

BIBLE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

By Robert C. Veil, Jr.

Question: In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, there are references to various “hours” of the day. What does this mean, and how do they correspond to our own clock?

Answer: The Hebrews traditionally told the time of day by referring to certain “hours.” The 24-hour period we know as a “day” began for the Jew at 6:00 p.m. For 12 hours it was “night.” Then, at 6:00 a.m. the daylight portion of the “day” began. Thus, the “third hour of the day” (Mt. 20:3) would be what we know as 9:00 a.m. The “sixth hour” and the “ninth hour” (vs. 5) would be 12:00 noon and 3:00 p.m. respectively. Finally, the “eleventh hour” (vs. 6) would be 5:00 p.m.

This explains the references to time in many Bible passages. For example, when Peter on the Day of Pentecost said that it was the “third hour of the day” he was saying it is 9:00 a.m., (Acts 2:15). When it is said that darkness was over the land during Jesus’ crucifixion from the “sixth hour” until the “ninth hour” we understand this was from 12:00 noon until 3:00 p.m., (Mk. 15:33).

Notice that in the Hebrew clock, the night came before the day. Thus we read about the “evening and the morning” being one day, (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31, etc.). This is unlike our clock, where the 24-hour day begins at midnight. Further, the Romans (and the Greeks before them) divided the night into 4 “watches” rather than 12 hours. Thus, we read about Jesus mentioning the possibility of his coming during the “second watch” or the “third watch,” (Lk. 12:38). And when, in Mt. 14:25, it is said that Jesus came to the disciples walking on the sea, we know that this occurred somewhere around 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. With the use of sundials, the position of the sun could be precisely identified each hour during the daylight.

This understanding also helps explain some so-called Bible errors. For example, critics have cited Jesus’ question as being mistaken in Jn. 11:9, “Are there not 12 hours in the day?” Obviously, Jesus was utilizing the Hebrew method of referring to the “day,” which does indeed contain 12 rather than 24 hours. For another example, when reference is made to Jesus being in the tomb for “three

days and three nights” (e.g. Mt. 12:39-41), we understand that any portion of those three 24-hour-periods was considered a “day.” Thus, Jesus was not predicting that he would be in the tomb for 72 hours, but for some (any portion) of three consecutive days.

As we understand these principles for reckoning time, the Bible passages not only come into a clearer focus for our understanding, but their remarkable accuracy becomes even more impressive. God, who transcends time, has not only managed to convey his word within the limitations of man’s understanding of time, but to do so accurately and uniformly throughout.

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