

"Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?"

The Riddle of Times of Day in the Gospels¹

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"Mom, what time does this say...?" I asked. It was Christmas Day, 19..., well, let's just say it was several years ago when I was in the first grade.

One of the gifts I received that year was my first wristwatch. Of course this was back in the pre-digital days, and I watched in delight as the three hands did their circling movements around the watch's face.

"The little hand is on the seven, and the big hand is on the one," I continued.

"And where is the second hand?" she replied.

So I'm sitting there thinking, "Second hand? Mom, I can't tell time, but I do know how to count. And like I just said, the little hand (which must be the first hand) is on the seven, and the big hand (now let's see..., the hand that comes after the first hand would be the *second* hand, right?) is on the one. Or are you trying to trick me?"

Well, I did manage to work through that little puzzler as I finally figured out what "second hand" really meant. But this wouldn't be the last time I struggled with a time-keeping dilemma. Years later, I find myself struggling with another time-related riddle — and this one was in the Bible.

The puzzle begins when I realize that the Bible people didn't use the "o'clock" system that we do. Take, for instance, the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. I read in the Gospel

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of John that Jesus made His stop at the well at *about the sixth hour*. So I look at my watch, and nope, there is no sixth-hour o'clock. Houston, we have a problem.

So I hear some preacher say that the sixth hour meant that the woman was at the well at noon — and then adds that since that was not the time women typically did their water-getting chores, it must mean that this woman was purposely avoiding the criticism of others who were ticked about her sinful lifestyle. Okay, maybe so. But when I look at the preacher's watch, it is missing the sixth-hour o'clock too. So maybe I shouldn't be too quick to take his idea at face value.

Then the Bible springs a big one on me. The challenge of deciphering Bible Standard Time is dialed up to the next level when I find the gospel writers apparently had trouble telling time too, because their writings seem to contradict one another.

Here's what I notice: It's the day of Christ's trial and crucifixion. John writes that at the sixth hour Pilate is winding down his interrogation of the not-yet-crucified Jesus when he tells the Jews, "*Behold your king*" (John 19:14).

However, Mark says that at the sixth hour (ah, sound familiar?) darkness had covered the whole land — and this was after Jesus had been on the cross for three hours (Mark 15:25, 35). Of course, back then the specific time of day was rounded off to the whole hour since people didn't have a way to keep up with the minute exactness like we have today. But that doesn't begin to account for this much time difference. So, I'm puzzled even more.

Faced with this growing mystery, I decide to take a second look at these time references in the gospels. I discover 15 instances where specific times of day are mentioned. And by comparing these side-by-side, the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place.

I noticed that the first three gospels all recount that on the day Jesus died darkness was over all the land at the sixth hour (Matt. 27:45, Mark 15:33, and Luke 23:44). So, it seems crystal clear that Matthew, Mark and Luke (who wrote both the Gospel of Luke and Acts) all use the same time system. So far, so good.

However, John seems to have slipped a gear. When we compare his times to the others, they don't match up so well. Why does he say that at the sixth hour Jesus had not yet been crucified when Mark says that He was crucified at the third hour (John 19:14, Mark 15:25)? Was John wrong?

No, actually the difference stems from an often unknown or forgotten little fact — there were two different time-keeping systems used in those days. For the Jews, a new day began around sundown (approximately 6 p.m., by our time system). Numbering the evening hours thus began about 6 p.m. and went through the night. It reset to zero at 6 a.m., when counting the daytime hours began. Therefore, for the Jews “the sixth hour” of the day was six hours after 6 in the morning – i.e., noon by our measuring. And this was the system that Matthew, Mark and Luke all used.

The second system was the one the Romans used. Like the Jewish method, this one ran for 12 hours and then reset for a second 12 hours, making a full day. But instead of starting at six o'clock, the Roman system began at midnight — just like our own system does.

John's writings use this Roman system. That John should choose to use this instead of the Jewish method is really not all that surprising. He wrote his gospel later in his life (probably around 85 A.D.) when he was living in the Roman world and no longer living in the Jewish system. This would have been after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D., so

there would be even less reason for him to use a time-keeping method that was increasingly obsolete.

If the idea of having two time-keeping systems throws you a little off balance, just remember that we, too, operate with multiple systems, e.g., Standard Time, Daylight-Savings Time, military time, Greenwich Mountain Time and possibly even others.

So getting back to the crucifixion events, John's time of "the sixth hour" (after midnight) would mean that Pilate presented Jesus to the Jews at about 6 a.m. Mark says that Jesus was crucified on the third hour (i.e., three hours after the Jewish daytime hours began), which would be 9 a.m. And when the three gospels say that darkness fell upon the land at the "sixth hour," that would have been noon. Then Jesus died at the "ninth hour" (3 p.m.) (Matt. 27:46; Mark15:34).

But there is still the little jewel in John 4 — at what time did Jesus meet the woman at the well? Well, since John said it was the sixth hour, and since he used Roman time, that would mean that the encounter took place at 6. Obviously, this wasn't 6 a.m., because Jesus wouldn't likely be "wearied from His journey" that early in the day. So, in this case, the sixth hour would have been 6 p.m. And that would mean the woman wasn't avoiding others by getting out in the noontime sun after all.

So, riddle solved. Now if I could just figure out how to set the clock on my DVD player.

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