

## THE TIME OF THE CRUCIFIXION

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The purpose of this article is to reconcile or harmonize the apparently conflicting accounts of Mark 15:25 and John 19:14 as to the time of the crucifixion of Jesus. The primary problem is the apparent conflict between Mark 15:25 ("And it was the third hour when they crucified him") and John 19:14-16 ("Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. . . . And so he then delivered him up to them to be crucified"). Mark seems to say that Jesus was crucified approximately three hours earlier than John says that he was condemned by Pilate.

Several modern translations of the NT have entered such a contradiction into the texts of John and Mark. The translators have not written simply "third hour" and "sixth hour," which would be literal translation, but have instead supplied a modern time reckoning for each, with the result being such readings as the following: "It was nine o'clock in the morning when they nailed him to the cross" (Mark 15:25). "It was then almost noon of the day before the Passover. . . . Then Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be nailed to the cross" (John 19:14-16).<sup>1</sup>

### I. NONHARMONISTIC APPROACHES TO THE TEXT

Many scholars consider the texts irreconcilable. Some claim that Mark is preferable because John altered the time of the crucifixion to fit his theological plan,<sup>2</sup> while others claim that John is preferable because he was writing later than Mark in order to correct Mark.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today's English Version* (2d ed., 1966). Cf. also *The Living New Testament, Paraphrased* (1967); *The Twentieth Century New Testament* (1961); *The Amplified New Testament* (1958). NASB has "third hour" and "sixth hour" in the text but "9 a.m." and "12 a.m." in the margins.

<sup>2</sup>J. E. Bruns, "Use of Time in the Fourth Gospel," *NTS* 13 (1967) 289. In order to develop his theory, however, Bruns opts for a highly doubtful reading in John 1:39, where Codex Alexandrinus read *hōra ēn hōs hektē* instead of "the tenth hour." He sees this as one of John's three symbolical uses of noon, the other being in John 4:6 besides 19:14. Thus the light breaks upon a small group of disciples, then upon a larger group outside the disciples (the Samaritans), finally upon the whole world. But one obvious factor that Bruns ignores is that noon was the period of darkness at Christ's crucifixion. See also R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 2. 895; R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1975), 3. 306-307.

<sup>3</sup>H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884) 509. See also J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Scribner's, 1929), 2. 623-624.

Other scholars would prefer to emend the text of either Mark<sup>4</sup> or John.<sup>5</sup> Both texts have variant readings at exactly the point in question, but those readings are in the minority both as to text type and number of witnesses, and it is easier to understand how variant readings could have crept into the text out of a desire to reconcile the differences than to see how the differences could have arisen and become so dominant.

Such treatments of the texts are irrelevant and unnecessary if the texts harmonize and make good sense as they stand.

## II. HARMONISTIC APPROACHES TO THE TEXT

Two primary approaches attempt to harmonize the texts as they stand. One is to attribute to John a different method of reckoning time than Mark. The other is to interpret both time notations as approximations. The remainder of the article will discuss these options in detail inasmuch as they appear to be the primary avenues open to those who would be faithful to the text and hold to its inerrancy.

1. *John Uses a Different Method of Reckoning Than Mark.* Proponents of this view suggest that the solution to the problem is that John and Mark base their time notations on different standards. While Mark uses Semitic time, numbering the hours from sunrise, John, it is argued, uses a different standard—usually designated Roman—that counts the hours from midnight. The problem would then be solved, because “about the sixth hour” in John would be 6:00 a.m. for the time of Pilate’s judgment of Jesus, well before the 9:00 a.m. crucifixion deadline recorded by Mark.

Internal support for this theory comes from the use of time within John’s gospel and from the chronology of the trial, while external support comes from non-Biblical historical witnesses.

John has four time notations, two of which are unique in that they refer to specific hours that are not pinpointed to a quarter of a day (third, sixth, or ninth hour). In 1:39 John says that two of John the Baptist’s disciples began their stay with Jesus at the tenth hour. According to Jewish reckoning, that would be 4:00 p.m. Westcott says of this passage:

It is then scarcely conceivable that it was 4 p.m. (4 a.m. is out of the question) before he reached the place “where he abode”; and even less conceivable that the short space of the day then remaining should be called “that day,” which, in fact, appears full of incident. On the other hand, 10 a.m. suits both conditions. It is an hour by which a wayfarer would seek to have ended his journey; and it would leave practically “a day” for intercourse.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>W. L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 566-567. See also A. Mahoney, “A New Look at ‘The Third Hour’ of Mk 15,25,” *CBQ* 28 (1966) 295.

<sup>5</sup>E. Ruckstuhl, *Chronology of the Last Days of Jesus: A Critical Study* (New York: Desclee, 1965) 47-48. See also C. C. Torrey, “In the Fourth Gospel the Last Supper was the Paschal Meal,” *JQR* 42 (July 1951-April 1952) 248; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 664; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955) 454.

<sup>6</sup>B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: John Murray, 1908), 2. 325-326. Cf. also R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943) 150-151.

In John 4:6, Jesus' visit with the woman at the well is at the sixth hour, which by Jewish reckoning would be noon. It is proposed, however, that 6:00 p.m. would be a more natural time for the events here recorded, both the drawing of water by the woman and the purchase of food by the disciples.<sup>7</sup> A third notation is in 4:52, recording that the nobleman from Capernaum arrived at Cana and spoke to Jesus at the seventh hour, which would be 1:00 p.m. by Jewish reckoning but 7:00 p.m. by the proposed Roman reckoning. Westcott says that "it is more likely that the words of Jesus were spoken to the nobleman at Cana in the evening at seven o'clock, when it was already too late for him to return home that night."<sup>8</sup> Finally, there is the sixth hour in 19:14, which the Roman time scheme would make about 6:00 a.m. It will be noted that this time scheme suggests that hours were numbered from both midnight and noon.

An additional element of the internal witness is that John uses unique phraseology in recording the hour of Pilate's judgment by giving the day as well as the hour: "the sixth hour of the Friday." This may be an additional indication that John is using a Roman reckoning: "But *Friday* in S. John is the name of the whole *Roman civil day*, and the *Roman civil days* are reckoned from *midnight*."<sup>9</sup>

The chronology of the trial also adds internal support to the suggestion that John's time scheme is different from Mark's. This is not to say that it necessitates a different scheme, but only that the hours of the trial would allow a judgment by Pilate as early as 6:00 a.m. or so. Hovey offers this schedule for the trial: The *terminus a quo* would be about 3:30 a.m. based on John's use of *proia* (18:28), which was customarily used of the fourth watch from 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. He adds one half-hour for the public charges and another half-hour for Jesus to be sent to Herod, which could not have consumed much time since Jesus would not answer Herod's inquiries. By 4:30 a.m. Jesus would be back before Pilate again; the scourging and mocking might have covered from 5:00 a.m. to 5:45 a.m. About six o'clock would have come the *Ecce Homo*, and by 6:30 Pilate's pronouncement would have been given.<sup>10</sup> This might seem an extraordinarily early hour for a trial to begin, but it was not so unusual in Roman tradition: "A Roman court might be held directly after sunrise; and as Pilate had probably been informed that an important case was to be brought before him, delay in which might cause serious disturbance, there is nothing improbable in his being ready to open his court between 4.0 and 5.0 a.m."<sup>11</sup> If Pilate stayed at the fortress of Antonia, then he was in the middle of the bustle of Passover activities, and thus not much time had to be consumed in the trial events, especially if Pilate had been made aware before-

<sup>7</sup>Westcott, *John*, 2. 325-326. Cf. also N. Walker, "The Reckoning of Hours in the Fourth Gospel," *NovT* 4 (1960) 69-73.

<sup>8</sup>Westcott, *John*, 2. 325-326.

<sup>9</sup>A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Cambridge: University Press, 1906) 342. Cf. also J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: University Press, 1964) 12-13; W. Hendricksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953-54), 2. 421.

<sup>10</sup>A. Hovey, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1885) 377-378.

<sup>11</sup>Plummer, *John* 328-329.

hand of the nature of the charges against Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

External support for this theory has been seen in the historical reckoning of time in Roman provinces of the first century:

John wrote this Gospel in Asia Minor late in the century long after the destruction of Jerusalem when the Jewish method would not likely be preserved. He evidently is not writing for the Jews primarily, since he constantly speaks of them as outsiders. Therefore John makes the day begin at midnight as the Romans did, for Roman ideas were prevalent in Asia Minor. Here then we understand that Pilate passed the sentence at *six o'clock*.<sup>13</sup>

Walker<sup>14</sup> has developed the position thoroughly, and the primary factual data depends on the time of the martyrdoms of Polycarp and Pionius. The former was martyred at the eighth hour, the latter at the tenth. Since such executions were usually in the morning, the times given must indicate a reckoning from midnight, which would place the executions at 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.<sup>15</sup>

While this has been a favorite theory of many scholars seeking an honest solution to the problem, unfortunately it unravels for lack of solid evidence. Neither internal nor external evidence supports the conclusion that John used a different standard of time reckoning than the synoptists.

As to the internal evidence, it is readily apparent that in some instances John is more precise in denoting the hours of the day, but none of the instances cited is inherently improbable if the hours are calculated from dawn instead of from midnight. For example, in 1:39, if the tenth hour is 4:00 p.m., the disciples could then have remained with Jesus until the next morning if John were speaking of the "day" according to popular usage. If Jesus and his disciples had begun their trip to Samaria early in the morning, then noon (the sixth hour) would have been an appropriate time to seek rest and respite from the hot sun, and the unusual hour for drawing water (if it were indeed uncommon) may indicate something of the character and plight of the Samaritan woman who had had such a checkered past and may have had an equally checkered reputation. Further, even if reckoning started at midnight, for this hour to be 6:00 p.m. would mean starting the numbering of the hours over at noon. Had the nobleman from Capernaum left for Cana about sunrise, he could have made the twenty-mile journey by one o'clock (the seventh hour) and then not have completed the return journey until the next day. As Plummer summarizes: "We have seen already (i. 39, iv. 6, 52, xi. 9), that whatever view we may take of the *balance* of probability in each case, there is nothing thus far which is conclusively in favour of the antecedently improbable view, that S. John reckons the hours of the day as we do, from midnight to noon and noon to midnight."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Cf. also A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper, 1922) 285; F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke* (5th ed.; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, n.d.), 2. 320: "It cannot be decided with certainty whether Pilate at this time resided in the palace of Herod the Great, on the hill of Sion, or in the citadel of Antonia, at the northwest of the temple."

<sup>13</sup>R. R. Specter, *On What Day Did Christ Die?* (New York: Exposition, 1959) 50 n. 15.

<sup>14</sup>Walker, "Reckoning" 69-73.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. also Plummer, *John* 341.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

In regard to the trial chronology, it might have been possible to have completed the entire matter by about 6:00 a.m., but it seems unlikely. First, sunrise at that time of the year did not occur as early as 3:30 a.m. or 4:00 a.m., so that an appearance before Pilate at that hour would be unlikely.<sup>17</sup> Second, there are too many events to compress so tightly. Lenski, who would like to solve the problem, acknowledges, "It is impossible to concentrate all that preceded the sentencing by Pilate into the time before 6 A.M."<sup>18</sup>

But the major problem with the theory is the allegation that there was a Roman reckoning of hours from midnight as opposed to a Jewish reckoning from sunrise. While it is true that the Romans recognized a civil day that began at midnight, it does not follow that hours were calculated beginning with midnight.

The civil Day was not divided into hours; it was a purely religious, legal, and scientific entity, and did not affect in any way popular division of time. Among the Greeks and the Jews it began at sunset; among the Romans it began at midnight. . . . There was no device practised by the ancients for dividing the civil Day into parts; and such a division could never in any way come to affect ordinary thoughts or habits.<sup>19</sup>

Martial, who lived in first-century Rome, numbered the hours of the day thus in one of his epigrams:

The first and the second hour wearies clients at the levee, the third hour sets hoarse advocates to work; till the end of the fifth Rome extends her various tastes; the sixth gives rest to the tired; the seventh will be the end. The eighth to the ninth suffices for the oiled wrestlers; the ninth bids us crush the piled couches. The tenth hour is the hour for my poems.<sup>20</sup>

The night itself was not divided into hours by the Romans but into watches, which were numbered first through fourth. The watches were marked off by use of a water clock, which had been calibrated with the help of the sundial.<sup>21</sup> Josephus speaks of hours of the night, but it is clear that their numbering began at sunset and that they were divided according to the watches.<sup>22</sup>

It is improbable that the situation would have been different in the provinces of Asia Minor. First, it is not certain that John wrote to Greek-speaking pagans. Robinson argues convincingly that the apostle's audience was Diaspora Judaism, "to which the author now finds himself belonging as a result (we may surmise) of the greatest dispersion of all, which has swept from Judea Church and Synagogue alike."<sup>23</sup> Second, there is no reason to believe that in Asia Minor days were count-

<sup>17</sup>Jerusalem lies between 31 and 32 degrees north latitude, so that near the spring equinox only about thirteen hours of sunlight could be expected, beginning not earlier than about 5:30 a.m.

<sup>18</sup>Lenski, *Interpretation* 1273.

<sup>19</sup>W. M. Ramsay, "About the Sixth Hour," *Expositor* 7 (4th series; 1893) 219. Cf. also Bruns, "Use" 286.

<sup>20</sup>Martial 4.8.

<sup>21</sup>J. Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University, 1940) 143-150; Ramsay, "Sixth Hour" 218-219; F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 248 n. 9.

<sup>22</sup>Josephus *J. W.* 6.5.3. Cf. also Acts 23:23, which makes mention of the third hour of the night, qualifying the phrase to make it specific.

<sup>23</sup>J. A. T. Robinson, "Destination and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," *NTS* 6 (1960) 131.

ed from midnight. Ramsay says that there are many instances from that locale where both the civil day and the natural day were reckoned from sunrise.<sup>24</sup> One example may be found in Acts 19:9 in a variant reading of Codex Bezae, which says that Paul taught at the school of Tyrannus daily from the fifth to the tenth hour. Ramsay says that these were the hours from about 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. normally set aside for rest,<sup>25</sup> which would mean that the Christian students gave up their rest time daily to listen to Paul's teaching. It is highly improbable that they could free themselves from labor for that purpose if those hours indicated 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. according to a midnight reckoning.

The deaths of Polycarp and Pionius do not support a midnight reckoning, as evidenced by Ramsay.<sup>26</sup> In regard to Polycarp he says that the eighth hour was 2:00 p.m.: "But on closer inspection we see that, when Polycarp was tried, the sports were already over, and the president declared it was not legal for him to reopen them and give Polycarp to the beasts."<sup>27</sup> As to Pionius, he argues that Pionius' trial was not first that day; that it took much time, lengthened by torture; that the preparations for burning took longer than for Polycarp; and that he had to be conducted from the court to the place of burning.

The historical evidence, therefore, does not support a reckoning of hours from midnight any more than the internal witness of the gospel of John necessitates it. Morris' observation is simple but almost conclusive: Sundials read VI at noon.<sup>28</sup> This is what would have made sense in Palestine, Rome and Asia Minor. As Ramsay remarks: "It is certain that no example has ever been quoted from the ancient writers in which the hours were counted as beginning from midnight."<sup>29</sup> If John used a midnight reckoning, according to the amount of evidence currently available it would have been unique with him. It is possible, then, that he could have so counted from the opening of the temple gates at midnight after the celebration of the Passover,<sup>30</sup> but it is improbable that he would have done so or that his audience would have understood such a method. Cross summarizes this position:

It is pretty certain that it was not known to the ancients, for Eusebius, Theophylact, and Severus found themselves reduced to the necessity of supposing that there was an error in the text (Alford *in loc.*). This is in itself a considerable argument against the modern view, for it is hard to suppose that the early commentators would have been ignorant of the custom in Asia Minor, or that they would have overlooked so obvious an explanation of the difficulty.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup>W. M. Ramsay, "Numbers, Hours, and Years," *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (ed. J. Hastings, 1908), 5. 478.

<sup>25</sup>Ramsay, "Sixth Hour" 223.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 220-222.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>28</sup>L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 158 n. 90.

<sup>29</sup>Ramsay, "Numbers" 477.

<sup>30</sup>Josephus *Ant.* 17.2.2.

<sup>31</sup>J. A. Cross, "The Hours of the Day in the Fourth Gospel," *The Classical Review* 5 (1891) 245.

Finally, if anyone were to use Roman time, assuming that such a thing existed, one might imagine that it would have been Mark, who traditionally is credited with addressing a Roman audience. If Mark's time notations are comparable to and consistent with those used in Palestine, and if no explanation is necessary for Mark's audience as to the meaning of the time notations, then one might naturally suppose that John and Mark both reckoned the hours of the day from sunrise.

2. *The Time Notations Are Approximations.* The time notations of both Mark and John are merely approximations for the events noted, and they can be reconciled when interpreted in light of the author's usage and purpose.

Support for the position comes from two different avenues: first, the manner in which time was denoted; second, the manner in which John and Mark note the events of the crucifixion.

Time notations from the time of Christ and before were very inexact, bearing little or no resemblance to the modern concept of punctuality. The use of *hōra* with an ordinal number, denoting a specific hour of the day, is known from only a single inscription of the first century B.C.<sup>32</sup> This is because until the invention of the sundial there was no way to denote specific hours. And the sundial itself was not exact, because the duration of an hour changed from season to season and the accuracy of a dial was affected if it were moved from one geographical location to another.<sup>33</sup> The dial was later used to help calibrate the water clock, but this device was not the property of the common man, nor was it in common use during the first century A.D.

Because of the inexactness of marking time, one can imagine that there was also a correspondingly relaxed attitude about the observance of time. There was not even a word to express a smaller division of time than an hour, so that an hour could not be held to mean sixty minutes.

In the highly organized life of Rome and a few other great cities there was more accurate reckoning, but their reckoning was by hours, where we reckon by minutes. No one ever thought of, or had any term to express, minuter division of time than the hour; and in Latin idiom, "in the lapse of an hour" (*horae momento*) is used where we should now say "in a second."<sup>34</sup>

The same latitude is observable in the NT, especially in the gospels. The word *hōra* can refer to the entire period of daytime (e.g. Matt 14:15; Mark 6:35; 11:11), to approximately a twelfth part of a day (John 11:9), or to a specific moment (e.g. Matt 8:13; 9:22; 15:28). The night was simply marked off into four watches: "evening, midnight, cock-crowing and morning" (Mark 13:35). The only time a specific hour of the night is given it is related to one of the watches: "the third hour of the night" (Acts 23:23)—that is, a fourth of the way through the night.

The same division of the daytime into fourths is also apparent. In the parable of the man who hired laborers to work in his vineyard, the man began early and then returned to the market place to hire additional laborers at the third, the

<sup>32</sup>H. J. Cadbury, "Some Lukan Expressions of Time," *JBL* 82 (1963) 277.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Carcopino, *Daily Life* 145-150.

<sup>34</sup>Ramsay, "Sixth Hour" 218.

sixth, the ninth and the eleventh hours (Matt 20:1-9). The notation of the eleventh hour may not be any more specific than “almost quitting time.” With the exception of John the gospel writers never refer to a more specific time of the day than one of these quarter divisions, and then only in reference to the day of the crucifixion (Matt 27:45-46; Mark 15:25, 33-34; Luke 23:44).<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it is suggested, the way that division of the day by hours would have been commonly understood would not have been as periods of sixty minutes but as periods of approximately one-fourth of a day.

It seems to me more likely that in spite of the opportunity offered by an hourly nomenclature the ancients found that for many purposes the simpler three-hour interval was sufficiently definite. For the culture represented by the evangelists and in a society without clocks or watches one could often be satisfied with phrases no more specific than our *midmorning*, *midday* (or *noon*), *midafternoon* together with *dawn* or *sunset*. For the last two terms in the Greek the first hour and the twelfth are conspicuously scarce or missing.<sup>36</sup>

John’s gospel has only two exceptions to this—1:39 and 4:52—which would indicate that John desired to especially emphasize the events that took place on those hours and therefore had taken particular pains to notice and record the time as precisely as he was able.

In light of this, it would be proper to understand Mark’s “third hour” as that quarter of a day between approximately 9:00 a.m. and noon, and John’s reference to “about” (*hōs*) the sixth hour to mean sometime before the middle of the day. Ramsay makes clear the inexactness of the terms:

Still more elastic, of course, was the expression, “about the sixth hour,” which, except where the circumstances of the speaker imply better opportunity for precise reckoning, cannot be interpreted more accurately than somewhere between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. . . . To the Oriental mind, the question between the third hour and the sixth is not more important than the doubt between 12.5 and 12.10 p.m. is to us.<sup>37</sup>

Mark can be properly interpreted as giving the hour of the crucifixion beginning from the middle of the morning and counting forward, while John reckoned it from the middle of the day and counted back. Morris thus summarizes this view:

It is more likely that in neither Mark nor John is the hour to be regarded as more than an approximation. People in antiquity did not have clocks or watches, and the reckoning of time was always very approximate. The “third hour” may denote nothing more firm than a time about the middle of the morning, while “about the sixth hour” can well signify getting on towards noon. Late morning would suit both expressions unless there were some reason for thinking that either was being given with more than usual accuracy. No such reason exists here.<sup>38</sup>

A second element that enters into consideration here is the event to which Mark and John were referring by their time notation. Mark appears to be referring to the crucifixion of Jesus, while John mentions the condemnation by Pilate. Would this affect the above interpretation? It is suggested that Mark and John are referring to two different aspects of the trial as the *terminus a quo* for the crucifixion. Mark sees the scourging of Jesus, which was properly preparation for

<sup>35</sup>Cf. also Acts 2:15; 3:1; 5:7; 10:3, 9, 30.

<sup>37</sup>Ramsay, “Sixth Hour” 217-218.

<sup>36</sup>Cadbury, “Lukan” 278.

<sup>38</sup>Morris, *John* 801.

crucifixion, as the time that the crucifixion actually began.<sup>39</sup> The summary statement in Mark 15:15 certainly suggests that he is viewing the entire proceedings as a unit. John, on the other hand, distinguishes the scourging (19:1-3) from the final condemnation. A considerable amount of time could have elapsed between those two points, further explaining the difference of perspective between the two evangelists as to the timing of the crucifixion.<sup>40</sup> Mark's use of the aorist (*estaurōsan*) in 15:25 could then be ingressive ("they began to crucify"), or else constative, seeing the entire period as one event ("they crucified"). A possible support for this position would be the reading of D at this point: *ephylasson* instead of *estaurōsan*. The scribe who substituted the former reading, assuming that it was not original to the text, may have understood the verse to refer to the time from which the soldiers took authority over Jesus, and thus he could have changed the word in an attempt to clarify the reading. It is also recognized that the reading may have been the product of an awkward attempt to harmonize Mark with John.

This interpretation of Mark 15:25, that it does not refer to the specific moment of nailing to the cross, is not essential to the theory of harmonization proposed in this section. But it is an added point to consider in attempting to determine how exacting one can be in putting a modern time notation to either Mark's "third hour," or John's "about the sixth hour," especially when it may be different points in the proceedings to which the two authors are making reference.

There are three problems to be dealt with in light of this theory. The first problem is the apparent interval between the crucifixion and the time of darkness, which fell at the sixth hour according to the united testimony of Matthew (27:45) and Luke (23:44). If Jesus were not crucified at 9:00 a.m., as has often been supposed, how does such an interval fit in? It should be noted, first, that the notation for the time of darkness cannot be interpreted as exactly twelve noon; Luke even says that it was "about" (*peri*) the sixth hour. Second, nowhere do the writers say how long a time intervened from the moment the victims were affixed to their crosses until darkness fell.

There [Mark 15:33], it is true, the onset of darkness is not said to have begun at the same moment as the crucifixion, but neither is it said that the darkness began only when Jesus was already hanging on the cross for some time. Hence it remains possible that Mk or the tradition which he passes down wishes to circumscribe in 15:33 the time which Jesus spent on the cross: while the Savior was hanging on the cross creation was enveloped in darkness.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore this objection to the theory is not weighty.

A second problem is that Mark 15:25 seems too far removed from v 15 to give the time for the beginning of the crucifixion process and too close to the account of the scene at the cross to not be describing the beginning of that moment. While this might argue against the division between the scourging and the crucifixion,

<sup>39</sup>A *New Testament Commentary for English Readers* (ed. C. J. Ellicott; London: Cassell, 1901), 1. 535; Godet, *Luke*, 2. 322.

<sup>40</sup>Godet, *John*, 2. 380.

<sup>41</sup>Mahoney, "New Look" 293. Cf. also Lane, *Mark* 567; J. Blinzler, *Der Prozess Jesu* (4th ed.; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1969) 420.

it does not affect the interpretation of the "third hour" as being a period later than 9:00 a.m. But Blinzler<sup>42</sup> sees two indications in Mark's account that the actual crucifixion was later than 9:00 a.m. First, it was Simon coming from the field who was impressed to carry the cross for Jesus (Mark 15:21). Since it was required in Judea that work should stop at midday on the day before Passover, it is suggested that Simon had done just that, assuming this was the day before (or morning of) Passover, at least for the Judeans, and therefore it was shortly before midday. Second, Pilate's wonder at the fact that Jesus was so soon dead (15:44) may indicate a very short time on the cross before Joseph requested the body.

This leads to the third problem: Was there sufficient time for the thieves crucified with Jesus to have died in the three to four hours allowed for them to have hung on the cross according to this theory? Under ordinary circumstances crucifixion could be a lingering death, lasting sometimes for days. But one of the variables cutting short the life was the intensity of the scourging preceding the hanging. Another was the abuse while on the cross. John reports that the legs of the thieves were broken to hasten their death, adding strangulation to their other woes (John 19:31-32). By this time Jesus had died already, so as much as another hour or two could have passed after three o'clock until the thieves were dead. Further, the text does not state that the thieves were yet dead, only that their legs were broken and they were taken away (19:31). This heightens the note of surprise at the fact that Jesus was dead already (Mark 15:44). Therefore either the death of the thieves could have been hastened or they could have been removed from their crosses not yet dead. In either case there is no obstacle to the theory herein detailed.

On the positive side, this theory has dealt with the time notations given by Mark and John and has shown that in light of both historical and grammatical factors the two can be reconciled inasmuch as they are stating that Jesus was crucified in the midmorning period, which lay between nine and twelve o'clock. Both accounts are accurate, but to demand more preciseness than that is to be unfair to the authors' language or purpose.

### III. CONCLUSION

This article has dealt with the alleged discrepancy between the time of the crucifixion as noted in Mark 15:25 and John 19:14. The theory that both writers' time notations must be read as approximations and are therefore reconcilable was found to fit the demands of usage and of historical evidence. It is clear that Mark should not be pinned down to 9:00 a.m. when he said "the third hour," for such exactness was foreign to him and improbable to him. His meaning was most probably that quarter of a day that covered the third to the sixth hour, or approximately 9:00 a.m. till noon. And when John said "about the sixth hour," it is clear that he did not mean precisely noon but rather that it was simply "about" midday. So both writers set the crucifixion within the same general time frame, a frame of reference that is as accurate as they meant it to be and that leaves no room for the claim that they were three hours apart in giving the time of the crucifixion.

<sup>42</sup>Blinzler, *Prozess* 421.