

The Problems, Proposals and Personal Preference for the time of Jesus' Death and Resurrection

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1] The Problems

Problem 1:

- *Jesus said it was to be 'three-days-and-three-nights' between His death and resurrection. He also said He would be raised after three days. The traditional scheme (Friday Jesus dies, Sunday rises) does not make room for this.*
 - Please read: Matthew 12:40; Mark 8:31.

Problem 2:

- *John's gospel places the Passover Meal on the evening of the day Jesus was crucified, whilst the other Gospels (synoptics¹) say Jesus ate the Passover before He was crucified. The synoptics say that the slaying of the lamb and eating of the Passover meal was done the day before Jesus died. John implies that the lamb was slain at the time of Jesus' death.*
 - Please read:
 - John 13:1, 29; 18:28; 19:14, 36. (see Matthew 26:5)
 - Mark 14:12-17; Matthew 26:17-19; Luke 22:7-15.

2] The Proposals

For Problem 1

There are those who take Jesus' words as strictly literal. The time between His death and subsequent resurrection was therefore 72 hours. The traditional sequence of Friday to Sunday is thus wrong. Jesus died on Wednesday 15h00 and rose again Saturday afternoon/evening. Between this time was a special 'high day' Sabbath (Thursday), an ordinary working day (Friday) and the weekly Sabbath (Saturday) which ended toward the evening.

Assessment: This creates more problems than it solves. All accounts are far easier read in the traditional sequence. This lengthy 'Wednesday to Sunday' sequence is only insisted upon by those who insist on a literal 'three-days-three-nights' interpretation of Jesus' saying. If the saying of Jesus is shown to be more figurative than literal, then the Wednesday-to-Sunday sequence is unnecessary and not necessitated from the Gospels themselves.

Rather, the Gospel writers clearly show that Jesus rose on the third day, that His tomb was found empty on the third day and not after it. There is an avalanche of evidence for this². In Semitic time reckoning, a part of a day was inclusive of the whole. This accounts for the phrase 'on the third day' as meaning 'the day after tomorrow'. Even the related expression 'after three days' (Mark 8:31) is used for the same period of time. A study of Matthew 27:63 and 64 shows the terms were understood to the Jews as

¹ Synoptic gospels are Matthew, Mark and Luke.

² Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Mk 9:31; 10:34; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7,21,46; Acts 10:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4.

equivalent. Luke 13:32 shows how the saying is also figurative and not literal³. Lastly, the forlorn disciples walking on the road to Emmaus tell the 'stranger', "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, *it is now the third day since these things happened*" (Luke 24:21). Now if Jesus was crucified on Wednesday, then the Sunday on which these words were spoken was the fourth day! I believe that the disciples weren't wrong, and that Jesus could not have crucified on the Wednesday.

For Problem 2

Bible readers have attempted various harmonisations of the Synoptics and John's regarding the Passover dating. On the one end, liberal scholars have dispensed with either John or the Synoptics, whilst some conservative scholars have preferred to let them stand in tension believing the knot cannot be untied. Between these two extremes are those who proffer a way to harmonise John and the Synoptics:

Those who maintain **John's Passover Priority**:

These people believe that the 14th of Nissan (on which the lamb was slaughtered according to the Exodus 12:1-6) was the day Jesus was crucified (our traditional Friday). The official Passover meal itself was then eaten after Jesus died, on Friday evening (the 15th of Nissan).⁴ In answering the question as to whether Jesus ate the Passover meal on Thursday, most would answer that Jesus did not eat a Passover Meal with His disciples, but rather at this meal privately, symbolically and in advance of the official eating the next day. Others would also allow for the possibility of legitimate Passover meals prior to the main official one on the Friday, thus allowing for other Passover meals whilst keeping John's priority (see below). For these people, the synoptics gospels thus make no statements to seriously discredit the eating of the Passover meal after Jesus' crucifixion.

Those who maintain **Synoptic Passover Priority**:

These people believe that the 14th of Nissan was the day Jesus' disciples were sent to find a room already prepared to eat the Passover meal (our Thursday). This was the official day at that time for the lambs to be killed. The 15th Nissan began that evening during which they ate the Passover, also being the day Jesus was crucified. The phrases in John implying that eating the Passover was the next day should be flexibly interpreted to mean: 'eat meals of the Passover period'. For these people, John's gospel thus makes no statement to seriously discredit the Passover meal prior to Jesus' crucifixion.

Those who maintain **Double Passover Practise**

Due to the volume of people in Jerusalem at Passover time⁵ and even OT precedent (Numbers 9:1-14), eating of the Passover meal was extended over two evenings (Thursday and Friday). That is, because so many lambs had to be slain, this began from Thursday through to Friday. People could choose to eat the Passover on either evening⁶. Whether this practise was unique to that year or more commonplace, the conclusion amounts to the

³ "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course'. Jesus certainly did not die on the Cross three days after saying this! The 'literalists' have a serious problem: Luke has Jesus saying He will be raised on the third day, and in Mark it is after three days. Only the more flexible idiomatic interpretation can be happy with both phrases.

⁴ Friday evening was actually the next day according to Jewish time keeping (Lv 23:32; Mark 1:32). Thus the Sabbath commenced on Friday evening. All Gospels imply that the Sabbath began at sunset (John 19:31; Luke 23:54). The ladies could not prepare the body in the evening for it was the eating of the Passover and the beginning of the Sabbath that evening.

⁵ Josephus estimates about 3 million pilgrims, whilst recent calculations bring it down to about 180 000.

⁶ If an alien had to gauge which the correct day to celebrate the Christmas meal was, he would come up with two options apparently conflicting: Christmas eve and Christmas day. There is flexibility here but within parameters.

same.

Those who maintain a **Double Passover Calendar & Day Reckoning.**

Jesus followed a calendar that identified the Thursday evening as the Passover meal. But the temple authorities followed the calendar that identified the Friday evening as the Passover. John used the official calendar to show Jesus was the Passover Lamb, whilst the synoptic followed the more popular one. Lastly, it has been supposed that the popular Galilean method of reckoning a day (used by synoptic) was from sunrise to sunrise, whilst the Judean method (used in John) was from sunset to sunset. This resulted in the synoptic rendition of Jesus eating Passover on the 14th and dying on the 15th; and John's Jesus having the last supper and dying all on the 14th. This allows for a harmony of days (both agreeing Jesus died on the Friday) yet a difference in dating.

3] Personal Preference

In trying to make head or tail of the issues here, I suggest establishing some anchor's for our thinking. These are points at which both Gospels agree.

- The 14th of Nisan came to be included in the Feast of Unleavened Bread by the time of Jesus' day.
- The Passover lamb was slain in the late afternoon 'at twilight' on the 14th of Nisan (Exodus 12). This time was probably early evening as the sun was setting.
- We can fairly safely assume that Jewish chronology reckoned the new 'day' began at evening.
- All the Gospels affirm that *the day after Jesus was crucified* was a **Sabbath**.⁷ This Sabbath officially began the Feast of Unleavened Bread as per Exodus 12:14-20.⁸
- All Gospels affirm that **the day after** the Sabbath was the third day on which **Jesus rose**.⁹

The crucial place to start in working out which date Jesus died on is to decide when the Passover Lamb was killed relative to Jesus' death. *The difference remains that Matthew, Mark and Luke imply that the Passover lamb was eaten by Jesus and the 12 before He suffered, whilst John implies that the Passover lamb was eaten after He suffered.* We have to make a choice as to which was the official Passover so we can anchor our dates.

To me, Luke 22:7 clearly reads that the 14th (*'the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed'*) was the day when Jesus sent His disciples to prepare to eat the Passover. **This is a very clear and strong statement.** This verse can act as an unambiguous stake in the ground. Once this is anchored, then we take the 15th Nisan for the day Jesus was crucified, the 16th the day of the Sabbath, and the 17th the day of the Resurrection.

⁷ There is no necessity to distinguish the Sabbaths after the crucifixion. The 'high day' Sabbath in John 19:21 comfortably fits the view that this was a normal Sabbath which was upgraded to a special Sabbath during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. To insist that the plural use of Sabbaths in Matthew 16:1 implies two Sabbaths reveals an ignorance over the fact that a normal Sabbath day is frequently written in the plural in Greek (e.g. Mark 1:21 literally: "...immediately on the *Sabbaths* he came into the synagogue")

⁸ Even the synoptics confirm this mentioning a Sabbath day *after* Jesus ate the Passover. The trial and crucifixion of Jesus could not have taken place on the Sabbath of the Feast, a day of rest! Mark says that the day Jesus died was the Day of Preparation for the Sabbath (Mark 15:42 is NB).

⁹ This strictly began on Saturday evening. Thus the woman went to the tomb early in the morning whilst it was still dark.

Once this is agreed to, we can explain John's references in either two ways:

- (a) John does not speak of the eating of the real Passover meal *per se*, but of one subordinate to it and more related to the Feast of Unleavened Bread
- (b) John does speak of eating a real Passover but one in addition to the Passover Jesus ate. There was occasion at that time (maybe due to numbers in Jerusalem) for the Passover to be eaten over an extended time¹⁰. After my own detective work, this is the interpretation I prefer. However, if further evidence should demand a better accounting, I will change accordingly.

So here is my chronology for the Month of Nissan¹¹ when Jesus was crucified:

14th Nissan: Passover lambs begun being killed in the afternoon (Thursday)

15^h Nissan: Jesus ate the Passover Meal with the Disciples (Friday)

15th Nissan: Jesus' trial and crucifixion and burial (Friday)

16th Nissan: Sabbath for Feast of Unleavened Bread (Saturday)

17th Nissan: First day of the week and Jesus' resurrection (Sunday)

May God lead our minds into greater harmony with His precious Word

For further study, the following provide a good comprehensive summary of the issues:

The Gospel According to John (Revised), by Leon Morris (1995) *Additional Note H: The Last Supper and the Passover, pages 684-695.*

Commentary on the Gospel of Luke by J Norval Geldenhuys (1961) *Excursus: The Day and Date of the Crucifixion, pages 649-670*

The Last Supper and Lord's Supper I Howard Marshall (1997) *What kind of meal was the Last Supper, pages 57-75*

(10/05/2011)

¹⁰ In the Old Testament, the First Day of Unleavened Bread which was the 15th Nissan was to be a Sabbath. Yet this was only on the 16th in the Synoptics. If in Jesus' time the Passover Day itself was extended to fall over two days, it is understandable that the second Passover Day was not a Sabbath but also a day for killing the lambs and Unleavened Bread preparations.

¹¹ The counting would start from the sighting of the new moon.