Counting of days and nights in the Bible

(Iver Larsen, 2008, revised November 2026)

It has now been generally accepted that the Bible uses *inclusive* counting of days, a system still used today in Africa and parts of Asia and South America.

This is most clearly seen from Lev 23:15-16 which says (NIV): ”From *the day after the Sabbath*, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off *seven full weeks*. Count off *fifty days* up to *the day after the seventh Sabbath*, and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD.” The only way 7 full weeks - 49 days - from the day after the Sabbath to the day after the 7th Sabbath, can be counted as 50 is when both the beginning and ending days are included in the counting. The system is confirmed by each and every reference to the counting of days in the Bible. Compare also Hos 6:2: ”*After two days* he will revive us; *on the third day* he will restore us.”

Another important aspect of Biblical counting is that part of a day was counted as a whole day. This is most clearly seen by the fact that Jesus was raised on the third day. The first day is Friday, even though Jesus was only dead for about 3 hours that day. However, the length of the portion of the day is irrelevant. That portion of the day is counted as the first day. The third day started at sunset on Saturday. We don’t know the exact time when Jesus was raised, but it was apparently early Sunday morning before sunrise. But it is still the third day.

Expressions like ”x days and x nights” are fairly common in the Bible. Some examples are: Gen 7:4, 7:12, Exo 24:18, 34:28, 1 Kings 19:8; 1 Sam 30:12, Jonah 2:1, Job 2:12. (This is not a full list.)

Now, with inclusive counting of days and the counting of part of a day as a whole day, ”x days and x nights” is mathematically speaking impossible. If the third day is two days later, there can only be two nights in such a period.

In a Western culture where we use exclusive counting and count a portion of a day as a portion, it is possible to have 3 days and 3 nights. It we start at 3 p.m. on Friday, then 3 days and 3 nights will extend until 3 p.m. on Monday. If we assume that the ”night” goes from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., then the mathematics is as follows: Friday day 3 hours, Friday night 12 hours, Saturday day 12 hours, Saturday night 12 hours, Sunday day 12 hours, Sunday night 12 hours, Monday day 9 hours. Altogether 6 times 12 hours equals 3 days and 3 nights.

Now, if we do the same experiment with inclusive counting, the result is different. Again we start at 3. p.m. and assume the night goes from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m: Friday 3-6 p.m. 3 hours= one day. Friday night 12 hours=one night, Saturday day 12 hours=one day, Saturday night 12 hours=one night, Sunday to 3 p.m. 9 hours=one day. This results in 3 days: Friday, Saturday and Sunday plus 2 nights in between: Friday and Saturday.

Since it is mathematically impossible to have 3 days and 3 nights with inclusive counting, why does the Bible talk like that?

The reason is fairly simple once you start thinking in Hebrew like the Jews did: In the Hebrew world view, it is of paramount importance to use repetition. If something is repeated it is strengthened. It has poetic force to say 40 days and 40 nights, but it loses that force if we say 40 days and 39 nights. Another aspect is that the symbolic meaning of numbers is very important. The number 40 stands for a time of testing or trial. (40 years in the wilderness, 40 days in the desert for Jesus, etc.) The number 7 stands for what is complete. The number 3 stands for divine

power and intervention. Several times in the OT divine intervention happens on the third day as God said in Exo 19:11: ”Be ready, because *on the third day* I will intervene with a miracle.” (See also 2 Kings 20:5, Est 5:1, Hos 6:2, Matt 16:21, Luke 24:46). That is why Jonah was in the sea animal 3 days and 2 nights, and that is why Jesus was in the tomb 3 days and 2 nights.

To assume that ”3 days and 3 nights” in Hebrew is the same as ”3 days and 3 nights” in English is to make an ethnocentric mistake.