

Did Jesus Rise "On" or "After" the Third Day?

by Eric Lyons, M.Min.

The most frequent reference to Jesus' resurrection reveals that He rose from the grave **on** the third day of His entombment. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus as prophesying that He would arise from the grave on this day (Matthew 17:23; Mark 9:31; Luke 9:22). The apostle Paul wrote in his first epistle to the Corinthians that Jesus arose from the grave "the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:4). What's more, while preaching to Cornelius and his household, Peter taught that God raised Jesus up "**on** the third day" (Acts 10:40, emp. added). The fact is, however, Jesus also taught (and Mark recorded) "that the Son of Man" would "be killed, and **after three days** rise again" (Mark 8:31, emp. added). Furthermore, Jesus elsewhere prophesied that He would be in the heart of the Earth for "three days and three nights" (Matthew 12:40). So which is it? Did Jesus rise from the dead **on** the third day or **after** three days?



While to the 21st-century reader these statements may initially appear to contradict one another, in reality, they harmonize perfectly if one understands the different, and sometimes more liberal, methods ancients often used when reckoning time. In the first century, any part of a day could be computed for the whole day and the night following it (cf. Lightfoot, 1979, pp. 210-211). The *Jerusalem Talmud* quotes rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, who lived around A.D. 100, as saying: "A day and night are an Onah ['a portion of time'] and the portion of an Onah is as the whole of it" (from *Jerusalem Talmud*: Shabbath ix. 3, as quoted in Hoehner, 1974, pp. 248-249, bracketed comment in orig.). Azariah indicated that a portion of a 24-hour period could be considered the same "as the whole of it." Thus, as awkward as it may sound to an American living in the 21st century, a person in ancient times could legitimately speak of something occurring "on the third day," "after three days," or after "three days and three nights," yet still be referring to the same exact day.

The Scriptures contain several examples which clearly show that in Bible times a part of a day was often equivalent to the whole day.

- According to Genesis 7:12, the rain of the Noahic Flood was upon the Earth "forty days and forty nights." Verse 17 of that same chapter says it was on the Earth for just "forty days." Who would argue that it had to rain precisely 960 hours (40 days x 24 hours) for both of these statements to be true?
- In Genesis 42:17 Joseph incarcerated his brothers **for three days**. Then, according to verse 18, he spoke to them **on the third day** and released them (all but one, that is).
- In 1 Samuel 30:12,13, the phrases "three days and three nights" and "three days" are used interchangeably.
- When Queen Esther was about to risk her life by going before the king uninvited, she instructed her fellow Jews to follow her example by not eating "for three days, night or day" (Esther 4:16). The text goes on to tell us that Esther went in unto the king "**on** the third day" (5:1, emp. added).
- Perhaps the most compelling Old Testament passage which clearly testifies that the ancients (at least occasionally) considered a portion of a twenty-four hour period "as the whole of it" is found in 2 Chronicles 10. When Israel asked King Rehoboam to lighten their burdens, he wanted time to contemplate their request, so he instructed Jeroboam and the people of Israel to return "**after** three days" (2 Chronicles 10:5, emp. added). Verse 12, however, indicates that Jeroboam and the people of Israel came to Rehoboam "**on** the third day, as the king had directed, saying, 'Come back to me **the** third day'" (emp. added). Fascinating, is it not, that even though Rehoboam instructed his people to return "**after** three days," they understood this to mean "**on** the third day."
- From Acts 10, we can glean further insight into the ancient practice of counting consecutive days (in part or in whole) as complete days. Luke recorded how an angel appeared to Cornelius at "about the ninth hour of the day" (approximately 3:00 p.m.; Acts 10:3). "**The next day**" (10:9) Peter received a vision from God and welcomed visitors sent by Cornelius. "**On the next day**" (10:23) Peter and the servants of Cornelius departed for Caesarea. "And **the following day** they entered Caesarea" where Peter taught Cornelius and his household the Gospel (10:24). At one point during Peter's visit, Cornelius spoke about his encounter with the angel of God. Notice carefully how he began the rehearsal of the event. He stated: "**Four days ago to this hour**, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour..." (10:30, NASB, emp. added). Although the event actually had occurred only 72 hours (or three literal days) earlier, Cornelius spoke of it as taking place "**four days ago to this hour**." Why four days instead of three? Because according to the first-century method of reckoning time, a part of the first day and a part of the fourth day could be counted as whole days. Surely one can see how this information aligns itself perfectly with Jesus' burial taking place on Friday and His resurrection occurring on Sunday. A part of Friday, all day Saturday, and a part of Sunday would be considered **three** days in ancient times, not one or two.

Even though in modern times some may find this reasoning somewhat confusing, similar idiomatic expressions frequently are used today. For example, we consider a baseball game that ends after only

completing 8½ innings a "9-inning game." And even though the losing pitcher on the visiting team only pitched 8 innings (and not 9 innings like the winning pitcher from the home team), he is said to have pitched a **complete** game. Consider also the guest at a hotel who checks in at 8:30 p.m. on Wednesday, and checks out at 5:30 p.m. on Thursday—less than 24 hours later. Did the man stay one day or two days at the hotel? Technically, the guest was there for less than one full day (24-hour period), yet the hotel legally can charge him for two days since he did not leave before the mandatory 11:00 a.m. checkout time. Considering how flexible we are in measuring time, depending on the context, perhaps we should not be surprised at how liberal the ancients could be in calculating time.

Further evidence proving that Jesus' statements regarding His burial were not contradictory centers around the fact that even His enemies did not accuse Him of contradicting Himself. No doubt this was due to their familiarity with and use of the flexible, customary method of stating time. In fact, the chief priests and Pharisees even said to Pilate the day after Jesus was crucified: "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure **until** the third day" (Matthew 27:63-64, emp. added). The phrase "after three days" must have been equivalent to "the third day," else surely the Pharisees would have asked for a guard of soldiers until the fourth day. Interesting, is it not, that modern skeptics charge Jesus with contradicting Himself, but not the hypercritical Pharisees of His own day.

The idiomatic expressions that Jesus and the Bible writers employed to denote how long Jesus would remain in the grave does not mean that He literally was buried for 72 hours. If we interpret the account of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection in light of the cultural setting of the first century, and not according to the present-day (mis)understanding of skeptics, we find no errors in any of the expressions that Jesus and the gospel writers used.

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