

The Timing of Yeshua's Resurrection

In Matthew 12:40, when the religious authorities asked Yeshua for a sign, He declared that “just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” Commentators have long wrestled with the interpretation of His words, and, in particular, whether it mandated three 24-hour periods, for a total of 72 hours.

The narrative of the gospels leaves no doubt that Yeshua was in the grave for a short time on the 14th (the sixth day of the week), the entire day of the 15th (the seventh day Sabbath), and a portion of the 16th (the first day of the week). The text of the gospels is not ambiguous in those details whatsoever. What it doesn't tell us is exactly the moment when Yeshua rose from the grave, other than it was after sundown and before sunrise. Even if you place the occurrence right before sunrise on the first day of the week, it is impossible to reach a total of 72 hours.

But a full 72 hours is not necessary according to the principle of inclusive reckoning of time that was practiced in the Jewish culture. Accordingly, in biblical times, any part of a day was considered the same as a whole day.

- We see this stated directly in the Babylonian Talmud: “The portion of a day is as the whole of it” (*Bereshit Pesachim 4a*).
- And again in the Jerusalem Talmud: “A day and a night are a period of time (Heb. *onah*), and the part of a time is as the whole of it” (*Mishnah Shabbat 9:3*).
- Kings were considered to reign for an entire year, even if it was just one day (Bab. Talmud, *Bereshit Rosh Hashanah 2a,2b*).
- You can also see it in passages like 1 Sam. 30:12-13. In this passage, if “three days and three nights” were understood literally, instead of the servant saying that his master left him “three days ago,” he would have said “four days ago” if time wasn't reckoned inclusively.
- Esther fasts for “three days” but goes before the king “on the third day” (Est. 4:16; 5:1).
- Jeroboam was told to return “in three days” and returns “on the third day” (2 Chr 10:5,12).
- We even see this reflected in Yeshua's parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard where the landowner paid all of the workers the same amount regardless of how long they had worked (Mat 20:1-16). The men who started working at 9:00am, noon, 3:00pm and 5:00pm all got credited for a full day's wage, regardless of working 9 hours or one.
- Also Yeshua repeatedly said that He would rise from the dead on the third day (Mat. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 1 Cor. 15:4). So, based on the chronology of the gospels, the third day would be Nisan 16. In contrast, a full 72 hours would require a fourth day in contradiction of Yeshua's own words. But, in the Hebraic way of thinking, the phrase “on the 3rd day” was the same as all or part of three days.

Thus, Yeshua being in the grave less than 72 hours was compatible with the Jewish cultural understanding of time as long as it spanned parts of three consecutive days, just as the Scriptures depict and is consistent with all of the other points of evidence.

Regarding the timing when Yeshua rose from the grave, once the third of those consecutive days began after sundown, Yeshua had satisfied the requisite period described as three days and three nights according to inclusive reckoning. From that point onward, He would not have been credited with any more time for each minute He remained in the grave.

Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that Yeshua rose from the grave shortly after the sundown that began the first day of the week according to the Jewish way of reckoning time, not after midnight according to the Roman civil day. That means, in our modern way of measuring time, the resurrection occurred on Saturday night, not on Sunday, as it is popularly envisioned. That is why it is important to describe the events using the numbers of the days of the week rather than the modern names of the days of the week that are based on the Roman civil day.

This understanding is consistent with the purpose of the resurrection being victory over death. Although Yeshua was willing to experience the ultimate penalty of death instead of us because of our sins, it was only temporary. As eternal God in the flesh and the almighty King of all creation, as soon as He fulfilled the promise of His own words about the duration of His death, it was time to proclaim victory over sin and the death that it brings to humanity. And that is what the resurrection of Yeshua accomplished.

The Resurrection Connection with the Concept of First Fruits

As part of his discussion on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul makes this declaration in verse 20: “But now Messiah has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.”

The concept of first fruits in the Bible refers to the act of dedicating to God the very first thing in a particular category, which gives approval of the intended result of subsequent things in that same category. That was true for actual fruits in biblical times, so that the dedication to God of first fruits was intended to bring prosperity to the land with subsequent fruits, thanks to His blessing.

That concept was epitomized in *Bikkurim*, the annual Feast of First Fruits, in which barley, the first grain to ripen, was dedicated at the temple, followed by subsequent fruits and crops from the harvest. As the third of seven feasts, God instructed that it was to be observed “on the day after the Sabbath” (Lev 23:11). Since this passage comes right after His instructions on the special Sabbath day for the feast of Unleavened Bread, there was not a consensus on which Sabbath is in view. The religious party of the Sadducees said that it referred to the regular weekly Sabbath. So, according to their reckoning, *Bikkurim* was to be observed on the first day of the week (Saturday night/Sunday daytime) that followed Passover.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, said that it referred to the special Sabbath of Unleavened Bread. So, according to their reckoning, the Feast of First Fruits was to be observed every year on the 16th day of Nisan, which meant it could occur on any day of the week. That also meant that one out of every seven years, *Bikkurim* would fall on the first day of the week, in conformity with the timing of the Sadducees. The Apostle John clearly describes this kind of alignment during the crucifixion and resurrection of Yeshua:

Then the Judeans, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away (John 19:31).

The Greek word *megas*, translated here as “high,” literally means “great,” which conveys a strong sense of distinction from regular weekly Sabbaths that do not coincide with a feast day.

This alignment is consistent with the other details in the gospel narratives that place both the 16th day of the month and the first day of the week on the exact same day for this year. Moreover, Yeshua’s resurrection from the dead on the day of the Feast of First Fruits is consistent with other events occurring on actual feast days, namely Yeshua’s death on Passover, being in the tomb on Unleavened Bread, and the giving of the Holy Spirit on the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot/Pentecost). And, most significantly, that provides a literal connection to the concept of first fruits, so that the resurrection of Yeshua secures the resurrection of those who believe in Him (1 Cor 15:23).