

John's Gospel: Jewish time, or Roman time?

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Recently a friend and correspondent wrote me that 90% of commentaries and 95% of Bible versions affirm that John's Gospel uses Jewish time, not Roman. Well now, as far back as I can remember, I have always supposed that John used Roman time. Although in spiritual matters the majority is generally wrong, 9 to 1 borders on the lopsided, so I decided to go back and look again. As best I can tell, there are four places where John mentions a specific hour: 1:39, 4:6, 4:52 and 19:14. I will consider them in that order.

1:35 Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples. **36** And seeing Jesus walking by, he says, "Look, the Lamb of God!" **37** The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. **38** So turning and observing them following¹ Jesus says to them, "What do you want?" So they said to Him, "Rabbi" (which translated means 'Teacher'), "where are You staying?" **39** He says to them, "Come and see". So they went and saw where He was staying, and stayed with Him that day—it was about the tenth hour.

Note the "and stayed with Him that day". If John were using Jewish time, this would be 4:00 p.m. But in Jewish time there would only be two more hours in the day, since the new day would begin at 6:00 p.m. It would border on the dishonest for John to use "and stayed with Him that day" with reference to only two hours. John uses Roman time, so this is 10 a.m., which means that Jesus spent most of the day with just those two men. You had better believe they were talking the whole time. Jesus knew they would be two of His disciples and was already investing in them—to such good effect that the next day they brought in two more.

4:1 Now when Jesus² knew that the Pharisees³ had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" **2** (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples), **3** He left Judea and went away into Galilee.⁴ **4** Now He needed to go through Samaria;⁵ **5** so He comes to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob gave to his son Joseph.⁶ **6** Now Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, being worn out from the journey, sat as He was by the well. **It was about 6 p.m.**

The Text has "the sixth hour". Many versions put "noon", which reflects Jewish time. But the Text says Jesus was worn out, which agrees better with a full day's walk than with a half day's walk (remember that they did all their travelling on foot, and so were used to it). The distance between Salem and Sychar was probably about 35 miles, as the crow flies, but since the whole distance was over accidented terrain, the walking distance would be a good deal more. They

¹ Presumably Jesus waited for them to catch up, so He was observing them during that time. His purpose in passing by there was precisely to attract those two men (so I imagine), and He was doubtless aware when they started out after Him.

² I follow the best line of transmission in reading "Jesus", rather than 'the Lord', albeit with only 21.7% of the Greek manuscripts.

³ The 'Judean' in 3:25-26 was probably a Pharisee.

⁴ This was a tactical withdrawal. I take it that Matthew 4:12 refers to the same withdrawal. Between John 3:36 and 4:1 the Baptizer was imprisoned. If the Pharisees knew something it would not be long before Herod knew it. It was not part of the Plan for Jesus to have to deal with Herod at this juncture.

⁵ He could have gone up the coast and avoided most of the mountains, but He "needed" to go through Samaria. Probably because the Father told Him to—it was harvest time in Sychar.

⁶ See Joshua 24:32.

had walked some 50 miles in twelve hours. Like the Text says, He was tired! And He was hot and thirsty. John emphasizes that as a human being He felt the full effects of the day. But where did I get Salem?

3:22 After these things Jesus, with His disciples, went into the Judean countryside, and there He spent time with them and baptized. 23 Now John also was baptizing in Aenon, near Salem, because there was plenty of water there. And *people* were coming and being baptized; 24 for John had not yet been thrown into prison.

To this day there is “plenty of water” in the Aijalon valley, some 15-20 miles WNW of Jerusalem (Salem is an ancient name for Jerusalem; see Genesis 14:18 and Hebrews 7:1)—perhaps that is where it was. I take it that Jesus and John were in the same area, at this point (“John also was baptizing in Aenon”). Even from the nearest point in Judea to Sychar, it is unlikely that they could have walked the distance in six hours.

4:46 So Jesus went again to Cana of Galilee,¹ where He made the water wine. Now there was a certain royal official whose son was sick in Capernaum. 47 When this man heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son,² for he was about to die. 48 So Jesus said to him, “Unless you people see signs and wonders you will not believe!”³ 49 The official says to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies!” 50 Jesus says to him, “Go; your son lives”. Well the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and off he went. 51 Now while he was still going down his slaves met him and reported saying, “Your son lives!” 52 So he inquired of them the hour in which he got better. And they said to him, “Yesterday **at the seventh hour** the fever left him”. 53 So the father knew that it was at the exact hour in which Jesus told him, “Your son lives”. Both he himself and his whole household believed.

It is virtually certain that the official and his slaves used Roman time, in which case the cure took place at 7 p.m. It could not be 7 a.m. because the man would have met his slaves before noon and they would have said ‘today’, not ‘yesterday’ (verse 52). It could not be Jewish time for a similar reason—if Jesus healed at 1 p.m., the man would have met his slaves before sundown and they would have said ‘today’ (an official may well have been mounted, and it would not take him long—he was in a hurry). The man probably walked (unless he was mounted, but at night the horse would be held to a walk) during at least part of the night; the slaves would have started out at dawn; they probably met at a point much closer to Capernaum than to Cana.

19:12 From that moment Pilate really tried to release Him; but the Jews kept shouting, saying: “If you release this fellow you are no friend of Caesar’s! Whoever makes himself a king is opposing Caesar!”⁴ 13 Well, upon hearing this statement Pilate led Jesus outside and sat down on the judgment seat, in a place called ‘Stone Pavement’, while in Hebrew

¹ I suspect that He had a brother-in-law living there.

² The man was asking Jesus to make an emergency hike of some 25 miles (unless he was mounted and had brought an extra horse for Jesus; but He probably was not used to riding). Evidently he figured that the healer had to be physically present.

³ Again, Jesus is not exactly ‘polite’.

⁴ Ooops! Pilate owed his position to Caesar’s good graces, and simply could not afford to do something that could be construed (even with a little twisting) as treason. He is beaten and knows it.

*'Gabatha'*¹ **14** (now it was the day of preparation for the Passover;² **the hour was about six a.m.**), and he says to the Jews, "Look at your king!"

The Text says "the sixth hour", which in Roman time is six a.m. If it were Jewish time, it would be noon, which won't work here. Actually it says 'around' or 'about' six—I assume that it was a little after the hour. But why do I say that 'noon' won't work? Any honest interpreter of Scripture has the obligation to consider all relevant passages, which in this case include Matthew 27:45, Mark 15:25 and 33, and Luke 23:44. Mark specifies that Jesus was crucified at the 3rd hour and all three mention the supernatural darkness from the 6th to the 9th. It is clear that all three use Jewish time: the darkness could not have been from 6:00 to 9:00 a.m., nor from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. (using Roman time). Therefore the supernatural darkness occurred between 12:00 noon and 3:00 p.m. Since Mark uses Jewish time, his 3rd hour has to be 9:00 a.m. (it obviously could not be 9:00 p.m.). To argue that John used Jewish time here makes him out to be ridiculous; how could Pilate pass sentence three hours after the crucifixion?! Please remember that John was physically present, an eyewitness of the proceedings, which cannot be said of any of the commentators or translators (or of any of the non-biblical sources that they may cite).

To conclude, the evidence is surely adequate: John used Roman time.³ To ascribe errors of fact and stupidities to the Apostle John, by alleging that he used Jewish time, is to be perverse.

¹ This action signaled that he had reached a decision and was about to give the verdict.

² If the Jews were still preparing for the Passover, then Jesus and His disciples observed it a day early—which must have seemed strange to the disciples. But as the ultimate Passover Lamb, it would be appropriate for Jesus to die on that preparation day.

³ I fail to see any reasonable basis for an honest student of Scripture to arrive at the conclusion that John used Jewish time. So where did the 90% of commentaries and 95% of Bible versions get that idea? In spiritual matters there is no neutrality (Matthew 12:30, Luke 11:23).