



In last month's issue of the 'S.S.' I promised that I would next consider the question concerning the length of time the body of Jesus lay in the tomb – a question prompted by the words of the Lord Himself in Matt.12:40, where we read:

"As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth".

Expressed simply, the question asks:

"Was the body of Jesus really in the grave for three days and nights?"

Well, if we are looking for the chronological accuracy of which our modern world is proud, with its time-pieces which, for an age that is virtually controlled by the clock, make it possible to calculate time down to parts of a second, I think we shall be disappointed.

A Principle of Interpretation

Here is a fact that should always be borne in mind when attempting to determine the meaning of biblical words and phrases. Words are like tokens or counters. They have no intrinsic value; that is, no value in themselves. They depend on the meaning that is attached to them by the people using them. The question that we, today, must ask is:

'What did that word –or that expression – mean to the people who used it at that time?'

In the case of the words we are studying this month, the Jewish rulers who heard Jesus make this statement, revealed what *they* understood it to mean, when they went to Pilate the Roman Governor, to request that a guard be placed at the tomb of Jesus. They said, **"We remember that that deceiver said while he was yet alive, 'After three days I will rise again'. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day..."** (Matt. 27: 63-64)

I suggest that an understanding of this principle of interpretation will help us to understand both Matt. 12:40 and many other puzzling passages.

The reckoning of Time

In 1988, Professor Stephen Hawking gained worldwide celebrity when he produced his book 'A Brief History of Time', and man's fascination with time-keeping never diminishes. But in the New Testament Age, the reckoning of time was a relative calculation, and people of that age would probably never even have asked the question which we are now considering, not only because they did not possess the technology that we now possess, but because they were simply not as concerned as we are today, with measuring life in days and hours, minutes and seconds.

In fact, among the Jews in the days of the Lord Jesus, for legal purposes, it was not necessary for a 'day' to run the full number of hours, in order to be considered a 'day'. Any *part* of a 'day' was calculated as a 'day', even if only *one hour* had passed! Commenting on the words of Jesus in Matt. 12; 40, where the Lord mentions Jonah's terrifying experience, the highly regarded and scholarly Bishop Lightfoot, in his work, "*Horae Hebraicae*", mentions a Jewish saying which states that, "A day and a night make an Onah, and a part of an Onah is as the whole".

I suppose that, in an age of radio-controlled clocks, quartz and digital watches and chronometers, many would find this old Jewish saying very unsatisfactory. But Lightfoot also makes the comment: "Therefore Christ may truly be said to have been

in the grave three Onoth, the consent of the schools and the dialect of the nation agreeing thereunto”.

Do you think this Jewish practice strange? But Sir Robert Anderson, K.C.B. LL.D, who, besides being a biblical scholar, was also a highly respected legal authority says, concerning the phrase *‘three days and three nights’*,

“A prison chaplain would have no difficulty explaining this to his congregation. Our civil day begins at midnight, and the law reckons any part of a day as a day. Therefore, while a sentence of three days means three days of twenty four hours, equal to seventy-two hours, a prisoner under such a committal is seldom more than forty hours in gaol, and I have known cases where the period was only thirty-three hours. And this mode of reckoning was as familiar to the Jew as it is to our criminal courts

Old Testament Examples

You will also find this rather imprecise way of expressing time in the Old Testament. Consider the following examples.

- 1st. 1st Sam.30: 11-12 records that David’s men found an Egyptian and brought him to their commander. The man had been left behind by the fleeing Amalekites. We read that David gave him food and water, because he had not eaten nor drunk *‘three days and three nights.’* That simply meant, *‘for some time’*. In verse 12 the man says that he became sick *‘three days ago’*. Commentators claim that the two statements are intended to point out the considerable start the Amalekites had in their flight, and to stress that there was no time to lose if David was to catch up with them.
- 2nd. In 2nd Chron, ch.10, we read that when Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, became Israel’s new king, certain of his subjects approached him, pleading that they might be relieved of the heavy burdens which his father, in his later days, had imposed on them in order to support his extravagant life-style. Rehoboam said to them, *“Come again to me after three days”* (v.5). We then read in verse 12, *“So Jeroboam and the people came to Rehoboam on the third day.”* ‘On’ is not ‘after’! Yet Rehoboam did not rebuke them, or send them away, because they had come too soon.
- 3rd. In Esther 4:16, when Haman the enemy of the Jews plotted their wholesale destruction, Esther the Queen, issued this command. *“Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day”*. The fast was as binding upon Esther herself as upon the people. But chapter 5:1, then tells us, *“Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther appeared before the king and said to him. “If it seems good to the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him”*.

It is obvious, then, that in Bible times, the phrase *“three days and nights”* did not mean what we understand it to mean today and that it was not, in those days, considered necessary to be as precise in recording time as it is now.

But, as I pointed out last month, the early Christians knew nothing of an *annual* celebration of the Lord’s death, burial and resurrection, because, as Paul told the Corinthian Christians, each first day of the week, when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper (1st Cor.11.26), they *‘proclaimed the Lord’s death’*, and would continue to do so *‘until He comes’*.

Indeed, the issue of an annual celebration was not even raised until long after the

establishment of the New Testament Church. It was towards the end of the 2nd century, by which time the predicted 'falling away' from the faith had already begun, that disputes arose concerning the '*time to celebrate Easter*': (read again last month's 'Question Box' answer). The problem arose again 325 A.D. at the time of the first Council of Nicea, when the Church of Rome attempted to resolve it, but it was not until more than 300 years later, in 664 A.D. at the 'Synod of Whitby', that churches in Britain decided to adopt the practices of the Roman Church. This means that the present-day celebration of 'Easter' is the invention of the Church of Rome.

The New Testament Evidence

In any case, it is surprising that, when the length of time the Lord's body lay in the grave is discussed, it is just the one sentence in which He uses the illustration involving Jonah which receives attention. What we ought to consider are the following facts:

1. The four Gospels reveal that, repeatedly, the Lord Himself declared in unequivocal terms, that He would be put to death and would rise from the dead 'on the third day'.
2. He first predicted His resurrection early as John 2:19, in a statement which John admits His disciples only later understood, but later He began to speak about it openly, after Peter had declared Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, in Matt.16: 2. Similar statements are recorded in Matt. 17:23, 20:19, 26:44; Mark 9: 31, 10:34; Luke 9:22, 13:32, 18:33, 24:7, 24:21, 24:46, etc.
3. What Jesus said was evidently accepted without question by both His apostles and the members of the early Church, all of whom subsequently believed that what He had predicted had actually come to pass. Paul states this in 1st Cor.15:4, "raised on the third day". The New Testament contains nothing to suggest that the Lord made a prediction that failed.
4. Matt. 27; 63-64, tells us that, after the burial of the body of Jesus, the leaders of the Jews came to Pilate with a request. They said, "*We remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, 'After three days I will rise again'. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made secure until the third day'.*
5. On the morning of the third day, the women came to the tomb, and Luke 24: 5-8 records that the heavenly messengers who met them even quoted the Lord's own words. "*The Son of Man must be delivered...and be crucified and the third day rise again. And the women remembered His words.....and told all these things to the eleven.*" Matt.28:6 says that one of the angels told the women: 'He is not here, for He is raised, even as He said. Come; see the place where the Lord lay'.

Dr. John Brown of Haddington, the Scottish minister who produced the Bible version which bear his name, also undertook to prepare a '*Harmony of the Gospels*.' One day, a visitor came to the house asking to see the great man, and Dr. Brown's canny old servant informed the visitor, rather scornfully, that his master was busy '*trying to reconcile four men who never disagreed!*' It seems that we ourselves, are sometimes inclined to undertake similar pointless tasks. Which is the more important: to be able to prove that the Lord's body lay in the grave for precisely three days and three nights? Or to be assured by all who truly knew Him, that He rose from the dead 'on the third day, even as He said?'

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