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LUKE 23:54 - LUKE 24:21

Earlier today I received a question about Luke 23:54 - Luke 24:21. The question basically (not verbatim) went like this:

I understand that Jesus Christ was crucified on a Wednesday and not on a Friday. But when I read Luke's account in a vacuum (i.e. without referring to the other gospels), then it does appear as if Luke is speaking about a Friday-Sunday crucifixion-resurrection. Did Luke intend to convey a Friday-Sunday event to us? Or is there something that I am missing?

Here is a reply to this question.

1) Of course we are NOT supposed to consider any book of the Bible "in a vacuum". That is also true for books outside of the synoptic gospels. That is precisely why we have the instruction in 2 Timothy 2:15; we study ALL the books of the Bible so that we can "rightly divide" the word of truth.

2) To come up with a Friday-Sunday scenario in Luke's account DOES require people to make some ASSUMPTIONS. In this case the assumption has to be that the word "sabbath" must always refer to a Saturday unless a Holy Day is SPECIFICALLY mentioned.

THIS ASSUMPTION IS CLEARLY WRONG!

3) The authors of the New Testament simply DON'T differentiate between a weekly Sabbath and an annual Sabbath, apart from one single reference by the Apostle John. And even with John his one comment that that Sabbath day was an annual Holy Day is ONLY A PARENTHETICAL STATEMENT (see John 19:31); it is like an after-thought. We need to understand that the N.T. authors viewed weekly and annual Sabbaths as being basically identical, serving similar purposes, but carrying a different symbolism. Check out Matthew, Mark and Luke for references that will identify a "Sabbath" as a "Holy Day" ... it's not there. They just never bothered making a difference between Holy Days and weekly Sabbath days.

4) John 19:31 is the only occasion where the term "high day" is used in the N.T., and it is only a parenthetical statement at that. The parallel accounts don't bother to state this.

5) So when WE TODAY read the word "Sabbath" in the N.T., we must ALWAYS make allowance for the possibility that it could in fact be a reference to an annual Holy Day. It MAY be no more than a weekly Sabbath day, but we can never make that assumption. We need to first carefully examine the context.

6) Notice the word "PREPARATION" in the New Testament. It is used six times in the gospels and is always the Greek word "paraskeue". This Greek word is not used anywhere else in the N.T. In Ephesians 6:15 a totally different word is used. There it is "hetoimasia".

7) The difference between these two Greek words is as follows:

HETOIMASIA (Ephesians 6:15) refers to "get everything ready". The focus is not on self, but on factors around you, which however may have an effect on you, or may apply to you in some way.

PARASKEUE (6 times in the gospels) refers to "make ONESELF ready", "prepare ONESELF". The focus with this word is on the self.

Thus: When a day in the gospels is called "the preparation" (and this is only the case for the Day before the First Day of U.B., the day on which Jesus Christ died), then the focus is on preparing ONESELF for the occasion, not necessarily a focus on other things outside of self, though things outside of self can obviously come into play.

But the point is that these two words have a different focus.

8) Next, the six occasions when the word "paraskeue" is used ALL REFER TO A PREPARATION DAY BEFORE A HOLY DAY! None of those six occurrences refer to a regular weekly Friday before a regular weekly Sabbath Day.

The six places are: Matthew 27:62, Mark 15:42, Luke 23:54, John 19:14, John 19:31 and John 19:42.

9) So the word "preparation" is ONLY used for a day before a Holy Day in the gospels ... AND ALL FOUR GOSPEL WRITERS CLEARLY IDENTIFY THE DAY OF THE CRUCIFIXION AS SUCH A "PREPARATION DAY". The Apostle John does so three times, but only once refers to that Sabbath as "a high day".

10) The audiences they were writing to clearly understood that the word "paraskeue" was only used for the day before a Holy Day. WE TODAY have "assumed" that the words "preparation day" refer to a Friday before a weekly Sabbath Day, but that is NEVER the way it is used in the New Testament. You cannot find a single example in the New Testament to support that assumption.

11) No, I am not saying that we shouldn't prepare ourselves for the weekly Sabbath. I myself try to prepare as much as I possibly can in order to minimize necessary activities on the weekly Sabbath Days. But the point is this: The Greek word "paraskeue" very clearly, and in an unambiguous way, identified the day before a Holy Day to audiences of the New Testament writers. So the gospel writers did not really need to spell out what type of Sabbath Day they were speaking about in the context of the crucifixion; the word "paraskeue" clearly told their readers in the first century A.D. that they were speaking about the day before a Holy Day.

12) A careful reading of Luke 23:56 further clarifies this matter.

The verse reads:

And THEY RETURNED, AND PREPARED spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment. Luke 23:56

IF that was supposed to be a Friday late afternoon, very clearly close to sunset, THEN there simply wasn't any time for the women to "PREPARE SPICES" ... EVEN IF THAT TASK HAD ONLY REQUIRED TWO HOURS! In practice that was usually a full day's work (no cars, no electrical appliances, no pharmaceutical giants to provide such things, etc.).

13) But the Greek verbs used in this verse make this matter even clearer.

A reader of this English translation may make some unwarranted assumptions here; namely that the "returning and preparing" followed immediately upon the heels of having seen Christ's body placed in the sepulchre.

But both the Greek verbs used in this verse (for "returned" and for "prepared") are in the tense known as THE AORIST TENSE! This "tense" has no equivalent in the English language. It does not strictly refer to either the past tense or the present tense or the future tense. It could really on occasions apply to any one of these three English language tenses.

14) Here is some information about the aorist tense, as it is provided by the computer "Online Bible" program.

"The aorist tense is characterized by its emphasis on punctiliar action; that is, the concept of the verb is considered without regard for past, present, or future time. There is no direct or clear English equivalent for this tense, though it is generally rendered as a simple past tense in most translations.

"The events described by the aorist tense are classified into a number of categories by grammarians. The most common of these include a view of the action as having begun from a certain point ("inceptive aorist"), or having ended at a certain point ("cumulative aorist"), or merely existing at a certain point ("punctiliar aorist"). The categorization of other cases can be found in Greek reference grammars.

"The English reader need not concern himself with most of these finer points concerning the aorist tense, since in most cases they cannot be rendered accurately in English translation, being fine points of Greek exegesis only. ..." (Online Bible)

15) The points for us English language readers to note are as follows:

A) In Luke 23:54 Luke told us quite clearly that this was the day before a Holy Day, by calling it "the preparation". He also stated that "the Sabbath, meaning the Holy Day, drew on". The "weekly Sabbath" was certainly not yet "drawing on"; it was the First Day of Unleavened Bread that was about to start, and his readers understood this very well.

B) In the next verse, Luke 23:55, he stated that the women noted carefully where Christ's body was laid.

C) THEN Luke uses the aorist tense to tell us that the women "RETURNED AND PREPARED" spices. By using the aorist tense he was expecting his readers to understand that they OBVIOUSLY first observed the Holy Day, which had been "drawing on" two verses earlier. Luke obviously expected his readers to understand that the spices were prepared AFTER the Holy Day had passed. The aorist tense in both these verbs also makes clear that Luke expected his readers to realize that there was a gap between "returning" and "preparing", even though they are joined by "and". Luke focused on THE ACTIONS of the women, and NOT on the timing of these actions; that's the whole point of the aorist tense.

D) Next, in the same verse, Luke tells us that after PREPARING the spices, the women then rested on the weekly Sabbath.

E) Luke 24:1 then identifies the very early part of Sunday morning, by calling it "the first day of the week".

16) To summarize:

To understand this passage in Luke, we need to keep two points in mind:

A) The word "preparation" (Greek "paraskeue") is ONLY used in the gospels to refer to the day before a Holy Day. It is never used to refer to a Friday before a regular ordinary weekly Sabbath. And the word "paraskeue" is not used outside of the gospels.

B) The use of the aorist tense in Luke 23:56 for the verbs "returned and prepared" shows that Luke was expecting his readers to understand the passage of the Holy Day BEFORE the women could possibly "prepare" the spices. There was simply nothing memorable on that particular Holy Day (First Day of U.B.) that Luke felt was worth mentioning to his readers. And so he used the aorist tense to bridge the time-gap between the two verbs, choosing instead to simply focus on the actions of the women without regard to the timing of those actions. That's what the aorist tense is used for.

17) Now let's look at "the third day" in Luke 24:21. Two of the disciples were discussing the events that had happened with Jesus Christ. The account is only a brief summary of what was said while they walked together for a few miles. But they related EVERYTHING they knew to Jesus Christ, who was walking with them. That would have included the crucifixion itself on the Wednesday, as well as the chief priests getting Pilate to place a guard before the tomb on the Thursday (see Matthew 27:62-66). Late Sunday afternoon was "the third day" SINCE ... "ALL THESE THINGS WHICH HAD HAPPENED" (see Luke 24:14) had actually passed. The placing of the guards was the last event of the whole "crucifixion episode". After that nothing happened until Jesus Christ was resurrected.

So Sunday afternoon was "the third day" after Pilate had placed the guards at the tomb on the Thursday.

18) There is another point, which is not really directly related to the above question. And that is as follows.

When we understand that the New Testament writers did not really bother to differentiate between a weekly Sabbath and an annual Holy Day, by simply referring to both as a "Sabbath", then it also implies that they viewed BOTH of these in the same light, even though the Day of Atonement, for example, has some added instructions (we are to fast). Because the Day of Atonement had a feature that set it apart (i.e. fasting), therefore Luke used this feature in writing Acts 27:9 to identify this particular Holy Day.

Now in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 we see Paul stating quite clearly that the people should prepare an offering "upon the first day of the week", a Sunday. It seems obvious that Paul was careful to avoid having them prepare this offering on the Sabbath. It also seems very clear that offerings were NOT taken up on the weekly Sabbath Days. And the Church of God today does not have any custom or tradition of taking up weekly offerings.

In a recent article I mentioned that the instructions to give offerings "three times in the year" refer to the three Feasts, and NOT to the seven annual Holy Days. This is based on a careful examination of the Old Testament instructions, since the New Testament has no direct instructions for offerings on either the three Feasts or the seven Holy Days. The New Testament only gives us principles as guidelines, without any clear indication as to which days in the year these guidelines should be applied.

For us today the custom of giving an offering on all seven of the annual Holy Days is probably one of the major points that differentiates a Holy Day from a normal weekly Sabbath. It is common for church pastors to remind their congregations in advance that an offering will be taken up on the Holy Day.

YET THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS DIDN'T EVEN BOTHER TO POINT OUT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHEN THEY WERE REFERRING TO A HOLY DAY AND WHEN THEY WERE REFERRING TO A NORMAL WEEKLY SABBATH!

The way the gospel writers refer to annual Holy Days simply as "a Sabbath Day" seems to imply that on

the Holy Days they didn't take up any offerings any more than they took up offerings on the weekly Sabbaths. [Pentecost being BOTH, a Feast and a Holy Day, is the exception, and thus it is clearly identified in Deuteronomy 16:16.]

This inference from the gospel accounts is not presented as "proof" for this matter. The "proof" is quite clear in the Old Testament itself. But this inference does seem to me to "supplement and support" what is plainly stated in the Old Testament.

Hopefully the above information about Luke 23:54 - 24:21 helps to make that passage a bit easier to understand. And Luke really didn't think of a Friday-Sunday scenario.

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