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THE TIME OF THE CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

Chapter 3

THE DAY OF THE CRUCIFIXION

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Is the Wednesday Crucifixion a fact or a fable? Wednesday Crucifixionists firmly believe that it is a Biblical fact. To support it, they appeal not only to the sign of Jonah examined in the previous chapter, but also to a second key text, namely, John 19:14, where the day of Christ's Crucifixion is designated as "the day of Preparation of the Passover."

The conclusion drawn from John 19:14 is that Christ was crucified, not on a Friday—the Preparation day for the Sabbath—but on a Wednesday—the Preparation day for the annual ceremonial Passover Sabbath, which that year supposedly fell on a Thursday. Thus, all the references to the "Preparation day" of Christ's Crucifixion (Matt 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:31, 42) are interpreted in the light of John 19:14 as meaning Wednesday—the day preceding the Passover Sabbath (Thursday)—rather than Friday—the day preceding the regular seventh-day Sabbath.

The three major reasons generally given in support of this conclusion are succinctly stated in the booklet *The Time Element in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ*, published by the Church of God (Seventh Day): "Firstly, the day before the weekly Sabbath was never called a 'preparation' in

the Bible; secondly, the weekly Sabbath (as designated in the Ten Commandments) was never called or referred to as a 'high day'; and thirdly, the same writer (John) tells us . . . exactly which occasion this preparation day preceded. He said: 'And it was the preparation of the Passover' (John 19:14) . . . Thus, after John states this '*was the preparation of the passover*' (in verse 14), we must understand . . . that '*the sabbath day*' in verse 31 corresponds to '*the passover*' in verse 14."¹

A brief analysis will now be made of the three given reasons in an attempt to determine what is meant by the "Preparation" day mentioned in all the four Gospels as a time reference of the day of Christ's Crucifixion.

I. PREPARATION DAY

The first reason given for interpreting "the day of Preparation" as meaning Wednesday rather than Friday is that "the day before the weekly Sabbath was never called a '*preparation*' in the Bible." This reason is puzzling, to say the least, because it flies in the face of the irrefutable Biblical and historical usage of the term "Preparation-*paraskeue*" as a technical designation for "Friday." In addition to its occurrence in John 19:14, the term "Preparation-*paraskeue*" is used five times in the Gospels as a technical designation for "Friday" (Matt 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:31, 42).

Mark's Definition. Mark 15:42 provides what is perhaps the clearest definition of the expression "day of Preparation" by the statement: "It was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath." Note that in Greek the two phrases "the day of Preparation" and "the day before the

Sabbath" are each given with a single technical term: "*paraskeue*-Preparation," and "*pro-sabbaton*-Sabbath-eve." Translated literally the text reads: "It was Preparation, that is, Sabbath-eve." For the sake of clarity, Mark uses two technical terms here, both of which unmistakably designate what we call "Friday."

The term "*prosabbaton*-Sabbath-eve" was used by Hellenistic Jews to designate explicitly and exclusively "the day before the Sabbath, i.e. Friday" (Judith 8:6; 2 Macc. 8:26).² Thus Mark, by defining "*paraskeue*-Preparation" as being the "*prosabbaton*-Sabbath-eve," gives the clearest possible definition to his Gentile readers of what he meant by "*paraskeue*," namely, the day before the weekly Sabbath. Clarifications of time references by a qualifying clause are common in Mark, evidently because the author knew that his Gentile readers were generally unfamiliar with Jewish terms and customs.³

A Technical Designation for "Friday." An English reader could fail to see the technical usage of the term "Preparation," because in the English language such a term is a generic noun which does not mean "Friday." The situation was much different in the Semitic Greek of our Palestinian document, however, where the term "*paraskeue*" was the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic word "*arubta*-eve," both of which were commonly used to designate "Friday."

In Aramaic, as Charles C. Torrey explains, "the middle days of the week were designated by numbers, 'third, fourth, fifth,' but Friday was always *arubta*; there was no 'sixth day' of the week; . . . Its Greek equivalent, *paraskeue*-Friday, was likewise

adopted, from the first, by the Greek Church."⁴

The early Christian usage of the term "*paraskeue*," as a technical designation for Friday is well attested outside the New Testament. The *Didache* (or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*), dated between A.D. 70 to 120, enjoins Christians to fast on "the fourth day and Preparation" (8:1), that is, Wednesday and Friday. It is noteworthy that Friday is designated simply as "Preparation-*paraskeuen*," without the article or the noun "day," thus indicating the technical usage of the term.

By the time of Tertullian (c. A.D. 160-225) *paraskeue* had already become such a fixed name for Friday that he even argues that this had been the name for Friday since creation.⁵ These, and similar examples,⁶ clearly indicate that Christians adopted the Jewish practice of numbering the first five days of the week and of naming the sixth and the seventh as *paraskeue* and *sabbaton*—Preparation and Sabbath.

The Need for a Clarification. Christians coming from a Gentile background had to learn this Judeo-Christian nomenclature of the week-days, because in the pagan world the week-days were not numbered but named after the seven planetary deities (*dies solis, dies lunae, . . .*). This may explain why Mark, in writing to a Gentile-Christian readership who had only recently learned the Judeo-Christian nomenclature of the week-days, deemed it necessary to clarify what he meant by "*paraskeue*-preparation," by adding the qualifying phrase, "that is, the day before the sabbath" (Mark 15:42). This clarification may also have been necessitated by the fact that the seven-day planetary week itself had

been recently introduced in the Roman world where the eight-day week (*nundinum*) was still used side by side with the planetary week.⁷

Additional and conclusive evidence that "*paraskeue*-Preparation" is used in the Gospels to designate "Friday" and not "Wednesday" is provided by the sequence in which the days of the Passion weekend are given: "Preparation, Sabbath, first day" (Matt 27:62; 28:1; Mark 15:42; 16:1; Luke 24:54-55; 24:1). Both Mark and Matthew explicitly place the beginning of the first day at the end of the Sabbath (Mark 16:1; Matt 28:1). The latter could hardly have been a Thursday Passover Sabbath, because Thursday is not followed by the first day of the week.

A Reason for the Misunderstanding. The failure to recognize the technical usage of the term "Preparation" as the name for "Friday," has caused some to misinterpret John's phrase "it was the day of Preparation of the Passover" (John 19:14) as meaning "the day of Preparation *for* the Passover." The latter is in fact the translation of the American Revised Standard Version. On the basis of this misunderstanding, Wednesday Crucifixionists argue that in John "the day of Preparation" means not Friday but the Wednesday preceding the Passover day, which supposedly fell on a Thursday.

This conclusion ignores the fact, cogently stated by Norval Geldenhuys, "that at the time when John wrote, the Greek term *paraskeue* ('preparation') was already for a long time the technical term used to indicate 'Friday,' the equivalent of the Hebrew *erebh shabbath*."⁸ The recognition of this fact is evident in the right translation which is found in the A.V., R.S.V., and N.I.V., namely "the

day of Preparation of the Passover."

This means, as Geldenhuys explains, "that the day of the Lord's crucifixion was the Friday of the Passover, the Friday that falls during Passover week, i.e., Passover Friday (Good Friday). It is a grammatically correct rendering and all the evidence is in favor of it."⁹

The foregoing considerations make it abundantly clear that in the Gospels, as stated by Moulton and Milligan, noted authorities on the Greek language: "*paraskeue* is a technical designation for Friday."¹⁰ Thus, the first reason, which claims that "the day before the weekly Sabbath was never called a '*preparation*' in the Bible" must be regarded as false, because, as we have shown, the very opposite is true.

II. A HIGH DAY

The second reason given for interpreting "the day of Preparation" as referring to Wednesday rather than Friday is based on John's definition of the Sabbath day which followed the Preparation day of Christ's Crucifixion. John explains: "that sabbath was a high day" (John 19:31). It is argued that since "the weekly Sabbath (as designated in the Ten Commandments) was never called or referred to as a 'high day,'"¹¹ then the latter must have been not the regular weekly Sabbath but the annual ceremonial Passover Sabbath (Lev 23:5-7).

In support of this conclusion, a third reason is given, namely, that John 19:14 "tells us exactly which occasion this preparation day preceded. He says: 'And it was the preparation of the passover.'"¹² Thus the

"high day" Sabbath of John 19:31 is interpreted as being the "Passover" day of John 19:14, and by the same token "the day of Preparation" of verse 31 is interpreted as being the Passover day of verse 14. Since in the year of Christ's Crucifixion, Passover day supposedly fell on a Thursday, the day of preparation for the latter would obviously be a Wednesday.

A Ceremonial Sabbath. The reasons given in support of this conclusion rest on three major mistaken assumptions. First, it is assumed that since certain annual feasts such as the Day of Atonement are designated as "sabbath" (Lev 23:24, 32, 39), then all the references to the Sabbath found in the Passion narratives must refer not to the weekly Sabbath but to the annual ceremonial Passover Sabbath.

This assumption is discredited by the fact that the day of atonement is designated by the compound expression *shabbath shabbathon*, meaning "a sabbath of solemn rest" (Lev 23:32; 16:31). But this phrase is rendered in the Septuagint by the compound Greek expression "*sabbata sabbaton*," which is different from the simple "*sabbaton*" used in the Passion narratives. It is therefore linguistically impossible to interpret the latter as a reference to the day of the Passover or to any other annual feast day, since these are never designated simply as "*sabbaton*."

High Day: Passover or Sabbath? The second mistaken assumption is that the term "high day-*megale hemera*," used in John 19:31, is employed in the Scripture to designate the annual Passover feast (a ceremonial Sabbath), rather than a special weekly Sabbath. Unfortunately, no Biblical or extra-Biblical examples are cited to support

this assumption—the reason being simply that no such examples exist .

Israel Abrahams, a noted Jewish scholar, finds no instance before John 19:31 of the use of the term "high day" or "Great Sabbath" in Rabbinical literature. His opinion is that the later Rabbinic use of the term "Great Sabbath" to designate the Sabbath of the Passover season was borrowed from the church.¹³ While the latter is difficult to prove, it is a well-known fact that the church coined the terms "Good Friday" and "Holy Saturday" as designations for the special days of Christ's Crucifixion and burial. It is noteworthy that Georgius Codinus (15th century) gives the official term for "Good Friday" as "*he megale paraskeue*—the great Preparation."¹⁴ This suggests the possibility that even the Sabbath of the Passion week came early to be known by Christians as a "high day" or a "Great Sabbath."

Note should be taken also of the fact that, according to examples given by Strack and Billerbeck, in later Rabbinic literature the seventh-day Sabbath is regarded as a "high day" if it fell on Nisan 15, since that was the first day of the Passover festival, or if it fell on Nisan 16, because on that day the *omer* or first sheaf of barley was offered according to Pharisaic tradition.¹⁵

This information is important because it disproves the claim that "the weekly Sabbath was never called or referred to as a "high day." Rabbinical sources seem to indicate that the weekly Sabbath was called a "high day" when it coincided with Passover, because, as well stated by Charles C. Torrey, "its inherent solemnity was greatly heightened by the celebration of the foremost feast of the year."¹⁶

III. PREPARATION OF THE PASSOVER

The third mistaken assumption is that the term "Preparation" found in John 19:14, "It was the day of Preparation of the Passover" is used as a technical designation for the day before the Passover. It is also assumed that this "Preparation" day fell on a Wednesday because Passover day allegedly fell on a Thursday. On the basis of these assumptions, it is further assumed that all the other five references to the "Preparation" day (Matt 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:31, 42) must be interpreted in the light of John 19:14 as meaning Wednesday.

Friday of the Passover Week. These assumptions are false on several counts. First of all, because, as Charles C. Torrey explains, "There is no evidence to show that that word [Preparation] was used in the time of the Gospel writers for the 'eve' of other festal days than the Sabbath."¹⁷ Milligan and Moulton emphasize the same point, saying: "It has never been shown that the day before the Passover was called 'The preparation of the Passover.'"¹⁸ Leon Morris expresses the same view, saying: "The fact must be faced that no example of the use of *paraskeue* is cited for any day other than Friday."¹⁹ Moreover, as J. H. Bernard points out, if "Preparation" meant "*the* Preparation day of the Passover" we would expect a definite article in Greek, which, however, is absent.²⁰

An additional indication that John meant "Friday" by the phrase "Preparation of the Passover" (v. 14) is provided by the usage of the same term "*paraskeue*" twice again in the same chapter. In verse 31 John explains that the Jews did not wish the bodies to remain on the Cross "on the Sabbath, because it

was Preparation" (literal translation). Here John not only mentions the Sabbath explicitly, but also refers to the preceding day by the technical term "*paraskeue*—Preparation" without the article, thus meaning: "because it was Friday."

Similarly, in verse 42, John reports that Jesus was placed in a garden tomb near the place of His Crucifixion "because of the Preparation of the Jews." In this context the term "Preparation" is used again by itself, not in a generic sense, but in a temporal sense as a technical designation for Friday. What John is saying is that Jesus was buried in the garden tomb because it was near and because it was late Friday (Preparation) when the Sabbath was about to start. In the light of the above considerations, the expression "the day of Preparation of the Passover" (John 19:14), simply means, as most scholars acknowledge, "*the Friday of the Passover week.*"

The Testimony of the Synoptics. Further support for this conclusion is provided by the Synoptics where the same "Preparation" day mentioned by John is unmistakably identified with Friday, the day before the weekly Sabbath (Mark 15:42; Matt 27:62; Luke 23:54).

Any attempt to interpret the Synoptic references to the day of "Preparation" in the light of John 19:14 as meaning "Wednesday," is unwarranted for at least two reasons. First, because, as shown earlier, the term "Preparation" was never used as a technical designation for the day preceding the Passover. Second, because, even granting that John used the term "Preparation" to mean "Wednesday Passover-eve," such a meaning cannot be automatically read back

in the parallel references found in the Synoptics, because the Matthean, Marcan, and Lucan communities understood this term, not in the light of what John wrote later, but in the light of its context in their respective Gospels and in the light of its prevailing usage.

Undisputed Tradition. A final and equally important consideration is the fact that Christian tradition has unanimously held to the Friday-Crucifixion/Sunday-Resurrection chronology. This is all the more surprising in view of the fact that some early Christian writers did place the Last Supper on Tuesday evening rather than Thursday evening. With regard to the Crucifixion, however, no early Christian writer ever disputed or doubted its occurrence on Friday.

The absence of any early Christian polemic regarding the day of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection, offers, in our view, overwhelming proof of the trustworthiness of the traditional chronology of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. If indeed Christ had risen on a Saturday afternoon, seventh-day Sabbathkeepers would have capitalized on this fact to discredit the Resurrection argument frequently used in early Christianity to defend Sundaykeeping. Such an argument, however, never appears in the polemic over the theological superiority of the two days.

Conclusion. The foregoing analysis of John 19:14, the second key text of the Wednesday Crucifixion theory, has shown that such a theory is based on human fantasy and not on a Biblical fact. We have submitted abundant evidence indicating that John's expression "the day of Preparation of the Passover" (John 19:14), simply means, as most

scholars acknowledge, "the Friday of the Passover week." Thus the Crucifixion took place on Friday and not on Wednesday.

NOTES ON CHAPTER III

1. *The Time Element in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ*, published by the Bible Advocate Press of the Church of God (Seventh Day), p. 20.

2. See William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, 1979), s.v. "prosabbaton."

3. See, for example, Mark 1:32, 35; 4:35; 13:24; 14:30; 15:42; 16:2.

4. Charles C. Torrey, "The Date of the Crucifixion according to the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 50 (1931): 234-235.

5. *The Writings of Tertullian*, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, vol. III, p. 309.

6. See, for example, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 7, 1.

7. On the origin and adoption of the Planetary week in the Roman world, see Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome, 1977), pp. 241-251.

8. Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, 1983), p. 664.

9. *Loc. cit.*

10. W. Moulton and W. F. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*

(New York, 1928), p. 545.

11. *The Time Element* (n. 1), p. 20.

12. *Loc. cit.*

13. Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (Cambridge, 1924), vol. II, p. 68.

14. *De Officiis* 13,1.

15. H. L. Strack and P. Billerbec, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash* (Munich, 1922-1928), vol. 2, pp. 581f. and 847.

16. Charles C. Torrey (n. 4), p. 235.

17. Charles C. Torrey, "In the Fourth Gospel the Last Supper was the Paschal Meal," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 42 (January 1952): 241.

18. W. Milligan and W. F. Moulton, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Edinburgh, 1898), on John 19:14.

19. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, 1971), p. 777.

20. J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (Edinburgh, 1928), on John 19:14.

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