

Keeping track of time...timing is everything...

One of the most challenging chronological issues of the New Testament is the day of Jesus' crucifixion and harmonizing the apparent differences found in the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and John. In addition to the chronological issue is the meaning of the Lord's Supper within the context of its association with Passover. Was the Last Supper the Passover meal? The Synoptics seem to indicate that Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover meal the evening before the Crucifixion (Matt 26:17-19, Mark 14:12-16; 15:1-25; Luke 22:7-15). John seems to suggest that the Last Supper occurred earlier, because the Passover lamb was slaughtered at the moment that Jesus was crucified (John 13:1; 18:28; 19:14).

The first question to consider is whether the Last Supper had the characteristics of a Passover Seder. Joachim Jeremias in his book, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (3rd ed., London: SCM Press, 1966), noted fourteen parallels:

- 1) It took place in Jerusalem, 2) It took place in a room available to pilgrims for that purpose, 3) It took place at night, 4) The meal was celebrated with family (His family of disciples), 5) They ate while reclined, 6) The meal was eaten after achieving ritual purity, 7) Bread was broken throughout the meal, 8) The wine was red, 9) The wine was consumed, 10) Last minute preparations were made for the meal, 11) After the meal, alms were given, 12) A hymn was sung, 13) Celebrants remained in Jerusalem and 14) The symbolism and significance of Passover was discussed.

While these parallels certainly exist, some academic theologians still debate whether these parallels are too general to be conclusive (i.e. meal at night, reclined while eating, ate bread, drank wine and sang a hymn), and some see the Last Supper as any Jewish meal (i.e. Acts 2:46-47).

However, skeptics of Jeremias' parallels cannot easily discount his 14th observation nor the Synoptics's dating of Passover (Matt 26:2, 18; Mark 14:12, 17). Jesus explained the symbolism of the bread and wine (Matt 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20) just as Jews would explain the symbolism of the Passover meal within the context of the Exodus from Egypt. This is not done at any Jewish meal.

The definitive answer to this chronological discrepancy is both challenging and elusive. Scholars fall into three camps in approaching this problem.

Theory #1. The chronological difference between the Synoptics and John cannot be harmonized.

Academic theologians who hold this view take the position that either the Synoptics or John is correct in their account of chronology. In either case, any theory of this kind depends on its explanation of why the discrepancy was introduced.

- 1a) Those who believe that the Synoptic record was correct with associating the Last Supper as the Passover meal, suggest that John changed his date to make a theological statement: Jesus died as the Passover lamb (John 1:29).
- 1b) Those who believe that John's account was correct in dating suggest that the Synoptics changed their date to make the Last Supper fit the Passover symbolism.

In the attempt to trace the theological development of their position, this camp of scholars see the discrepancy of dates found in the Synoptics and John as later changes by scribes motivated by theological perspective. However, this produces significant problems as it presumes that other chronological references in the Synoptics and John were changed to maintain consistency, which cannot be found in the earliest manuscripts. So far, this type of theory is not considered compelling or convincing.

Theory #2. The chronological difference between the Synoptics and John are due to calendar differences and can be harmonized.

The Dead Sea Scrolls revealed the presence of two separate calendars which were used in the calculation of feast days. Scholars in this camp theorize that divergent calendars existed during the first century and show how the account of the Synoptics and John were both correct. For example, they propose that the Pharisee and Sadducees adopted different calendars and the Passover and crucifixion might look like this:

Pacific Standard Time	Galilean Time (Jesus & Pharisees) [Matthew, Mark, & Luke]	Judean / Roman Time (Sadducees) [John]
Thursday 12am		
Thursday 6am	Thursday (14 th of Nisan: Day of Preparation)	
Thursday 3-5pm	Passover lambs slain	
Thursday 6pm	Last Supper	Thursday (14 th of Nisan: Day of Preparation)
Friday 12am		
Friday 6am	Friday 15 th of Nisan	
Friday 9am Crucifixion		
Friday 3pm Christ dies		Passover lambs slain
Friday 6pm		Friday 15 th of Nisan

Note the following:

- 1) There are 3 different concepts of a day. A new day starts: a) Pacific Standard Time at midnight, b) Galilean Time at sunrise, and c) Judean / Roman Time at sunset.
- 2) In the year Christ died, the priestly calendar commission agreed to the Sadducees preference to have Pentecost fall on a Sunday. The Pharisees meanwhile followed the normal course of time, which had the month start one day earlier. Hence, Passover occurred on two consecutive days.
- 3) Matthew, Mark, and Luke were based on Galilean Time and John was based on Judean / Roman Time. When considering the different time zones, the Matthew, Mark, and Luke accounts of the Last Supper was indeed the Passover supper, and in John's account the Last Supper was indeed the night before the Passover Supper.
- 4) The Gospel of John portrays the crucifixion as occurring during the slaying of the Passover lambs!

While theory #2 is possible, it currently cannot be proved that the first century Jew adopted two different calendars. There is no evidence that Jesus followed a Galilean calendar, and it is unlikely that temple authorities would have allowed Passover to be held on two different days.

Theory #3 There are no chronological differences between the Synoptics and John.

Both the Gospels and John agree on the day of the week that the crucifixion occurred. The crucifixion and burial of Christ took place on the Day of Preparation, which was a day before the Sabbath (Mark 15:42; John 19:31). Mark's account has the weekly Sabbath in mind whereas John indicates High Sabbath.

The Sabbath is the Jewish day of rest, which in Hebrew is called "Shabbat." By Jewish reckoning, a new day begins at 6 p.m., and the Sabbath commences at the end of Friday at 6 p.m. and continues until Saturday evening at 6 p.m.

The Sabbath finds its basis in Genesis 1:2-4; 2:3 and Exodus 16:23-29; 20:8-11; 31:12-17. It is celebrated as a day to acknowledge the fruits of the earth as a gift from God, and on the seventh day of each week.

It is worthwhile noting that in over thirty languages other than English, without exception, "Saturday" a cognate of "Sabbath".

Preparation Day was the day before Sabbath where people prepared for the day of rest. For example, in Exodus 16:22-30, the Israelites gathered extra portions of food so that they wouldn't work on the Sabbath.

In addition to the weekly Sabbath, there are several other days that God instructed the Israelites to set aside as mandatory days of rest that are not necessarily a Saturday. These days occur during festivals commemorating God's great acts of salvation in the history of Israel, and there are seven festivals that are celebrated annually (though not all will have Sabbaths). Of these commemorations, Leviticus 23 lists seven festival Sabbaths:

- Feast of the Unleavened Bread has two Sabbaths within the seven day celebration: first and seventh day (Lev 23:7-8).
- Feast of Weeks (also known as Festival of Reaping, Day of First Fruits or Pentecost) has one Sabbath on this one day celebration (Lev 23:21).
- Feast of Trumpets has one Sabbath on this one day celebration (Lev 23:24). Rabbis added a second day to this festival around 500 B.C.
- Day of Atonement has one Sabbath on this one day celebration (Lev 23:27-28).
- Feast of Tabernacles (also known as the Feast of Ingathering, Feast to the Lord or Feast of Booths) has two Sabbaths within the eight day celebration: first and eighth day (Lev 23:34-43).

The term "High Sabbath" does not exist in Jewish traditions. While God makes a distinction between a festival Sabbath from a weekly Sabbath with the mandatory day of rest to include a "holy convocation," John's reference to "High Sabbath" (John 19:31) is almost certainly in recognition that the weekly Sabbath occurred during of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

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Within the context of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion of Christ, two festivals were occurring: Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

The Passover was an annual festival that started with the sacrifice of the lamb at twilight of the 14th day of the month of Nisan (Abib in the Old Testament), and followed by the Passover meal that evening which would be the start of 15 Nisan. The Feast of the Unleavened Bread followed the next morning and lasted seven days.

Passover commemorated the last meal in Egypt while the last plague upon Egypt took place and passed over all those whose home had the blood of an unblemished lamb on its lintel and doorposts; it was a memorial of redemption from the angel of death (Ex 12:1-13, 23-27).

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread commemorated the day that God brought the nation of Israel out of Egypt. In their preparation of their hasty departure, God instructed the Israelites not to leaven their bread (Ex 2:14-20; 13:1-16).

Thus these two festivals were celebrated over eight days and Passover could be seen as “the day of preparation” for the Sabbath that started off the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

By the first century, the proximity of Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread caused many Jews to consider the two memorials as a single festival. In the Gospels, there are instances in which the reference to Passover includes the seven day Feast of the Unleavened Bread or visa versa.

Luke 22:1 – *“Now the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover,..”*

Luke 22:7-8 – *“Then came the first day of the Unleavened Bread on which the Passover Lamb had to be sacrificed. And Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and prepare the Passover for us,..”*

Matthew 26:17 – *“Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Where do you want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?’”*

Mark 14:12 – *“On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, ‘Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?’”*

Luke 2:41-43 – *“Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days,..”*

Contemporary Jewish extrabiblical sources also show the same blurring of the two festivals.

Josephus (37-100 A.D.) referred to the eight-day festival of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread as the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Antiquities of the Jews 2.15.1.; The Jewish War 2.12:1; 2.12:7; 2.14:3).

In other instances, Josephus used “Passover” to refer to the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

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While the Old Testament specified Nisan 14 as the start of Passover and Nisan 15-21 for the Feast of Unleavened Bread, by the first century, Jews no longer made the distinction and referred to the whole period of Nisan 14-21 as Passover. Passover was often synonymous with the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the two festivals were used interchangeably as a reference to a single festival.

With the understanding that the first century use of Passover included the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, it provides some clarity to the biblical text.

While John's description of the Last Supper was "before the Feast of the Passover" (John 13:1), he understood that same day as "the day of preparation" for "high Sabbath" (John 19:31), which was the weekly Sabbath occurred during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

John's account of Jesus' Last Supper appears to be on the evening after Nisan 15 began which is the correct time and day for the Passover meal.

There are other characteristics of the Last Supper that indicate that it was the Passover meal.

The meal was at night in Jerusalem (John 13:30).

The meal was eaten in ritual purity in which the disciples had bathed (John 13:5-10).

Judas left to either buy more things in preparation for "High" Sabbath; Passover was preparation day for the Sabbath on the first day of Feast of Unleavened Bread (John 13:29). Or Judas went to give something to the poor who were begging from Passover pilgrims, which was customary on Passover night.

Jewish religious leaders also understood the late night trial of Jesus as before the Feast of Passover just as John understood Passover to include the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (John 18:28).

They did not enter the Praetorium, because they feared of ritual defilement by entering a Gentile dwelling. Ritual uncleanness would have prevented one from participating in the Passover meal.

Because Exodus 12:8-10 forbids any delay of the Passover meal, it is unlikely that Jewish religious leaders were referring to a Passover meal immediately following the trial of Jesus; it was around midnight.

If Jewish religious were referring to a Passover meal the following night, they had the following day to become ritually clean.

If this were the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, Jewish religious leaders would have the "chagigah" (also known as "hagigah") in the morning, which was the first feast offering of this festival. In this light, Jewish religious leaders may not have enough time for purification and would want to avoid ritual uncleanness to continue full participation of the entire feast. And it was known that Passover lamb sacrifices were eaten during the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

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John's account of Pilate's presentation of Jesus to the crowds occurring on the day of preparation was a reference to Friday (John 19:14).

By the first century, there is strong evidence that Preparation Day was synonymous with Friday the day before the weekly Sabbath. Mark 15:42 provides an example: the Greek term "paraskeuē" means "preparation" and "prosabbaton" means "Sabbath eve." Mark's text is translated as "it was Preparation, that is, Sabbath eve". This clarifying reference was probably intended for Gentile readers unfamiliar with Jewish religious practice and dating.

While festival Sabbaths could fall on other days of the week besides Saturday, "paraskeuē" was not used to refer to the day before a festival Sabbath unless it was a Friday. And scholars have never found "paraskeuē" used in the context as the "preparation for the Passover." It always meant Friday the day before Saturday.

Hellenistic Jews used "prosabbaton" to exclusively designate Friday, the day before the weekly Sabbath (Judith 8:6; 2 Macc 8:26).

First century Christians used "paraskeuē" to mean Friday. An early Christian work, the Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Disciples 70-120 A.D.) instructs Christians to fast on "the fourth day and Preparation" (Didache 8:1). It was referring to Wednesday and Friday.

Christians adopted the Jewish designation of a week: the first five days were numbered and the sixth and seventh were called "paraskeuē" and "sabbaton" respectively.

Both Matthew and Mark indicate that the first day of the week begins after the Sabbath (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2). This fixes the Sabbath, the day after the Crucifixion, on Saturday.

That Friday was the day of Jesus' crucifixion is held unanimously among all early Christian writers.

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There are reasonable grounds to accept Theory #3 where there are no chronological differences between the Synoptics and John; but, nothing is certain. With this understanding, the chronology of the Crucifixion is seen as follows:

1) **Thursday night.** The Passover meal takes place. While the Synoptics understand the Passover to include the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, they record the Passover meal on Thursday evening at the beginning of Nisan 15. John considers the Passover meal as occurring on Friday night Nisan 16 during the first evening meal of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

2) **Friday.** Christ was crucified Friday at 9 am (3rd hour) and died at 3 p.m. (9th hour). Both the Synoptics and John call this day Preparation Day the day before the weekly Sabbath. Jesus' body was placed in the tomb on Friday evening.

This was also the festival Sabbath for the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. Would Jewish religious leaders be involved with a trial and execution on this day? The Mishnah, the first major work of Rabbinical Judaism reflecting the debates of Jewish sages 70-200 A.D., seem to indicate the possibility. It advocates that the execution of a rebellious teacher should take place on one of the three principle feasts so that the people would hear and fear.

3) **Saturday.** The weekly Sabbath was the day of rest.

4) **Sunday.** The tomb was found empty Sunday morning. Approximately only 40 hours has passed from Jesus' death to resurrection.

Consistently throughout the Old and New Testament, part of a day is counted as a whole day. Matthew 12:40 is an idiomatic expression for three days not a literal 72 hours (ie. see Esther 4:16-5:1); in all Biblical accounts, Christ rose on the third day not the fourth.

References:

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