

## PROBLEMS WITH PASSION WEEK



There is no set of events more important in the history of this Earth than those involving the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Messianic prophecies of the Holy Scriptures and the sacrificial system of the Hebrew people pointed forward to the great sacrifice which Jesus made for all humanity at the cross. The story of redemption is the story of Jesus' life and it is told most forcefully and clearly by the events that surrounded the sacrifice of the sinless One. More than at any other time, the character of Jesus was revealed through these events. Although He is the Creator of the Universe and the King of kings, He humbly submitted to the scourge of His enemies thereby demonstrating the great love He has even for those who rebel against Him. At no time has the Universe ever seen such a demonstration of unselfish love as at the cross of Jesus.

Not only are the events immediately surrounding the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus of utmost importance for a proper understanding of the power and character of God and His great love for His fallen creatures, certain events that led up to Passion Week also have an important bearing on the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish rulers. All of these events taken together serve as the strongest evidence of Jesus' mission in revealing the character of God to us and the on-looking Universe. We do well to study and contemplate these events thoroughly and often as they reveal to us the nature of God's character. It is only through a careful study of these events that we learn of the great treasures of Passion Week.

The landmark events of Passion Week are well known: the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, the crucifixion on Good Friday, and the resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. There are many passages in scripture with bits of information that serve to

support these events. But there are two pieces of the puzzle that just don't fit the traditional teaching: the sign of the prophet Jonah (Matthew 12:39-40) and the six days before Passover that John says Jesus arrived in Bethany followed directly by the dinner at Simon's home that evening and the next day by the triumphal entry (John 12:1-12). Although Christian tradition places the triumphal entry on the first day of the week, there is nothing in scripture that tells us directly and explicitly on what day of the week the triumphal entry actually occurred. A brief review of these issues will expose the enormous problems for the traditional teaching regarding two of the three landmark events of Passion Week.

Jesus said He would be three days and three nights in the heart of the Earth just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. It doesn't matter what logic one uses to try to understand the amount of time Jesus was in the tomb, a Friday afternoon through Sunday morning time period simply does not include three days and three nights. We can rationalize that three days and three nights should really mean just three days, but that isn't what Jesus said. We can argue that the Jews counted days by the method of *inclusive reckoning*, where any part of the day counts for an entire day, reasoning that so long as any part of the day is included, the entire day and night must be considered included. But that method of counting is easily discredited by scripture. Some other line of reasoning might be created to support the traditional teaching of Passion Week. Regardless of any of this, the three days and three nights of the sign of Jonah simply is not fulfilled by the traditional teaching. The conclusion can be made from this that, according to the traditional view of Holy Week, either Jesus was an incompetent prophet who didn't understand what

was about to happen to Him or He was a quick-witted, clever deceiver.

The second issue is that Jesus' arrived in Bethany six days before Passover, which causes a different kind of serious problem for the traditional teaching of the events of Passion Week. If we presume, as the traditional view does, that Jesus arrived in Bethany on the weekly Sabbath, had the feast at Simon's house that evening on what we call Saturday night, followed by the triumphal entry the next day on Palm Sunday, then counting forward six days from His arrival in Bethany brings us to the sixth day of the week — Friday — for Passover. If Passover was on the sixth day of the week that year, then the preparation day for Passover would be the fifth day of the week and not the sixth day of the week. The immediate conclusion is that Jesus was not crucified on Good Friday, but on Good Thursday. In order for Jesus to rise on Sunday morning, He would then be resting in the tomb before sunset on Thursday, and would spend all day Friday and all day Sabbath in the tomb, and be resurrected on the first day of the week. According to the method of counting by *inclusive reckoning*, Jesus would be resurrected on the fourth day, not the third day. If Palm Sunday really is the day of the triumphal entry, then Passion Week should include Good Thursday, not Good Friday. This certainly doesn't match the traditional teaching regarding the day of His death.

Conversely, if one presumes that the Passover coincided with the weekly Sabbath that year, as the traditional view does, then counting backwards the six days before Passover brings one to Sunday as the day Jesus arrived in Bethany. That night, now the second day of the week, would be the time for the dinner at Simon's house, followed by the triumphal entry the next day — still the second day of the week, on what we call Monday. This would give us Palm Monday, not Palm Sunday. This certainly doesn't match the traditional teaching regarding the feast at Simon's and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Indeed, the traditional teaching of the events of Passion Week has some serious problems. Which ever anchor point one wishes to cling to makes no difference, John's statement leaves us one day short of the required number of days for the traditional teaching to be supported. In fact, when every aspect of the story of Passion Week as described in Holy

Scripture is taken into account, the traditional teaching has impossibly serious defects. We are forced to recognize the possibility that there was no such thing as Palm Sunday or Good Friday.

The reason for the tortured traditional teaching of Passion Week is that, at some time in the past, in an effort to reconcile Christian teachings and practices with the more popular pagan teachings and practices, religious leaders made slight, but significant, alterations to the story so that the traditions of the story we understand today are somewhat different from the story told by the writers of scripture. We know from history that such compromises were made. Beginning in the early part of the second century, or perhaps even earlier, the church at Rome switched from celebrating the day of the LORD's resurrection in connection with Passover to celebrating it in connection with the pagan festival of Easter. The controversy between the churches in Asia and the church at Rome and those that followed her lead lasted until the fifth century when the practice of keeping the LORD's festivals virtually died. Part of the controversy is evidenced by the visit Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, made to Anicetus, the bishop of Rome, in A.D. 162 to discuss the Paschal controversy. Polycarp and others in the East always kept the feast on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan no matter on what day of the week it fell, while in Rome it was always observed on Sunday, and the day of the LORD's death on Friday. Nothing was resolved by their meeting as Anicetus did not wish to offend Polycarp who had been a disciple of John, who was a disciple of Jesus Himself, and who celebrated Passover with Him. In 190, Victor became the bishop of Rome and subsequently, in a letter to Polycrates, the bishop of Smyrna, demanded that the churches in Asia stop observing Passover and begin celebrating Easter, or be excommunicated. The churches in Asia that had been nurtured by Paul, John, and other apostles, although only a small minority when compared with the many churches under the leadership of Rome, continued to observe the sacred festivals of the LORD for many years and suffered persecution because of it. Celebration of the LORD's festivals in the Eastern churches was eventually extinguished by civil legislation that provided punishment by exile or death. The last such law was issued in 432. *The History of the Church*, Eusebius, pp. 170-173; Catholic

Encyclopedia.com, Anicetus; Orthodox Church in America [www.oca.org], Sermons on the Twelve Festivals, *The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop, pp. 103-113.

Bible students should not be surprised to find that various time elements important in scripture have been compromised by popular religions. The LORD gave Daniel a vision, recorded in Daniel 7, of a terrible beast and a Little Horn who spoke proud and blasphemous things against the Most High, mistreated His faithful people, and thought to change times and laws. For this, the Little Horn is condemned to death in the day of judgment and God's people are vindicated. This appears to be the same Little Horn in Daniel 8:24 who Daniel is certain is successful in whatever it does. John tells us in Revelation 13:3 that the whole world follows the beast in wonder. This seems to be the beast upon whom the Little Horn resides.

The Little Horn's desire to change times and laws encompasses God's entire system of worship. Daniel 7 is in that part of the Book of Daniel written in Aramaic, and verse 25 is the passage that tells us the Little Horn intends to change "times and laws." The Aramaic word here for 'times' is ܙܡܢܝܡ = *zennim*, which means 'appointed times' or 'appointed seasons' or 'sacred festival seasons.' This is the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew word מועדים = *moedim*, which encompasses the entire system of worship with all the LORD's sacred festivals, as well as any other appointment times God might have. The fundamental meaning for both the Aramaic *zennim* and the Hebrew *moedim* is the *appointment times*.

This raises several questions related to the events of Passion Week which occurs during the time of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Several events of this festival season were required to be done on dates set certain by the LORD through Moses. See Exodus 12 and Leviticus 23. The paschal lamb was selected on the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month, it was slain and its body roasted on the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month, the Passover meal was eaten on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month, and the day of first fruits was celebrated on the day after the Sabbath that fell within this festival. This is the pattern of practice the LORD instructed His people to follow for all time to come and it is the pattern of practice we can expect to find in the record of the gospels. These dates are part of the appointment

times of the LORD and we should expect that they would play an important role in the events of Passion Week.

On three separate occasions Jesus told His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem to die and that three days later he would rise again. Matthew 16:21; 17:22; 20:17-19; Mark 8:31; 9:30-32; 10:32-34; Luke 9:22-27; 9:43b-45; 18:31-34; John 11:25. In addition to these, there is the more specific statement regarding the sign of Jonah that He would be three days and three nights in the heart of the Earth. Based on these prophetic statements, there are four questions that set the stage for this study. First, considering the predictions in these statements, did Jesus have an appointment time with death? Certainly. Second, did He have an appointment time for the resurrection? Surely. Third, did Jesus specify the amount of time that would transpire between these two events? Positively. And fourth, does the Little Horn have any interest in deceiving people regarding the time of these events? Absolutely. By changing the way we interpret a few words in scripture, the story of Passion Week has been made the foundation for establishing a totally different system of worship contrary to God's instructions to His people on how He wants His people to worship Him. The weekly day of worship was changed from the LORD's Sabbath to Sunday, the spurious day of worship promoted by the ancient pagan religions of Ashtoreth, Baal, Mithra, Ra, and others. The Little Horn power has also sought to abolish as merely ceremonial all the festivals of the LORD, which He declared to be holy. Leviticus 23:7, 8, 20, 21, 24, 27, 35, 36. Indeed, the Little Horn has been very successful in all it has done to alter and/or abolish the LORD's system of worship.

The importance of this type of study cannot be underestimated. The investigation of truth, especially the truth about God and His system of worship, is always worth the time and effort invested. The doctrines we embrace are to be based on the most sound evidence and reasoning, and are always to be subject to investigation. Those who teach scripture are to be vigorous in the presentation of the truth to those who will listen. However, we are not to believe that our understanding of scripture is complete or that our doctrines will never need refinement or correction. Ellen White wrote about it this way:

“Investigation of Doctrine.— There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation.” Counsels to Writers and Editors, page 35. [Emphasis added.]

“Agitate, agitate, agitate! The subjects which we present to the world must be to us a living reality. It is important that in defending the doctrines which we consider fundamental articles of faith, we should never allow ourselves to employ arguments that are not wholly sound. These may avail to silence an opposer, but they do not honor the truth. We should present sound arguments, that will not only silence our opponents, but will bear the closest and most searching scrutiny....” Counsels to Writers and Editors, page 40.

Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, no one has written more about church doctrine than Ellen White. Yet she indicates in these statements that even her own teachings must be subject to investigation and may need to be refined by future study. The Holy Spirit did not stop working on the hearts and minds of men and women to uncover new gems of light and develop a more complete understanding of God after the death of Ellen White.

Ellen White appears to accept the “three days and three nights” as a literal time period. Although published in several different sources, she has made only two statements regarding Jonah's time in the fish and only one of those two statements says anything regarding Jesus' time in the tomb relative to Jonah's experience. In neither statement does she attempt to explain away the words of Jesus with respect to the literal meaning of “three days and three nights” either for Jonah's time in the belly of the fish or for Jesus' time in the heart of the Earth. Here are her words:

Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Prophets and Kings, page 268.

“And He sighed deeply in His spirit, and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign?” “There shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas.” As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, Christ was to be the same time “in the heart of the earth.” Desire of Ages, page 406.

Her words here are an exact echo of the words spoken by Jesus to those who doubted that He was working with the Spirit of God.

Throughout the record of scripture, there are only three anchor points that serve as the foundation of an accurate understanding of the time elements of the events of Passion Week: (1) the time of the resurrection, (2) the length of time Jesus rested in the tomb, and (3) the time of Jesus' arrival in Bethany before the dinner at Simon's house and the triumphal entry that followed the next day. Naturally, this study relates all the events of Passion Week to these three anchor points. The first event can be established by a review of the stories of the women and disciples finding the tomb of Jesus empty. This the only anchor point that can be established totally independently of any other parts of the story. The second time element is established in relation to the event of the resurrection and is dependent on first determining when the resurrection took place. The determination of the amount of time Jesus rested in the tomb will also establish the day on which Passover was celebrated, and from this the third anchor point of when Jesus arrived in Bethany can be established. From this date, the dinner at Simon's house followed the next day by the triumphal entry can be established. This study will address the time issues of Passion Week in this order.

This study seeks to follow the evidence in scripture regarding the time each of these events took place. It does not seek to exonerate the traditional teaching of Palm Sunday, Good Friday, or the Easter Sunday morning sunrise resurrection. The traditions of Passion Week are not more important than the record of scripture regarding the events of that period. This study will address each of the three anchor points of Passion Week and show that each of the three landmark teachings of the traditional view is contrary to the story as told in all of scripture.

This introduction would not be complete without

providing a sense of the importance of this study. There are at least eight reasons why this study and its conclusions are important. Some of these conclusions may be startling as they are profoundly contrary to the commonly held view of these events.

First on the list of my concerns is biblical accuracy. The traditional view that Jesus was in the tomb from Friday evening until Sunday morning is contrary to the words of Jesus regarding how long He would be in the heart of the Earth. When confronted by the scribes and Pharisees for a sign that He has been sent by the Father, Jesus cites the “sign of Jonah,” and the time element to which He directed their attention was the “three days and three nights” that Jonah was in the belly of the fish. Why did Jesus say “just as Jonah...” if it was not just that same time period of three days and three nights that He wanted them to find as the evidence that He was sent from heaven? Jesus pointed them to this very time period as the only piece of future evidence that He had been sent from God. By teaching a time period different from that taught by Jesus, this prophecy of Jesus is made to appear to be unfulfilled and Jesus is made to appear to be incompetent or a liar by modern Christians. The format of a Friday crucifixion — Sunday morning resurrection is contrary to at least six (6) Bible passages: Matthew 12:38-40; 16:4; 27:63; Mark 10:34; Luke 11:29-30; & 24:21. Teaching that which is contrary to scripture is wrong.

Second, Jesus declared that the sign we could count on as the deciding factor that He was sent by the Father would be the sign of Jonah, and He specified that He would be in the heart of the Earth three days and three nights. Teaching that Jesus was resurrected before the completion of three days and three nights is teaching that the sign Jesus said we could count on was never fulfilled, thus we can logically and properly conclude from Jesus' own declaration that He is not the Christ, the Messiah, and is not divine. Teaching the Friday crucifixion — Sunday morning resurrection format teaches that the sign of His divine appointment was not fulfilled. If the sign didn't happen as He said it would, then Jesus is a fraud. Three of the gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) testify that Jesus was resurrected after three days had passed. In scripture, an accusation was considered established upon the witness or testimony of two or more individuals. (See

Numbers 35:30, Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15, John 8:17, and 2 Corinthians 13:1.) Here we have the testimony of three gospel writers that Jesus was resurrected after three days. I will show that at least 16 of the 21 verses where the day of the resurrection is associated with “the third day” can and have been translated to be “after three days”.

Third, Jesus gave the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees the sign so that they would know when He died and was resurrected that He could accurately tell the future. They all understood that only God's anointed could tell the future. By fulfilling the sign of Jonah (three days and three nights in the heart of the Earth), Jesus proved that He could foretell the future and be the spokesperson for the Father. Teaching a Friday crucifixion — Sunday morning resurrection format teaches that Jesus' word about Himself is not reliable and His teaching might even be a misrepresentation of truth as the prophecy He said would be the sign did not come true. It raises questions by implication that if Jesus was not correct in this teaching, there might be other teachings about which He was mistaken. I'm not willing to say that Jesus made mistakes in His ministry.

Fourth, Jesus stated that everything He taught He was directed to teach by the Father. John 12:44-50. The Father is witness to the teaching of Jesus, and the Father has directed us to listen to Him (Matthew 17:2-5, Mark 9:2-8, and Luke 9:28-36). As already mentioned, scripture requires that two witnesses are necessary to validate a claim. Here we have Jesus and the Father in agreement about the teaching of Jesus and we are instructed to listen to Him. Moreover, the Father's testimony regarding Jesus is stronger than the testimony of any number of human witnesses. 1 John 5:9. Did the Father make a mistake in directing Jesus to cite the “three days and three nights” of Jonah as the time period He would be in the tomb? Or did Jesus misunderstand the Father regarding which story to cite and/or the actual time period involved? The failure to count a full three days and three nights for this time in the tomb is not only a show of disrespect to Jesus for what He said about Himself, but is also a show of disrespect to the Father for this as well. What does it say about us if we attempt to edit the meaning of the words of Jesus — especially for something so important as the sign Jesus pointed to as the evidence that He has been sent

from the Father?

Fifth, when Lazarus died, Jesus said He was glad He was not there because now God's glory could be revealed. The pagan religions and Greek philosophy promoted the belief that the spirit and body were separable so that when a person died, the spirit would hang around the body for three days after which it would depart for the house of Sheol. This teaching had made considerable inroads into Jewish teaching and Jesus made sure to wait more than the three days before resurrecting Lazarus so no one, Jew or Gentile, could say that Lazarus wasn't really dead before Jesus resurrected him. The same principle holds true here at Jesus' death. Jesus wants to be the Savior of all mankind, not just the Jews. The Jews had no problem accepting His death on the cross when Pilate ordered the soldier to shove a spear in His side and blood and water spilled out and there was no quiver in His body. They had enough evidence that He was dead.

At the request of the Jewish leaders, Pilate had authorized that 100 Roman soldiers be stationed around the burial site to ensure that the disciples wouldn't steal His body away and claim that He had risen just as He had predicted. The Roman soldiers were assigned to the tomb for three days and were expected to forfeit their lives if they did not complete their assignment. They could verify the length of time Jesus was in the tomb. But after the resurrection, when the soldiers were scampering to tell Pilate that they had been overpowered by the angels, they were intercepted by the Jewish rulers and bribed into silence. The intention of the rulers was that the resurrection story would never be told. Despite their intentions and the bribes, the story of the Roman soldiers has been told. Hearing the resurrection story in its context helps to confirm that all the events foretold by Jesus have come true just as He said they would.

The Gentile population who were not near Jerusalem at the time of His crucifixion would have questions about whether He was really dead, that is, was He really in the grave for the required three full days so that there would be no question that His spirit had really departed. On the cross Jesus said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Luke 23:46. The Jews knew His spirit had departed and there are few people alive today who would seriously question

His death. But Jesus made reference to the sign of Jonah because it would answer the questions raised by Gentiles in foreign lands. The story of the Roman soldiers at the tomb helps to confirm the time of these events. Without Jesus being in the heart of the Earth three days and three nights, the pagans could dismiss Jesus as a Jewish poster boy without relevancy to the rest of mankind. By spending three full days in the Earth before His resurrection, Jesus proved that He was the Savior of all mankind.

Sixth, if Jesus was crucified on Friday in agreement with the traditional view, then the day following His crucifixion would be the weekly Sabbath in addition to being the first Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and thus, the Sabbath of Passover. All the gospel writers agree that Jesus participated in the triumphal entry a few days before His crucifixion, but only John specifies that Jesus arrived in Bethany six days before Passover. If the Sabbath of Passover was on the weekly Sabbath that year, then six days prior to this would be the first day of the week on what we call Sunday. One's first impression might be to conclude that this fits the time element for the triumphal entry, but on closer examination it must be noticed that John is explicit in verse 12 that the triumphal entry occurred on the day *after* His arrival in Bethany six days before Passover. Thus, if Jesus arrived in Bethany six days before Passover, then the triumphal entry occurred five days before Passover. If He arrived in Bethany on the first day of the week, then the triumphal entry had to be on the second day of the week on what we call Monday. For those who believe in a Friday crucifixion, the day for the triumphal entry should properly be called Palm Monday as it is clear that, as a literal, historical, or biblical event, Palm Sunday never occurred and is a very clever myth.

On the other hand, if Palm Sunday is the accepted anchor point, then his arrival was at least one day before that event, and counting forward six days places Passover on Friday and the preparation day for Passover, the day of His crucifixion, on Thursday. In this pattern Jesus would already be in the grave for the entire sixth day of the week and there could be no such thing as the arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death on Good Friday. As a literal, historical, or biblical event, Good Friday never occurred and is a very clever myth.

Seventh, if you were in Satan's place and you had just lost the contest with Jesus at the resurrection from the grave before the on-looking Universe, what would be your next best move? Wouldn't it be to distort the story and its record? By distorting the story, important theological doctrines are prevented from being taught in the context of the most powerful demonstration the Universe could possibly see. From Satan's perspective, wouldn't you want Jesus' followers to teach things about Him that were historically and factually wrong? It would be all the more persuasive if the thing His followers taught wrong was *the sign* that Jesus said His doubters could rely on as the primary evidence that He was heaven sent. Why should we not consider the truncated version of Jesus' time in the tomb from Friday evening to Sunday morning to be Satan's spin on the most important sequence of events in the history of the Universe and one fulfillment of the prophecy of the Little Horn's deception? While victory over Jesus can never belong to Satan, he can deceive many by changing the story so that some important truths are not taught and Jesus is made to look like the one who is less than completely competent and truthful.

Eighth, by distorting the story, these events are used as the basis for a new system of worship that is contrary to the system of worship God instructed His followers to observe. The traditional teaching of Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and the resurrection on

Easter Sunday morning did not develop by accident. Someone at war with Jesus and the Father has crafted this pattern of observance. The teaching of Palm Sunday as the day of the triumphal entry and Easter Sunday morning as the day of His resurrection serve the purpose of attempting to establish the first day of the week as the new day of worship. Both are contrary to scripture. Worship on Sunday follows the traditions of several ancient pagan religions and, once this is realized, adopting or maintaining this practice in one's religious life constitutes a rejection of the leadership of the LORD.

It must be noted that the proponents of the traditional view rely on theories to support their position and do not rely only on scripture as the basis of their teaching. The prophecy Jesus made that He would be three days and three nights in the grave is tortured to mean that He was in the grave for 36 hours — only half the time He specified. Likewise the record in John regarding the six days before Passover is simply ignored. Accepting either of these scriptures as actual events important to the complete story of Passion Week destroys the traditions of the traditional view. When little bits of truth are deliberately and cleverly compromised, the new system of worship appears to many to be completely acceptable.

It is my belief that we should be exonerating the testimony of Jesus rather than the distortions and deceptions of the Adversary.