
Tough Questions Answered

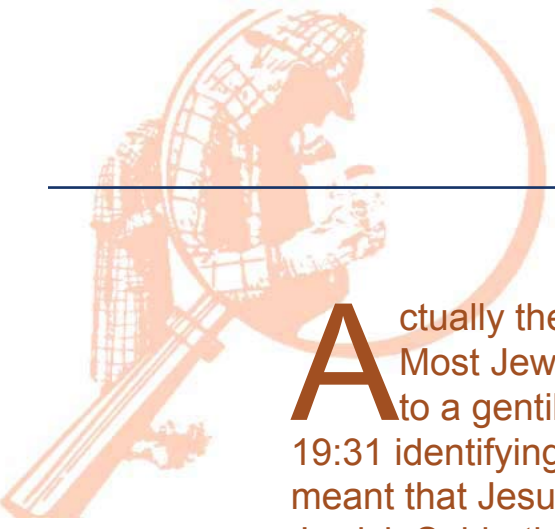
Solving the Three Day Three Night Mystery

How long was Jesus really in the tomb?



In Matthew 12:38 Jesus is asked for a sign that He's the promised Messiah. The religious officials had just accused Him of using the power of Satan to perform His miracles, and so He described the only sign they would see. "Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish," He said, "So will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (12:40)." By this He meant that they would only know for sure after they had put Him to death, but His response resulted in a 2000 year controversy surrounding the time of His death.

What's a Sabbath?



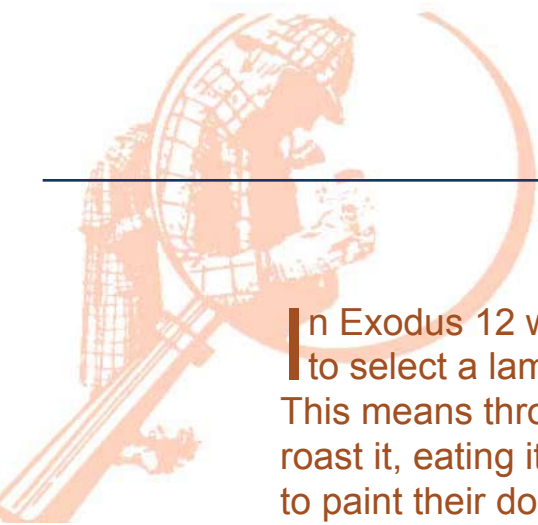
Actually the controversy exists largely among gentile believers. Most Jews familiar with their religion figured it out long ago. But to a gentile ignorant of the Jewish calendar, the phrase in John 19:31 identifying the day after the Crucifixion as a special Sabbath meant that Jesus was crucified on Friday. Even gentiles know that the Jewish Sabbath is Saturday and everyone agrees that He rose again on Sunday. There isn't any way you can put three days and three nights between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning. Hence the controversy.

Sabbath means holy day. There is one every Saturday in Israel, but there are also several during the year that are date specific. That means they are always observed on a specific calendar date, regardless of the weekday. Think of Christmas. It always comes on

the 25th of December no matter what day of the week that happens to be. The special Sabbath John referred to is the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and it's a date specific holy day; always observed on the 15th of the month they call Nisan. So the first thing we learn is that the special Sabbath mentioned in John 19:31 wasn't necessarily a Saturday.

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In fact there are three special Sabbaths in the month of Nisan alone; Passover on the 14th, the Feast of Unleavened Bread which begins on the 15th and runs through the 22nd, and the Feast of First Fruits on the Sunday morning following Passover. All have both a historical and prophetic purpose and like all days in the Jewish calendar they begin at sundown, following the pattern of Genesis 1. This also confuses Gentiles since our day begins at midnight.



The Passover Lamb

In Exodus 12 where the Passover is ordained, God told the Israelites to select a lamb on the 10th and inspect it for defects until the 14th. This means through the end of the 13th. Then at twilight slaughter and roast it, eating it that same evening. Using some of its blood they were to paint their door posts red to protect them from the plague coming upon Egypt at midnight. Following our calendar, these events would have all occurred on the night of the 13th but for them the 14th began at twilight, when the sun set.

Tradition, Tradition

Some years before the birth of Jesus the Passover celebration had been changed and called for a brief ceremonial meal to begin the 14th followed by a great and leisurely Sabbath meal on the 15th. This tradition is still followed today. The 14th became known as Preparation Day (Mark 15:42, Luke 23:54,

John 19:31), because on it they made ready for the great feast day beginning at sundown. It's also called the first day of Unleavened bread in Mark 14:12. Matthew identifies the day after the Crucifixion as the day after

Preparation Day (27:62) so all four Gospels agree. Jesus died on Preparation day, the 14th of their month Nisan, which is Passover. He ate the ceremonial meal with His disciples in the Upper Room, and then was arrested, tried, convicted, and put to death; all on Passover. While we commemorate these events on Good Friday, in the year of His death, Passover fell on a Thursday.

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How Do We Know This?

A little over 100 years ago a believer named Robert Anderson was head of Scotland Yard's investigative division. He became intrigued by the three days and three nights issue and enlisted the help of the London Royal Observatory to investigate the problem since astronomers can locate the exact position of the planets and stars on any date in history. Since Passover always falls on the 14th, and since the Jewish calendar is lunar (moon) rather than solar (sun) oriented, there is always a full moon on Passover. This fulfills Genesis 1:14. Plotting the course of the Sun and Moon they documented the day and date of every full moon. The Royal Observatory discovered that the first Palm Sunday was the 10th of Nisan, Passover, the 14th was therefore a Thursday, and Resurrection Morning was also a Sunday, the 17th. From Thursday afternoon through Sunday morning there are three days and three nights. Both the Jewish and Gentile calendars confirm this. It was written in the stars.

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So in the week Jesus died two Sabbaths were observed: The Feast of Unleavened Bread on the 15th, and the regular weekly Sabbath on the 16th. In Matthew 28:1 we read that at dawn on the first day of the week (Sunday the 17th) the women who were close to Jesus went to look at the tomb. Luke 24:1 tells us they were going to anoint His body for burial. The two Sabbaths had prevented them from doing so earlier. But He wasn't there. He had risen. Being the Sunday after Passover, at the Jewish Temple it was Feast of First Fruits. At the Empty Tomb it was Resurrection Morning.

