

AN ALLEGED DISCREPANCY IN THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS?

Someone has asked the question, “How should we explain “three nights” in Jesus’ statement, “As Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.” Scripture is clear that Jesus was crucified on the “Preparation”, the Friday, and that He rose early on Sunday. Jews counted days as beginning at sunset. To the Jew, the night of the Friday had already passed when Jesus was crucified. To our way of reckoning, Jesus was dead for about three hours on the Friday, Friday night, the whole of Saturday, Sunday night, until very early on the day of Sunday. In total, perhaps 38 hours. Three full days would be 72 hours. To our way of thinking there were only two nights, Friday night and Saturday night,

However, we should not feel compelled to take the expression “three days and three nights” to mean a full 72 hours. In our idiom we often do not mention nights. “I was in hospital for five days” simply passes over the nights. The apparent difficulty is recognising an oriental way of speaking and reckoning, where a part was counted as a whole. For other instances of this way of speaking, see Ex 24:18, 34:28; Deut 9: 18; 1 Sm 30:12-13; 1 Kng 19:8, and Jnh 1:17. Jesus was in the grave for a part of Friday, the whole of Saturday, and a part of Sunday. One whole and two parts of days together with two nights were popularly referred to as “three days and three nights.”

We, with our preference for precision, would similarly have difficulty in understanding “after three days” (Mt 27:63) as meaning the same thing as “on the third day” (Mt 16:21). We are not meant to take phrases that use oriental idiom like “after three days” literally and exactly. Nothing in Scripture compels us to assume that Jesus had to be in the grave for three full days and three full nights.