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Short Note:
"On the Third Day" is "Two Days Later"

By Peter Schmidt[1]

Biblical references discussed

Genesis 31:22; Exodus 19:10–11; Leviticus 7:16–17; Numbers 7:24; Numbers 19:11–12; 2 Samuel 1:1–2; 1 Kings 3:18; 1 Kings 12:5; 2 Kings 20:5; etc.

Introduction

What does the phrase הַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי *hayyôm haššᵊlîšî* 'the third day' mean? This is a small issue, but it occurs repeatedly in both narrative and legal texts, and translators have to make a decision on it. Modern versions take different stances, and some of them are inconsistent within themselves. The commentaries give hardly any attention to the question. This note deals with a number of instances and should help the exegete/translator to come up with a well-founded approach. The main points are these:

- To avoid a mis-translation in the sense of "three days later"
- Where needed, to clarify, which is "the first day."

The problem

The frequent phrases "on the third day" and "on the seventh day" and similar cases are somewhat ambiguous. When translating them, it is important to know what the point of reference is (day 1), and not to include more days in the counting than is intended in the original. Let me illustrate the issue with an analogy. It is just like the difference in counting the floors of a building in British English and American English: the floor at street level is called "the ground floor" in British English, and thus "the first floor" is the floor above it. In American English, that is usually called "the second floor." The same difference exists between French and Russian. In French the ground floor is *le rez-de-chausée*, and the floor above it is *le premier étage* 'the first story'. In Russian, that already counts as второ́й эта́ж 'the second story'. In the same way, translators need to be aware of the way of counting in Hebrew and in their own language.

The data

The phrase הַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי *hayyôm haššᵊlîšî* 'the third day' occurs 31 times, almost always as בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי *bayyôm haššᵊlîšî* 'on the third day'.[2]

Discussion of examples

The counting is clear in cases like in Numbers 7:24, where the first day is mentioned explicitly. Numbers 7 reports how Israel's leaders bring their gifts for the dedication of the altar. The representative of the tribe of Judah begins "on the first day" (v. 12). Issachar's leader follows "on the second day" (v. 18). Verse 24 reads (NIV):

> On the third day, Eliab son of Helon, the leader of the people of Zebulun, brought his offering.[3]

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[1] I am grateful for the help from a number of colleagues, especially in regard to the examples in various languages. Errors are my own responsibility.

[2] Exceptions: Ex 19:11 לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי *layyôm haššᵊlîšî* 'for the third day'; Lev 19:6 עַד־יוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי *'ad-yôm haššᵊlîšî* 'until the third day'.
The phrase לִשְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים *lišᵊlōšet yāmîm* (only Ex 19:15 and Amos 4:4) is variously translated as "for the third day" or similarly (in Ex 19:15), and "every three days," "on the third day," "within three days" (REB), or still differently (in Amos 4:4). This phrase is not discussed here.

[3] The account of the creation is similar, but the temporal phrase comes without the article: Genesis 1:13 (NASB) says "There was evening and there was morning, a third day."

The situation is similar in Exodus 19:10–11, which **refers to "today," i.e., the day of speaking**:[4]

> [10] The LORD also said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today [*hayyôm*] and tomorrow [*māhār*], and let them wash their garments; [11] and let them be ready for the third day [*layyôm haššᵊlîšî*], for on the third day [*bayyôm haššᵊlîšî*] the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

Consequently, vv. 15–16 say:

> [15] He said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." [16] So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes …

That the day of speaking is day 1 **should probably also be applied to 2 Kings 20:5** (and 8), where the LORD sends Isaiah to King Hezekiah with the following message:

> I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD.

Which is this "third day"? The rendering in English suggests, or at least is open to, the understanding that the visit to the Temple will take place three days *after his healing*. But even if it is understood as *the healing itself happening "on the third day,"* that is unclear: it could be two, or three days from "now."

If the conversation—contemporarily speaking—took place on a Monday, then, going by the above places (Num 7:24; Ex 19:10f.), the healing and going-to-the-Temple will happen on Wednesday. GNTD seems to have it wrong. "In three days" would point to Thursday:

> I, the LORD, the God of your ancestor David, have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will heal you, and in three days you will go to the Temple.

NET08 has it right, and puts it naturally:

> I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Look, I will heal you. The day after tomorrow you will go up to the LORD's temple.

Likewise, T4T says:

> …, have heard what you prayed. And I have seen your tears. So, listen: I will heal you. Two days from now you will be able to go up to my temple.

In contrast to these versions, and expressing the same meaning as GNTD, are these:

> NLT07: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will heal you, and three days from now you will get out of bed and go to the Temple of the LORD.
>
> EASY: … On the third day from now …

In other cases, it is not the timing of the speech act that matters for the counting, but a certain action or event. E.g., Leviticus 7:16–17:[5]

> [16] But if the sacrifice of his offering is a votive or a freewill offering, it shall be eaten on the day that he offers his sacrifice, and on the next day [*ûmimmāḥᵒrāt*] what is left of it may be eaten; [17] but what is left over from the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day shall be burned with fire.

In the above case, the sequence of days is obvious. **More debatable are cases where the wording is less explicit**. E.g., Genesis 31:22 reads (NRSV):

> On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled.

In such cases, the exegete has to establish the point of reference: the third day of/after what?[6] The *Handbook* (Reyburn and Fry 1997) advises:

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[4] Bible quotes are from NASB unless indicated otherwise. Any highlighting by underlining within quotes is added.
[5] Very similar is Leviticus 19:6–7.
[6] Cf. Bandstra (2019:182), who, following Reichenbach, distinguishes between event time, speech time, and reference time.

> For example, we may say "Three days after Jacob had left, Laban found out," "Jacob had only been gone three days when his uncle learned about it," or "After Jacob had been gone for three days, people told Laban what had happened."

If the more obvious places (like Ex 19:10f. and Lev 7:16f.) should inform our reading of the more obscure places, the *Handbook's* suggestions are problematic. The underlined phrases would be taken as Laban hearing the news on Thursday as it were. Accordingly, many English versions have "three days later" (e.g. NET08).

But more likely, the day the flight happened counts as the first day. (If it was a Monday, Laban learned about it on Wednesday.) The flight was reported in v. 21 and is the last event we read about; **the counting of days in v. 22 is based on that event.** This interpretation is reflected in GCLNR00, which says *zwei Tage später* (= two days later), and in FC97, which speaks of *le surlendemain* (= two days later).

2 Samuel 1:1–2 is another example. It says (NRSV):

> [1] After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. [2] On the third day, a man came from Saul's camp, …

Some readers will take this as follows: If David returned on a Monday, he stayed in Ziklag on Tuesday and Wednesday. The third day of his stay would then be Thursday. But going by the understanding explained earlier, **his arrival on Monday counts as the first day**.

Again, the *Handbook* seems to favor the idea that David had been in Ziklag for two *full* days, although the explanation is not absolutely clear. It says on v. 2 (Omanson and Ellington 2001):

> **On the third day:** literally "and it happened on the third day" (as explained on page 19). In the context of the previous verse, which mentions staying in Ziklag for two days, it may be more natural in many languages to say simply "the next day" as TEV has done. David had been in Ziklag for two days prior to the events recounted in this verse. It was on the following day that these events occurred.

Again, GCLNR00 has it differently:

> Er war gerade den dritten Tag wieder in der Stadt, da …
>
> *English:* He had just been back in town the third day, when …

While this wording is still slightly ambiguous, it would normally be read as the messenger arriving on Wednesday. HFA is clearer. It reads:

> … Nachdem David von seinem Vergeltungsschlag gegen die Amalekiter nach Ziklag zurückgekehrt war, erschien zwei Tage später bei ihm ein Mann aus Sauls Heer. …
>
> *English:* Two days after David had returned …, a man appeared …

Six French versions all state in one way or another that David returned to Ziklag and stayed there for two days (e.g. NBS: …où il resta deux jours). Then they all have the messenger arrive le troisième jour (= [on] the third day). This is understood to be on Wednesday, although, like with the German example above, there is a slight ambiguity, depending on the time of the day of the arrival. If David arrived late on Monday evening, le troisième jour would point to Thursday. We cannot tell for sure, but going by the earlier examples, to the Hebrew writer David's arrival happened in the course of the day, and Monday counts as day 1.

Among the Russian versions, two show a special wording. CRV2 says:

> 1 Саýл погиб. Давúд, разгромив амалекитя́н, на два дня остановился в Цикла́ге. 2 На третий день туда пришел человек из стана Саула; …
>
> *English:* Saul died. David, having struck down the Amalekites, stopped at Ziklag for two days. On the third day, a man arrived from Saul's camp; …

Here, the verb שׁוּב *šwb* 'return' remains untranslated, David's return is implied. This way, the text reads smoother. The day of David's return counts as day 1.

RBT says:

> [1] После смерти Саула, когда Давид, одолев Амалека, вернулся в Циклаг и провел там уже два дня, [2] пришел к нему на следующий день из стана Саула человек: …
>
> *English:* After the death of Saul, when David—having overcome the Amalekites—returned to Ziklag and had been staying there for two days already, the next day arrived a man from Saul's camp: …

This, too, was read the way that, if David arrived on a Monday, that other man arrived on Wednesday; however the wording also seems open to seeing David's stay last for two *full* days, and that man arriving on Thursday.

The somewhat accentuated Hebrew wording with the two verbs ("David returned…, David remained two days…. On the third day, a man came…") might suggest that the author had two *full* days after David's arrival in mind. Otherwise, he could have just said "David returned…. On the third day, a man came…"). However, the phrase *bayyôm haššᵊlîšî* is the same as in all the other places, and I do not see a strong enough signal for deviating from the interpretation that I suggested before.

Periods of time occur repeatedly in some of the legal texts in the Pentateuch. They deserve some attention. Let us look at two such cases:

Taking up Leviticus 7:16–17 (quoted above already) we read:

> [16] But if the sacrifice of his offering is a votive or a freewill offering, it shall be eaten on the day that he offers his sacrifice, and on the next day what is left of it may be eaten; [17] but what is left over from the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day shall be burned with fire.

Taken by itself, the phrase "on the third day" could suggest "three days later" (which would be Thursday). But in this case, there is enough contextual information to rule out that interpretation.

However, consider Numbers 19:11–12. We read:

> [11] 'The one who touches the corpse of any person shall be unclean for seven days. [12] That one shall purify himself from uncleanness with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, *and then* he will be clean; but if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean.

Ten English versions have it like that, as do the German, French and Russian ones. This is potentially misleading. Again, **we need to ask: on the third day of what?** In Hebrew, the reference point is **the day of the contamination**—when that person touched a corpse. If the touching happened on a Monday, then the Monday counts as the first day. The person is required to apply the water of purification on Wednesday and on Sunday. Thus, the third day is not three days later, and the seventh day is not after one week (the next Monday), but Sunday.[7]

Translation: To help the reader, one could end v. 11 with "shall be unclean for seven days *beginning with that day*."

If the beginning of the counting is not clarified like that, v. 12 should say that that person "shall purify himself from uncleanness with the water two days later and six days later." This could prevent the misunderstanding that he is unclean for the next seven days—including the next Monday.

Alternatively, and depending on the receptor language, one could try to disambiguate the prescription by saying "That one shall purify himself… on the third day *of his contamination*." T4T is the only version that takes such an approach. It adds the implicit information in italics:

> On the third day and on the seventh day *after touching a corpse*, …

Unfortunately, there is still some ambiguity: "the third day *after* touching" will probably be read by many as Thursday, but it should be Wednesday.

We turn to two more cases in the book of Kings. 1 Kings 3 contains the report of the two prostitutes who came before King Solomon. In 1 Kings 3:18, the first one says:

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[7] Cf. Lev 14:9ff. for a distinction between the seventh and the eighth day.

> It happened on the third day after I gave birth [*bayyôm haššᵊlîšî lᵊlidtî*], that this woman also gave birth to a child, …

The English phrase "after I gave birth" renders the Hebrew לְלִדְתִּי *lᵊlidtî*, which is an infinitive construct with the preposition לְ *lᵊ*. Waltke and O'Connor (1990:607 §36.2.3d) explain, "*Temporal clauses* in ל can mark a point in time or an extent in time." But this does not answer the question whether we should understand "on the third day beginning with my giving-birth," or "on the third day after my giving-birth." The versatile usage of the preposition *lᵊ* makes it difficult to come to a firm conclusion. The versions decided as follows:

Most English versions say something like these examples do:

> NRSV: on the third day after I gave birth
>
> NET: three days after I had my baby

GNTD is the only English version that goes the other way:

> Two days after my child was born

GCLNR00, HFA and FC97 do the same. **In light of all the other instances discussed earlier, following these latter versions is recommended.** Note also the Contemporary Russian Version (CRV2), which expresses the same idea like this:

> А через день родила и она.
>
> *English:* And after [the passing of] one day, she, too, delivered a baby.

SYNOD says it differently:

> на третий день после того, как я родила, родила и эта женщина;
>
> *English:* on the third day after my delivery, this woman, too, delivered a baby;

Although this looks like NRSV, and *could* be taken to mean that, if the delivery of the first woman happened on Monday, the delivery of the second woman happened on Thursday, the most natural reading in Russian is that it was Wednesday.

RBT overdoes it by saying:

> А через три дня после моих родов родила и эта женщина.
>
> *English:* And after [the passing of] three days after my delivery this woman, too, delivered a baby.

This would make the delivery of the second woman happen on Friday.

In **1 Kings 12:5**, Rehoboam tells the people:

> "Depart for three days [*ʿōd šᵊlōšâ yāmîm*], then return to me." So the people departed.

The verse contains a textual difficulty, as the *Handbook* explains (Omanson and Ellington 2008). V. 12 is easier:

> Then Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam on the third day [*bayyôm haššᵊlîšî*] as the king had directed, saying, "Return to me on the third day [*bayyôm haššᵊlîšî*]."

A translation of v. 12 should say "two days later / in two days," like in other places too; and v. 5 should be dealt with accordingly. This is, in fact, what the *Handbook* recommends regarding the parallel passage in 2 Chronicles 10:5 (Omanson and Ellington 2014):

> **Come to me again in three days:** GW and SEM render **in three days** more idiomatically as "the day after tomorrow," since the current day was counted as the first day.

Conclusion

There are cases where it is clearly stated which day is day 1: it is the day of speaking ("today" in Ex 19:10f.), or of a given action ("the day that he offers his sacrifice" in Lev 7:16f.). In places where the wording does not express such a point of reference, it is implied. In that case we need to identify the event, because it

determines day 1 (e.g. the day of Jacob's flight in Gen 31:21f.)—as long as the text does not suggest otherwise. That is to say, **the counting of days begins with the event in view, not with the first full day after it**.

Translation

Translations should be transparent about which day *hayyôm haššᵊlîšî* refers to, and they should also be natural. If the receptor language counts days like Hebrew does, there should be no problem. But if the phrase "on the third day" is ambiguous, or even clearly marks the time as "the day after the day after tomorrow," it will be misleading. To be recommended are wordings like those in NET08 and T4T in 2Ki 20:5 (quoted above): "**the day after tomorrow**" or "**two days from now/today**," or—depending on the setting—simply "**two days later**." In French, this could be *après-demain* or *le surlendemain* or *deux jours plus tard*. In Russian, послезавтра and через день look like good solutions.

Alternatively, the event that marks **the start of the counting could be identified** (as suggested above for Num 19:11f.: "on the third day *of his contamination*").

Translations should deal with the phrase *hayyôm haššᵊlîšî* and similar ones **consistently**. This does not always happen. E.g., GNTD has "two days after my child was born" in 1Ki 3:18, but "three days later" in 1Ki 12:12. NET08 has "the day after tomorrow" in 2Ki 20:5, but "three days later" in Gen 31:22.

A potential problem in using a phrase like "two days later" is that one loses the connection with the phrase "on the third day" as it might be familiar from texts inside and outside the Bible about **Jesus's resurrection** (e.g. τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ in Matthew 16:21 in one of the predictions, and ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις in John 2:19 about the rebuilding of the Temple, and τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ in the confession in 1 Corinthians 15:4). Hosea 6:2 in particular deserves attention ("He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day").[8] However, the problem with counting days is the same in the New Testament. Translators will need to judge whether linguistic clarity is more important, or accommodating accustomed phrasing. The issue is well presented in the *Handbook* on Matthew 16:21 (Newman and Stine 1988):

> **On the third day** (so also NEB, NJB) may be translated "three days later," as in TEV. Of course, each translator will use whatever expression is natural. For the Jews, the day of the event spoken of was the first day, the day after that was the second day, and the day after that was **the third day**. Languages which count the day after the event as the first day may have "two days later." (Note that English is such a language, and therefore TEV is actually translated incorrectly.) But because "third day" or "in three days" are phrases that are frequently used in the Bible with some symbolic value, many translators prefer an expression like that in RSV.

Residue

Not discussed were the following references:

- 1 Samuel 20. That chapter tells about the agreement between Jonathan and David. Verse 5 and 12 contain textual difficulties (v. 5: "until the third evening"[?]; v. 12: "about this time tomorrow, or the third day"[?]).
- The counting of days and the synchronization of the events in Joshua 1–3 is particularly problematic.[9] However, the present phrase *hayyôm haššᵊlîšî* "the third day" does not occur in those chapters. For details, see Woudstra (1981).
- Jonah 2:1 [English 1:17] is special in that it mentions the nights as well: "Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights [שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים וּשְׁלֹשָׁה לֵילוֹת *šᵊlišâ yāmîm ûšᵊlišâ lêlôt*]."

[8] For a biblical-theological study on "The Third Day," see Dempster (2014).
[9] NASB: 1:11 "within three days"; 2:16 "for three days"; 2:22 "for three days"; 3:2 "at the end of three days."

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