

How Long Was Jesus on the Cross

By Steve Ray

Your question intrigued me sufficiently to spend a good part of the day working on it. There seems to be a contradiction in the Gospels, mentioning different times for the crucifixion. Maybe someone forgot to check their watch! Mark says Jesus was crucified at the third hour and John tells us the crucifixion took place after the sixth hour. So, what are we to make of this seeming contradiction? And how long was he actually hanging on the cross? What I have done here is to discuss the texts and then provide some commentary.

The real problem exists between Mark 15:25 and John 19:14. Mark tells us Jesus was crucified at the third hour which according to Jewish time would be about 9 AM. Their day started at sunrise or 6 AM and was called by Mark early in the morning (Mk 15:1); 9:00 AM would be the third hour (Mk 15:35); 12 noon would be the sixth hour (Mk 15:33; Jn 19:14; cp. John 4:6); 3 PM would be the ninth hour (Mk 15:34).

I have provided a several comments on this passage and ended up with my favorite explanation. I don't buy the scribal typo theory or that Mark was confused or got his facts wrong. This is the word of God for heaven's sake. I think it had to do with the reckoning of time. Without wrist watches and on cloudy days they just took a wild guess: It was about the third hour. On top of that, it seems they viewed the days in four sections: early morning, the 3rd hour, the 6th hour, and the 9th hour. After that the day was done and it was time for bed. Anything from 6 AM to 9 AM was early morning; anything from 9 AM to noon was the third hour, etc. Understanding it this way puts Mark within range of John and minimizes or eliminates the seeming contradiction.

Mark says he was crucified in the third hour which could mean for him sometime in the late morning, leading up to noon. John says Jesus was tried by Pilate at about the sixth hour (or a bit earlier since he did not have a Timex to confirm the exact time) and was straightaway crucified. This puts Mark and John very close, even overlapping. So, Jesus was on the cross from possibly late morning or almost noon until the ninth hour, or about 3 PM.

This is a similar dilemma to Jesus being three days and three nights in the tomb (Mt 12:40) when in reality he was only in there a little over 24 hours. The problem is our English lack of understanding Hebrew idioms and manners of speech. The expression day and night in rabbinic usage meant the full cycle of twenty-four hours, or any part of such a cycle. So Jesus here announces that the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth during three complete or partial periods of twenty-four hours, and that then he will come forth again like Jonas from the fish.

Anyway, here are a compilation of several quotations and the final is my favorite. Thanks for the challenge!

John 19:14 Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth

hour (perhaps 6 AM). And he said to the Jews, Behold, your King!

Mk 15:25 It was the third hour (9 AM) when they crucified Him.

Mark 15:25. third hour: About 9:00 a.m., which stands in conflict with Jn 19:14 (sixth hour, or about noon). The Marcan time framework has an artificial air about it and may reflect a liturgical celebration of the passion in some early Christian community much more than the time sequence of the events (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*).

Using the Jewish method of counting hours from sunrise (and sunset) Mark alone recorded that Jesus crucifixion took place at the third hour, that is, 9 A.M. This seems to conflict with the time reference the sixth hour in John 19:14. But John probably used the Roman (modern) method of counting hours from midnight (and noon); thus he put Jesus trial before Pilate at about the sixth hour, that is, approximately 6 A.M. The interval between 6 and 9 A.M. was filled with the soldiers mockery (cf. Mark 15:16-20), Pilate s verdict on the two robbers (cf. 15:27), and preparations for the crucifixions (Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, [Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.] 1983, 1985).

Now it was the third hour and they crucified him . St Mark goes back to the actual crucifixion: and practically means when . But St. John (19:14), speaking of the condemnation of our Lord in the praetorium, emphasizes the place, the day, and the hour, and says: It was about the sixth hour . First, St John stands apart, because he uses the method of dividing the day into twelve hours starting from sunrise. Thus in 9:9 our Lord says explicitly: Are there not twelve hours in the day? Now quite apart from the difficulty of knowing the exact time, when clocks or watches were not available, an hour did not stand for a fixed length of time as it does with us, but in the winter, when sunrise was late and sunset early, the twelve hours of day would have been less than one or our own hours, and those of the night, longer. But in April, about the equinox, the hours of day and night would have been fairly equal. So St John s about the sixth hour may mean what we should call towards the latter part of the morning . Now St Luke (23:44) says that the miraculous darkness fell about the 6th hour; but by then he has related many things that happened when our Lord was already on the cross. St Mark, as we saw, says that He was crucified at the 3rd hour, and (here St Luke coincides with him) that the darkness fell at the 6th hour and lasted till noon. Clearly, therefore, St Mark and St Luke are not using the same division of the day as St John s. They seem to have divided the day into hours each consisting of three of our or of St John s hours the morning, the 3rd, 6th and 9th hours. St Mark s 3rd hour, then, will contain any time from 9 to 12 o clock. Thus if St Mark means after 9 but before 12 , and St John, round about 12 , their vague hours may be considered sufficiently to coincide. See Ramsay, in Hasting s *Dictionary of the Bible*, supplementary Vol., pp. 475 to 479, for perhaps the best discussion of Hebrew hours .

In Luke 23:44 it says about the sixth hour . . . the ninth hour. From noon to three in the afternoon, by the Jewish method of designating time. Jesus had been put on the cross at the third hour (9:00 AM, Mk 15:25). The sixth hour of John (Jn 19:14) may be Roman

time (6:00 AM), when Pilate gave his decision (Note in The NIV Study Bible).

25. It was nine in the morning: We called attention in the comment to the notes .. of time in Mark as punctuation marks in the story, convenient divisions by which to memorize the progress of events. But whether we translate as we have here or give the literal it was the third hour, we must beware of imposing on the world of the first century our own clock dominated sense of time. The note of time here, even assuming it to rest on the evidence of eyewitnesses, is an approximation at best and a wild guess at worst. To attempt a reconciliation of this note of time with John 19:14 (about the sixth hour) is in many ways a fruitless exercise (*The Anchor Bible: Mark* by C. S. Mann, pg. 646).

My favorite explanation, and the one I think is most accurate is from Robert Stein's *Difficult Passages in the New Testament* which states:

“A better approach to this problem would be to reconsider the general attitude toward time in the first century A.D. It is clear that the twentieth-century precision toward time, prevalent in Western culture, did not and could not exist in the first century A.D. Such exactness was impossible. Furthermore, the day was commonly divided into four periods: 6 to 9 A.M., 9 to 12 P.M., 12 to 3 P.M., and 3 to 6 P.M. In denoting these periods the hours referred to were the third, the sixth, and the ninth hours. Specific references to time in the New Testament are found in the following passages: Matthew 20:3 (3), 5 (6, 9), 9 (11); 27:45 (6, 9), 46 (9); Mark 15:25 (3), 33 (6, 9), 34 (9); Luke 23:44 (6, 9); John 1:39 (10); 4:6 (6), 52 (7); 19:14 (6); Acts 2:15 (3); 3:1 (9); 10:3 (9), 9 (6), 30 (9); 23:23 (3).

“There are twenty-three specific references to time in the New Testament and only three (Matt. 20:9; John 1:39, 4:52) use a designation other than 3, 6, or 9 to describe the hour. From this it appears that the usual way of expressing time is to refer to the third, sixth, or ninth hour and that time periods between tend to be rounded off to one of these three designations.

“It seems clear that something occurring late in the morning could be rounded off and described by one writer as occurring at the third hour, the 9-12 A.M. period, and by another writer as occurring at the sixth hour, near the 12-3 P.M. period. Calvin argues that for Mark the third hour refers to the ending of the 9-12 A.M. period and for John the sixth hour refers to the beginning of this 12-3 P.M. period. John used the expression about to indicate the approximate nature of the time and may have sought to round off the time of Jesus crucifixion as about noon because it was at that time that the passover lambs were to be slain.

“When understood in this manner the conflict between the Evangelists is greatly minimized. Even if the third hour occurs between 8-10 A.M. and the sixth hour between 11 A.M. and 1 P.M., the latter part of the first period is close to the beginning of the other. If the time references in these passages are understood as approximate designations in a period where exact time was difficult to achieve, the third and sixth hour difference should not cause any insurmountable problem.”