need to orient ourselves to the Jewish worldview out of and into which most of them write. We will briefly glance at the meanings of the Sabbath, the Passover, the Preparation Day, and the way Jews counted days and hours before we dig into a study of the Gospels.

What Is The Sabbath?

The Hebrew word for "Sabbath" probably originally simply meant, "rest." But because God "rested" on the Seventh day (Gen. 2:1), the seventh day of the Jewish week, (Saturday, with Sunday being the first day), came to be called the "Sabbath," or "Sabbath day" (see Ex. 16:22-30; 20:8-11; 35:2; Lev. 23:3; Deut. 5:14). Thus, the word, "Sabbath" in the NT almost always refers to the seventh day of the week, either as a specific day, or as an institution (Matt. 12:1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12; 24:20; 28:1; Mk. 1:21; 2:23, 24, 27, 28; 3:2, 4; 6:2; 16:1; Lk. 4:16, 31; 6:1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9; 13:10, 14, 15, 16; 14:1, 3, 5; 23:54, 56; Jn. 5:9, 10, 16, 18; 7:22; 23; 9:14, 16; 19:31; Acts 1:12; 13:14, 27, 42, 44; 15:21; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4; Col. 2:16). In some rare cases, the word can also refer to a whole week, or a "seven" day period between two "Sabbaths," (as in Luke 18:12; 24:1; Mark 16:2, 9; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16). While there are other uses of the equivalent Hebrew word in the OT to refer to an entire year of rest (e.g., Lev. 25:2), these are the only two uses of the word in the NT. See BDAG, 6545, or for those who oddly prefer it, Strong's Concordance, which lists the same two definitions as its only meanings in the NT, "The Sabbath (i.e. Shabbath), or day of weekly repose from secular avocations (also the observance or institution itself); by extension, a *se'nnight*, i.e. the interval between two Sabbaths; likewise the plural in all the above applications." This is what the word "Sabbath" refers to every time it occurs in your NT. That's not to say that there aren't other days of rest in the Jewish calendar, but that the Bible doesn't describe these other times as a "Sabbath" (though note the eternal eschatological rest sometimes related to Sabbath theology; c.f. Heb. 3:7-4:13, etc.).

What Is Passover?

The Passover was the annual feast that commemorated the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt (see Exodus 12-13; Numbers 28:16-25). The word "Passover" in the NT can have three different meanings (see BDAG, 5723, or for those who prefer it, Strong's Concordance #3957, who notes that the word can refer to the meal, the individual day, the entire festival, or to the sacrifices connected with it). First, the word can refer to the passover lamb in particular (Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7; I Cor. 5:7). Second, it can refer to the passover meal in general (Matt. 26:19; Mark 14:16; Luke 22:8; Heb. 11:28). Finally, it can refer to the passover festival itself. Technically, the Passover was a single day observance on Nisan the 14th, after which followed a separate 7 day feast from the 15th to the 21st known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread (see Lev. 23:4-8). Sometimes the distinction between the two was maintained (like in Mark 14:1). But by the time of the NT era, it had also become common to combine the two and think of them as a single festival that could be called "passover." Josephus regularly uses the word this way (*Antiquities*, 14.21 [2.1]; cf. 17.213 [9.3]; Jewish Wars 2.10 [1.3]). So does Philo. And even NT authors sometimes use the word this way, combining both the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread and referring to the entire resultant 8-

day feast as "Passover." For example, Luke writes, *"Now the feast of unleavened bread drew nigh, which is called the Passover (Lk. 22:1 KJV)."* He has no problem considering the Feast of Unleavened bread to be "The Passover," because that had become a common way of speaking in his day. Likewise, both Matthew and Mark can speak of "The Feast of Unleavened Bread" as including "Passover," rather than seeing them as separate Feasts (Matt. 26:17; Mark 14:12). The combining of both the "Passover" and the "Feast of Unleavened Bread" into a single 8-day feast that could be referred to by either name is thus a common idiom in Judaism.

What is the "Day of Preparation"?

The Day of Preparation was a way of referring to the day before the Sabbath, when preparations would be made for the Sabbath (Matt. 27:62; Mark 15:42; John 19:14, 31, 42; Luke 23:54). The English phrase is a translation of a single Greek word, *παρασκευή*. While initially the word referred to the day because of Sabbath preparations, it came to simply be a way of referring to Friday, the sixth day of the week, with no specific reference to the preparations, just as "Sabbath" came to be a simple reference to the seventh day of the week. BDAG explains (I've omitted the lengthy references), "according to Israel's usage...it was Friday, on which day everything had to be prepared for the Sabbath, when no work was permitted... For Christians as well *παρασκευή* served to designate the sixth day of the week" (BDAG, 5633).

Note that Jewish writers contemporary to the NT (like Josephus) used the word this way, as a simple reference to Friday (see references in BDAG entry). And later Christian authors in the period just after the NT use the word this way as well, not referring specifically to any preparations, but simply as the word for Friday. For example, in the "*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*" (A letter from the Church of Smyrna to the church at Philomelium written sometime in the second half of the second century, i.e., 150-200 AD), the author writes, "So, taking the young slave with them, on Friday about supper time the mounted police and horsemen set out, armed with their usual weapons as though chasing after an armed rebel." (Holmes' Translation, 7:1). The word παρασκευή here is translated simply as "Friday" because the author is simply using it to designate that sixth day of the week. Or, for example, in the *Didache*, an early manual on church order, written probably in the middle of second century, but reflecting material from much earlier, [10] the author writes, "But do not let your fasts coincide with those of the hypocrites. They fast on Monday and Thursday, so you must fast on Wednesday and Friday" (*Did.* 8:1, Holmes' Translation). Note that the author uses common words for the days of the week Monday, Thursday, and Wednesday. Then he uses the word παρασκευή, which had clearly simply become the common word to designate "Friday." Thus, when we come to the NT uses, it is clear that the Gospel writers are all using the word simply to designate Friday. And in any case, there is no known usage of the word to refer to a "preparation" that occurred on any day other than a Friday before a Saturday Sabbath. In fact, even in modern Greek, which has little connection to any ancient Jewish heritage or festival, the word *παρασκευή* is the commonly used word to designate Friday (Go ahead - paste it into Google Translate and see what it says).

How Were Days Counted?

In the common Jewish reckoning, the 24 hour period called a "day" doesn't really begin at sunup (though note that Judaism could at times follow either Egyptian or Mesopotamian reckoning). Rather a day began at 6 pm on one evening and ended at 6 pm the following evening. And a "day" was typically conceived of as an entire Day/Night unit, regardless of how much of that unit was being referred to. For example, Genesis records the first time such units were noted, *"And the evening and the morning were the first day"* (Genesis 1:5, etc.). Note that it starts with the evening first. One "day and night" was simply a way to refer to any part of this Night/Day unit.

How Were Hours Counted?

The daytime, understood as basically sunrise to sunset, was divided into 12 equal parts, as was the nighttime. Assuming a sunrise at roughly 6:00 am, then 7:00 am was "the first hour" of the daytime, 8:00

was "the second hour," while 9:00 was "the third hour" (which is why Peter explained it not likely that the disciples at Pentecost would be drunk as early as 9:00 am - Acts 2:15). The "sixth hour" of the day was roughly noon (John 4:6; Acts 10:9), and the "ninth hour" roughly 3:00 pm (Acts 3:1; 10:3, 30). The "night" was likewise divided (so that the "third hour" of the night was roughly 9:00 pm - Acts 23:23).

Keep these basic elements of the Jewish chronological view in your minds as you read the Gospels, since they are the elements in the minds of the Evangelists when they wrote them.

The Voice of Mark

We begin with the Gospel of Mark, likely the first Gospel written, and addressed to Christians, probably in Rome, who are facing or will soon face severe persecution for their faith in Jesus. For Mark, the death of Jesus is the climax towards which his entire Gospel builds. Mark has famously been called, "A Passion account with a short introduction." His Gospel divides into basically two parts. In the first half of his work, he builds up to the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus is the Christ (8:27-30). This opens the second half of his Gospel. In the first part of the second half of his work, where he recounts the journey to Jerusalem, (8:27-10:52), he shares three major "Passion predictions" by Jesus. Each of these predictions is followed by the misunderstanding of the disciples, which leads to an opportunity for Jesus to instruct them.

The Passion Predictions in Mark

Following on the heels of Peter's famous confession, Jesus explains that the nature of his messiahship isn't what they had thought - it would mean suffering before it meant glory.

> *"And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly"*
> *(Mark 8:31-32a, ESV).*

In Mark's Gospel, this is the first clear explanation by Jesus that he has not come to live, but to die. The disciples had learned enough to accept that this Jesus was the Messiah, but they had not yet grasped the nature of what it truly meant to be the Messiah. So Peter argues with Jesus.
"And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him." Jesus rebukes him sharply for his man-centered, triumphalists understanding of his messiahship (8:31-33). Note that Jesus' Passion prediction also contains a prediction of his rising *"after three days."* We will discuss this phrase in more detail below. After Peter's misguided outburst, Jesus instructs the disciples in the cross-shaped nature of discipleship (8:34-9:1).

After the transfiguration (a visual foretaste of the Resurrection to come), and the healing of a boy with an unclean spirit, they pass through Galilee. As they do so, Jesus is again teaching his disciples about a cross-shaped messiahship.

> *"They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise"" (Mark 9:30–31 ESV).*

Again, they misunderstand, (9:32), and Jesus teaches them that the first will be last in his kingdom (9:33-50).

As they approach Jerusalem, Jesus again pulls his disciples aside to explain the Passion and Resurrection that is coming.

> *"And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise""*
> *(Mark 10:32–34 ESV).*

The disciples again miss the cruciform nature of discipleship, and so begin to call dibs on sitting with Jesus in his glory (9:36-41). Jesus again takes opportunity to explain to them the cruciform nature of his messiahship (9:42-25), this time explicitly explaining, *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many""* (Mark 10:45 ESV). Jesus has come to die, and his death is intentional, and intended, as the ransom for many. Jesus is the coming King, but he has come not to rule from a throne but from a cross. He has come to defeat his enemies, but not by killing them, but rather by dying for them. Note that in each of these Passion predictions by Jesus, Jesus predicts that he will rise, *"after three days."*

The Passion Account in Mark

Thus we enter Mark's account of Passion Week (14:1-16:8), and here things begin to move quickly. But Mark regularly provides temporal markers to help the reader keep track of what takes place on what day, in what sequence, as he understands it (14:1, 12, 17, 22, 26, 32, 43, 53, 66; 15:1, 8, 15, 20-21, 33, 34, 42, 43; 16:1, 2). We'll pick up his account on the day that Jesus died. Jesus is tried by Pilate (15:1-15), and crucified around "the third hour of the day" (15:25). There is a lot of "wiggle-room" allowed in these common time designations in Judaism (seen for example in Matt. 20:3, 5, 9; 27:45, 46; Mark 15:25, 33, 34; Luke 23:44; John 1:39; 4:6, 52; 19:14; Acts 2:15; 3:1; 10:3, 9, 30; 23:23). But, as we noted above, "the third hour of the day" refers to roughly 9:00 am. At "the sixth hour" (12:00 noon), a darkness settles in (9:33), which last for three hours. At around three in the afternoon, the "ninth hour," (15:34), Jesus breathed his last breath (15:37) and the temple veil was rent (15:38). This is before the evening has come. And what day is it? Mark is careful to let us know,

> *"And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid" (Mark 15:42–47 ESV).*

According to Mark, Jesus died on "the day of preparation" which Mark further defines as, "the day before the Sabbath" (15:42). Those who demand a crucifixion day other than Friday will typically claim that some "Sabbath" (i.e., rest day) other than Saturday as the weekly rest day is in view here (often alluding to a misunderstanding of John 19:31). In fact, such an explanation is essential to that view. But the NT doesn't use the word to refer to such days (see above). Hoehner explains of this claim about an "annual Sabbath" instead of Saturday being in view that it is a non sequitur. He points out that, "There is no evidence of this anywhere. This is a creation of those who hold this theory only to fit their theory" (Hoehner, pg. 69.)

But more importantly, Mark will not allow us to understand his reference to a Sabbath as anything other than a Saturday. First, because in Mark's nine uses of the word prior to this point, he has always meant by it the seventh day of the week (either as the day or as the institution), as in Mk. 1:21; 2:23, 24, 27, 28; 3:2,

4; 6:2; or a reference to a week (or "seven" days), as in the final [two] use[s] in Mark 16:2 [and 9].

But second, and more substantially, Mark won't permit such a claim because of Mark's basic chronology. Whatever one might claim about what "Sabbath" was in view, Mark is abundantly clear about what day came after it. "When the Sabbath [referred to in 15:42, which Mark now picks up again after recounting the hurried preparations and burial of the body] was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb" (Mark 16:1–2 ESV). The day after the "Sabbath" that Mark refers to is the first day of the week, which is Sunday. If some other "rest day" were in view, then the temporal note in 16:1 would be redundant and the note in 16:2 would be a simple error on Mark's part.

Follow Mark's chronology. It is straightforward - Mark presents Jesus as dying on Friday (the day of preparation for the Sabbath, 15:42), then sees the next day as Sabbath (15:42; 16:1), and sees the day following the Sabbath day as the first day of the week, or Sunday (Mark 16:1). Thus, according to Mark, Jesus died on Friday. There is simply no room in Mark's chronology for any other understanding.

The Voice of Matthew

Matthew recounts the story of Jesus for a group of Jewish Christians who are feeling the increasing tensions between Judaism and Christianity. For Matthew, the Passion of Jesus represents the fifth and final narrative section of his Gospel. Matthew builds his Gospel around an alternating pattern of narrative/major discourse of Jesus, concluded by a transitional statement like "and it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings" that signals the beginning of the next narrative section (Matt. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). I quite appreciate D. A. Carson's suggestion that after having followed this pattern five times, Matthew intends for his reader to expect a major discourse by Jesus after the Passion and Resurrection account. But instead they are given by Jesus the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20). Thus, the preaching of the church is the final discourse of Jesus to the world. But in any case, in Matthew's presentation, the Passion account is part of his sixth major narrative section that concludes his presentation of Jesus (26:3-28:20).

The Passion Predictions in Matthew

Like Mark, Matthew presents Jesus as having predicted his Passion, but Mathew opens his account of the Passion with a fourth prediction (26:1-2), while Mark presented only three (see above, with Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19), and Matthew has also presented several more cryptic allusions to the Messiah's death (9:15; 10:38). Note carefully how Matthew handles these Passion predictions.

In Matthew 16:13-23, Mathew presents the parallel to Mark's account (Mark 8:27-33) of Peter's confession and Jesus' Passion prediction. But where Jesus in Mark uses the language of *"after three days rise again"* (Mark 8:31), Matthew records the same event and the same saying of Jesus but presents Jesus as saying, *"and on the third day be raised"* (Matt. 16:21). Matthew either sees the language of *"on the third day"* as being more clear, and perhaps less likely to be misunderstood (and thus he prefers it) or else he at least sees the language of *"after three days"* as meaning the same thing as *"on the third day,"* and prefers it.

In Matt. 17:22-23, Matthew parallels the same prediction of Jesus that Mark shared in Mark 9:30-32 (note how they both refer to Galilee, and both come on the heels of the healing of the boy with an unclean spirit Mark 9:14-32/Matt. 17:14-23). But once again, while Mark used the language of *"after three days he will rise"* (Mark 9:31), Matthew uses the more clear (or equivalent) *"he will be raised on the third day"* (Matt. 17:22).

Finally, in Matt. 20:17-19, Matthew presents the parallel of Jesus' saying recorded in Mark 10:32-34, while Jesus and the disciples were walking the road to Jerusalem. But once again, while Mark used the less clear

"after three days he will rise" (Mark 10:34), Matthew shares the same saying of Jesus using the more clear (or equivalent) phrase, *"he will be raised on the third day"* (Matt. 20:19).

The Passion Account in Matthew

Matthew basically follows Mark in his account of the Passion, though adding new material that Mark doesn't contain (like 26:1-2, 15, 25, 28, 50, 52-54, 63, 68, 72; 27:1, 17+22, 19, 24-25, 37, 43, 51-53, 57, 62-66; 28:9-10, 11-15, etc.). Matthew recounts the crucifixion in 27:32-44. Like Mark, Matthew records that there was a darkness from the 6th to the 9th hour (Mat. 27:45). Like Mark, Matthew recounts (27:46-50) that Jesus breathed his last breath around the ninth hour (3:00 pm). The Temple veil was rent (27:51-54), and Jesus was buried that evening (27:57-61). Matthew then moves on to the next day. But what day did all this happen? What day did Jesus die? What day was the next day? Just in case the reader might have gotten lost, Matthew provides a detailed chronological note.

> *"The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise'"*
> *(Matthew 27:61–63 ESV).*

Matthew has specifically chosen language that prevents the reader from seeing any Sabbath other than Saturday being in view. [11] According to Matthew, Jesus died on the day of preparation for the Sabbath (27:62).

The next day is the Sabbath. And what day follows this Sabbath? Matthew again leaves a clear chronology. *"Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb"* (Matthew 28:1 ESV). The day after this Sabbath was the first day of the Week, Sunday. This again means that claims that an "annual Sabbath" or some day other than Saturday is in view

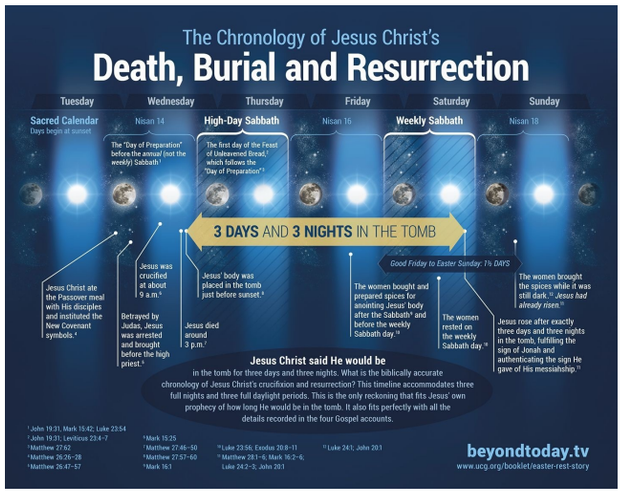
is simply not possible in Matthew's reckoning. For Matthew, the day after Jesus died was the Sabbath, since the day after Jesus died, or, *"the next day,"* was the one that followed, *"the day of preparation"* (Matt. 27:62), for the Sabbath, (thus, *"the next day"* = the Sabbath), and when this day ends, Sunday, *"the first day of the week,"* begins (Matt. 28:1). Matthew clearly believes Jesus to have died on the day before the day before Sunday, which means, Matthew believed Jesus to have died on a Friday. Any other reconstruction is simply ignoring Matthew's clear and consistent chronology.

"After Three Days" in Matthew and Mark

Note that Matthew 27:63 is the only time that Matthew employs the *"after three days"* language instead of his preferred and more clear *"on the third day"* language. [12] And he presents it not on the lips of Jesus, but on the lips of the Jewish leaders who opposed him who wished a guard to be set on the tomb. But again it becomes clear that for Matthew the phrase means the same thing as *"on the third day."* How? Because the Jewish leaders ask for a guard to be set, *"until the third day"* to prevent the disciples from stealing the body and perpetuating a fraud. The third day from when? They are clearly reckoning from the day of Jesus' death, and they are only concerned to protect the grave *"until the third day"* (Matt. 27:64) from his death. [13] Jesus had died the night before preparation, the next day, when the guard was set, was Sabbath, and they wanted a guard set through Sunday, which would be *"until the third day"* since Jesus died. This leaves us with the realization that when Mark wrote, *"after three days"* he seems clearly to have meant something like "after the start of the third day." And Matthew seems to have taken pains to make this more clear.

This also raises the question, how did the Pharisees know that the tomb needed protected until the third day? How did they know that it only needed protected that long? The Passion predictions that Matthew has shared up to this point have been made only to the disciples, not to the crowds and not to the Jewish leaders (see references above). In each case, Matthew specifically explained that Jesus was speaking to the disciples. Who is it that requested the guard? Matthew says it is the Chief priest and Pharisees (27:63). They *"remember how that imposter said..."* But how could they remember what they weren't present to hear? If we read carefully back through Matthew, we realize that Jesus did make a prediction of his Resurrection in the ears of the Pharisees, albeit a somewhat cryptic one. But the Pharisees heard it, and they remembered it. This prediction is the infamous Sign of Jonah in Matthew 12:38-42. It is this prediction which Matthew is likely picking up in Matthew 27:63. [14] We now turn to an explanation of Jesus' words about this famous sign.

The Sign of Jonah in Matt. 12:38-40



Here we come to the one text that has occasioned the claim that Jesus didn't die on a Friday. Hoehner notes, "First, it is to be doubted that anyone would hold to either a Wednesday or Thursday crucifixion date if it were not for Matthew 12:40."[15] In most written and graphical depictions of "Anti-Good Friday" presentations, this text figures most prominently. For example, one of the better graphical presentations is this one, which places *"3 days and 3 nights"* bolded in the center of its graphic in a highlighted color. Other passages may be mentioned (especially John 19:31, which is used to substantiate the claim that an annual Sabbath is in view in the Synoptics), but Matt. 12:40 and the sign of Jonah is ultimately *the* reason why anyone would deny Good Friday. But they almost always quote only verse 40, in isolation from its context. This will cause the reader to miss its interpretation. So let us examine the passage now in its full context.

In Matthew 12:1-45, Matthew recounts the escalation of Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees. His Sabbath actions and teaching spark their disfavor (12:1-14), and they ultimately blaspheme the Spirit by claiming that he preforms his exorcisms by the power of Satan (12:22-32). Jesus then denounces them as simply demonstrating by their accusations the evil of their hearts (12:33-37). Their response was to ask for a sign from him (12:38-42). But Jesus was well aware that they had no genuine interest in his person or message. Their's was not a seeking interest but a questioning challenge. They demanded a "sign." This is not a regular miracle (they already admitted that Jesus was doing miracles - they just accused him of doing them by Satan's power). Rather, they sought a more spectacular "miracle on demand" that would remove what they claimed to be an ambiguity in his deeds thus far. But the only real ambiguity was the faithlessness of their hearts. So Jesus refuses to condescend to their demand. His reply is sharp and his rebuke stinging,

> *"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here""*
> *(Matthew 12:38–42 ESV).*

Jesus draws a comparison between himself and Jonah that has two basic points. The first point of comparison is that Jonah was delivered from death, and so will Jesus be. In Jonah 1:17-2:10, the narrator tells the story of Jonah delivered by God's sovereign appointing of a great fish. The mariners had thrown Jonah overboard, having a better sense of awe for the Lord at that point than Jonah had (Jonah 1:16). But God was merciful to Jonah. He sent a fish which swallowed Jonah. This in itself doesn't seem like much of a deliverance. But the fish vomited Jonah out on the dry land (Jonah 2:10). This saved Jonah's life and delivered him from death. Thus, both the intro (1:17) and conclusion (2:1) of this section of Jonah mention the fish. And the author sandwiches between these points the prayer of Jonah (2:1-9). But note that it is not a prayer of request to be delivered - it is a prayer of thanksgiving (2:9). Jonah's ordeal in the fish was not judgment, but mercy. He graphically describes his near death experience of almost drowning as he descended to the bottom of the sea (2:3, 5). But God sent the fish that delivered him from drowning and took him to dry land (2:6-7). It is in this full context that the temporal note in Jonah 1:17 must be understood. When the author says, *"Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights"* his point is not to make some magical argument about specific timing. Rather, his point is to make it clear that Jonah didn't stay in the fish's belly. If he had, death would have been his end. But Jonah's stay in the belly of the whale was a temporary one, by the grace of God, and so Jonah was delivered from death. Thus, his appearance to the Ninevites alive was a "sign" to them, for he appeared as one who had been delivered from certain death. The "sign of Jonah" wasn't something Jonah said or did. Jonah himself was the sign. [16]

Jesus is well aware of the context of the book of Jonah, and that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites because he had been delivered from certain death by God's sovereign will. And he draws a parallel to himself and claims that this same sign will be the only one given to the wicked and rebellious Pharisees demanding a sign. No sign will be given to them, *"except the sign of the prophet Jonah"* (Matt. 12:39). Thus we come to verse 40. *"For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40 ESV).* Jesus' point has nothing to do with the exact amount of time that either he or Jonah was in the whale/grave, but only that the time was *temporary*. His point is that just as Jonah's deliverance from death was a sign to the Ninevites, so his

Resurrection from the grave will be the sign from God that communicates to the Pharisees, and in fact the whole world, which vindicates Jesus. And this is how the Resurrection of Jesus was ultimately understood (Rom. 1:4; Acts 17:31).

The second point of comparison that Jesus draws is how the Ninevites responded to the preaching of the one vindicated, and how this generation will hear Jesus. The people of Nineveh responded to Jonah's preaching with belief and repentance (Jonah 3:5). But the Pharisees aren't responding with belief to the preaching of Jesus, and they won't respond with belief even after the Resurrection of Jesus vindicates his person and message. Thus, the Ninevites will rise up in condemnation of the Pharisees at the judgment (Matt. 12:41). To further this idea of "reception to the preaching of the vindicated one" Jesus adds that the Queen of Sheba will likewise rise up (Matt. 12:42). Nineveh repented at Jonah's preaching. The Queen of Sheba came to hear Solomon. But Jesus is greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon, and the judgment of the Pharisees will be all the greater for having rejected the greater Jesus.

Note finally that, as we mentioned above, the Pharisees heard this challenging rebuke of Jesus (12:38). And how did they understand it? Matthew couldn't make it more clear (Matt. 27:62-66). Matthew is the only evangelists who records the plot to ensure the tomb is sealed, and also the only evangelist to record Jesus as saying that he would be *"three days and three nights"* in the earth. A modern reader has no right to jump on one of these passages and make it the entire basis of their chronological scheme in isolation from the other. Matthew intends the reader to read his whole Gospel. And according to Matthew, the Pharisees understood Jesus as meaning that they had to secure the tomb until Sunday, or, *"until the third day"* (27:64) to make sure that Jesus was proven a fraud. However a modern reader might misunderstand Jesus' phrase as demanding a 72-hour burial, those to whom it was first spoken harbored no such misunderstanding.

"Three Days and Three Nights"

Now we come to look more closely at the phrase that has caused confusion in some reader's minds. And the confusion is quite natural. It's only natural that a modern Western Gentile reading the phrase, *"three days and three nights"* might assume a 72-hour period and wonder how that seems possible in light of the fact that Jesus was buried on Friday and raised on Sunday. And if all I ever encountered was a humble question, "Hey, this one verse doesn't seem to make sense," then I wouldn't be writing this post. But that humility seems altogether lacking in many who read this verse, ignore its context, ignore the entire rest of the witness of the NT, and simply decide to arrogantly conclude that everybody else is wrong and they have finally come along to help us get it right and understand that Jesus died on Wednesday or Thursday. Thus, this post. So what does this phrase mean? As we have seen, in the context in Jonah, there is no intention by the author to focus with specificity on an exact number of hours. Rather the author simply uses the phrase to make clear that Jonah didn't stay in the whale but was ultimately released. Likewise, as Jesus uses the phrase he primarily is simply making the point that he will not remain dead. There isn't a special significance attached to the exact amount of time, at least not with any deep precision that could be counted in hours.

So what does the phrase mean? The phrase, "three days and three nights" employs a common Jewish idiom that refers to any part of a day/night unit as though it were the whole. Hoehner explains that rabbinic literature shows that any part of a day would commonly be counted as a whole. He quotes Rabbi Eleazar, writing in the first century, as explaining, "A day and night are an *Onah* ['a portion of time'] and the portion of an *Onah* is as the whole of it." [17] But we could see the same idiom at work in the OT, even if we weren't familiar with rabbinic literature.

In Genesis 42:12-17, Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies and puts them in custody, *"for three days."* But as Gen. 42:18-25 makes clear, Joseph released them from custody *"on the third day"* (42:18). Moses doesn't consider himself to have made some mistake in recounting that they were incarcerated *"for three*

days," because any part of the day can be considered the whole day.

In I Kings 20:29, the historian records that the armies of Israel and Syria camped opposite each other *"for seven days."* But then he goes on to immediately explain that the encampment ended and the fighting began *"on the seventh day."* And he sees no contradiction between these statements, because any part of day could be counted as a day.

In II Chronicles 10:5, Rehoboam sent away the people who were requesting that he lighten his father's policies and told them to *"Come to me again in three days"* (ESV), or, *"Come again unto me after three days"* (KJV). And the author is careful to tell us that they obeyed, and did *"as the king said,"* and came to him *"on the third day"* (10:12). The author then restates the request the king had made as being that they should, *"come to me again the third day" (ESV)* or *"Come again to me on the third day"* (II Chr. 10:12 KJV). My KJVO friends should especially note that the KJV translators seem to consider the phrasing of the request as *"after three days"* (II Chron. 10:5 KJV) or *"on the third day"* (II Chron. 10:12, KJV) as being equivalent. But in any case, the biblical author doesn't consider the people to have disobeyed because they did not wait a full 72-hour period before coming back to the king. To him, any part of a day could be counted as a whole day.

In Esther 4:16, Esther asked the people to fast for *"three days and three nights."* She implored them, *"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish" (Est. 4:16 ESV).* She specifically mentioned both three nights *and* three days. And that she would join them in this fast. But did she mean by this a literalistic 72-hour period? Let's see. She went to the king after the fast, just as she had said. And when did she go? *"On the third day"* (Esther 5:1). Even though she specifically demanded a fast that would last three days and three nights, she didn't understand by this a literal 72-hour period, or else she would have gone to the king, "on the fifth day." But she followed the common Jewish reckoning, where any part of a day or day/night unit can be considered as the whole.

In I Samuel 30:11-15, David's men found an abandoned Egyptian slave who has valuable military intel for them. But he had been starving, *"for he had not eaten bread or drunk water for three days and three nights (1 Sam. 30:12 ESV)."* This is the exact phrase used in Jonah 1:17. Surely this means he has been 72 hours without food or water - right? But in his own words he explains that his master had left him behind *"three days ago"* (I Sam. 30:13). Not "four days ago" or "five days ago" as would be necessitated if *"three days and three nights"* meant a literal 72-hour period, but *"three days ago."* For him, and for the biblical writer, any part of a day/night unit can be considered as the whole, and so *"three days and three nights"* simply means any part of three day/night units.

Thus, we can see that the Jewish idiom of counting any part of a day as the whole makes it clear that Jesus did not intend to predict himself being in the grave for a literal 72-hour period. Several factors come together to make this abundantly clear;

1. The original context in Jonah makes it clear that specifying a 72-hour period wasn't the original point of the phrase (Jonah 1:17-2:10).
2. The context of the passage surrounding the phrase in Matthew makes it clear that Jesus wasn't intending to specify a 72-hour burial period but was rather primarily predicting that he, like Jonah, would escape from death (Matt. 12:38-42).
3. The explanation and usage of this common idiom in rabbinic literature makes it clear that a 72-hour period isn't in view.
4. The normal usage of this common idiom even within the Hebrew Bible makes it clear that a 72-hour period is not in view (I Sam. 30:11-15, etc.).

5. The fact that the Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke the phrase clearly didn't understand him to mean a 72-hour period shows that Jesus didn't intend to refer to a 72-hour period (Matt. 27:62-66).
6. The fact that Matthew records the saying but sees no contradiction with his chronology consistent throughout his Passion account of Jesus dying Friday, and being raised on Sunday, *"on the third day,"* shows that he didn't understand Jesus to be specifying a 72-hour period.

We can summarize this brief perusal of Matthew 12:40 by quoting Carson's conclusion, "Since they included parts of three days, by Jewish reckoning Jesus was buried 'three days,' or to put it another way, he rose, 'on the third day' (16:21)... In rabbinical thought, a day and a night make an onah, and a part of an onah is as the whole...Thus, according to Jewish tradition, 'three days and three nights' need mean no more than 'three days' or the combination of any part of three separate days." [18] Jesus died on Friday around 3:00 pm. He was buried before 6:00 pm Friday. Thus, in Jewish reckoning, that was part of one "day/night" unit, and must be counted as a day. He remained in the grave Saturday, a second "day/night" unit. And he rose sometime before the women arrived early Sunday morning, which broaches into the third "day/night" unit, and thus, he was dead for a span of time (roughly 36 hours) that touched on three "day/night" units. So using the common Jewish idiom, it can be said that he was "three days and three nights" in the grave, as long as one doesn't misunderstand this to mean anything more than that basically 36-hour period. But there is one additional factor that makes Jesus' meaning behind the phrase *"three days and three nights"* even more clear, and that is Luke's handling of Jesus' prophecy and his Passion. To this we will turn in our next post.

In this post we have taken up the voices of scholarship, church tradition, Mark, and Matthew. In the next post we will take up the voices of Luke, John, Paul, and Peter, and then offer some concluding thoughts.

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[1] See "The Date Of Jesus' Crucifixion" in the ESV Study Bible.

[2] J. Dennis, "Death of Jesus," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, pg. 177.

[3] Carson, D. A., and Moo, Douglass J. "An Introduction To The New Testament," pg. 126.

[4] Blomberg, Craig. "Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction And Survey," pg. 225.

[5] While I won't interact with the Book of Mormon here, it should be noted that Mormons often attempt to defend a day other than Friday as the day of Christ's crucifixion, in order to better square the NT chronology with the divergent chronology of the Book of Mormon. See a brief note on the issue from Rob Bowman, noted apologist and Mormon expert, here http://www.religiousresearcher.org/2016/03/23/the-book-of-mormon-and-the-day-that-jesus-died/

[6] Brown, Raymond, "The Death Of The Messiah," pg. 1351. He also refers briefly in the note to Hoehner's list of scholars who have suggested a day other than Friday.

[7] Hoehner's Chapter is available as a PDF here;

[8] Hoehner, Harold, "Chronological Aspects Of The Life Of Christ," pg. 74.

[9] See John Chyrsostom, "Homilies on The Gospel of John," throughout the Passion section, especially Homily 85, section 4, and "Homilies on Matthew," Homily 84; For Tertullian, "Against the Jews" chapter 8, and, implicitly, in, “Against Marcion” book IV, chapter 40, and “On Baptism” chapter 19.

[10]Holmes notes, “The Didache may have been put into its present form as late as 150, though a date considerably closer to the end of the first century seems more probable. The materials from which it was composed reflect the state of the church at an even earlier time. [These materials] reflect a time closer to that of Paul and James (who died in the 60s) than Ignatius (who died sometime after 110).”

[11] See Carson, EBC, Matthew, pg. 655

[12] See also Gundry’s suggestion that this is one of several ways that Matthew makes clear that he intends to hark back to 12:40. Gundry, Matthew, pg. 584, and pg. 244-245.

[13] See Hoehner, Chronological Aspects, pg. 73, fn 14. The only other option is that they mean the third day from Saturday, when they are making the request. But this would mean that they want the tomb guarded till Monday, and that they thought Jesus to have predicted that he wouldn't rise till Monday. This wouldn't help a Wed. or Thurs. case at all.

[14] Gundry notes of Matthew’s circumlocution, “The careful highlighting of this succession (see also vv 63b and 64a) points to Jesus’ prediction that he will rise after three days, in particular to the only such prediction heard by Jewish leaders. That is the one in 12:40, which Matthew inserted.” (Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution, pg. 583; cf. 584-592). Note also his perceptive recognition that this is the only appearance of the Pharisees in Matthew’s Passion narrative, and that their appearance here “stems from their having heard Jesus’ only public prediction of his Resurrection after three days, the one in 12:40).” This is one of several ways that Matthew makes it clear that he intends in 27:62-66 to hark back to 12:38-40.

[15] Hoehner, Chronological Aspects, pg. 69. Note that Blomberg and Brown (see refs above) both also noted that this passage is essentially the only basis for such a claim.

[16] See Carson, EBC, Matthew, pg. 341, who notes that “of Jonah” functions here as an epexegetic genitive.

[17] Hoehner, Chronological Aspects, pg. 74.

[18] Carson, EBC, Matthew pg. 432.

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Timothy Berg

Other patrisic sources from quite early could of course be cited;

"But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration."

- Justin dialogue 1 66

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